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# Exploring the Underlying Barriers for the Successful Transition for Women from Higher Education to Employment in Egypt: A Focus Group Study

Muhammad Qasim Rana [1,*], Shadia Fahim [2], Mohammed Saad [2], Angela Lee [1], Olugbenga Timo Oladinrin [3,4] and Lekan Damilola Ojo [5,*]

1   School of Built Environment, University College of Estate Management, Reading RG1 4BS, UK;
    a.lee@ucem.ac.uk
2   Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, British University in Egypt, Cairo 11837, Egypt;
    sfahim@bue.edu.eg (S.F.); mo-hamed.saad@bue.edu.eg (M.S.)
3   Built Environment Department, School of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Plymouth,
    Plymouth PL4 8AA, UK; olugbenga.oladinrin@plymouth.ac.uk
4   Engineering & The Built Environment, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park Kingsway Campus,
    Johannesburg 2092, South Africa
5   Department of Building and Real Estate, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China
*   Correspondence: m.rana@ucem.ac.uk (M.Q.R.); lekan-damilola.ojo@polyu.edu.hk (L.D.O.)

**Abstract:** Education is the foundation of culture and the engine of economies; it is an essential part of life. However, it remains inaccessible or unavailable in some parts of developing nations. Moreover, such barriers for girls and women can extend beyond education and into the workplace, and this is a bone of contention based on erroneous beliefs and other factors. Barriers for girls' and women's education are debatable in the literature; however, there is a sparsity of literature that focuses on the bridge to the workplace. Therefore, through a focus group study, this study explores the barriers that prohibit the transition for women from higher education to employment in Egypt. Based on qualitative data from focus group participants, the barriers to girls' and women's education are related to cultural, economic, family, and structural–educational barriers. In addition, stereotypical thinking and discrimination are factors hindering girls and women from 'decent' employment in Egypt. Based on this study's results, some practical recommendations were elicited, which centre around awareness enhancement, formulation of laws and policies, and development of employability skills and entrepreneurship skills. The managerial and societal implications of this study are illustrated. It is anticipated that the results of this study will serve to create an inherent need to undertake a larger survey to investigate the barriers from a wider number of respondents.

**Keywords:** employment; transition; women; gender equality

## 1. Introduction

Navigating pivotal life transitions, particularly education and career decisions, poses challenges for young individuals (Ryan 2001). The shift from higher education to employment is often recognised as particularly demanding (Amer 2007; Santilli et al. 2024). Although education serves as a platform for realising dreams and life aspirations for many, certain personal and societal constraints may hinder others (Helve and Evans 2013), with women being disproportionately affected, particularly in developing nations. Despite notable strides by women in transitioning from education to securing employment across various sectors (Madgavkar et al. 2019), certain barriers impede some women from successful career transitions. Discrimination can affect their entry to, and career advancement in, the workplace (Bain and Cummings 2000; Helve and Evans 2013). Regrettably, gender biases significantly contribute to employment rejection in regions where traditional gender norms persist. Consequently, local challenges, including gender-based (Almoaibed 2020)

and class-related norms and ethnic and religious disparities, shape how young people perceive their prospects and ambitions (Furlong et al. 2011). The majority of the women who made an effort to get paid jobs ended up being given poor wages and are often controlled irrationally or not given due respect like other counterparts who are men (Kabeer et al. 2018).

Indeed, the transition from higher education to employment is a critical determinant of life outcomes, but it can be daunting in nations with limited job opportunities notwithstanding other structural and societal impediments. Other inherent issues, such as limited access to education, property rights, and opportunities that can culminate in future problems in their old age, are also experienced by women (Kabeer 2018). The transition process from higher education to employment in the global job market may depend on the quality of the education (Bain and Cummings 2000), which may be to the detriment of applicants from developing countries. Adverse economic and social conditions also contribute to an inability to have a standard education, which could aid the intended transition. In reality, economic issues can challenge citizens with a meagre income in the Egyptian labour market (Assaad and Barsoum 2009), which has made the government formulate a free education policy and assistantship. However, it is important to note that despite increased educational opportunities, the hope for a better life remains distant for younger generations in developing countries. In fact, with more than 40 percent of the girls enrolled in secondary schools, the female workforce remains low in Egypt, and those who attempt to enrol face high unemployment rates (Assaad and Barsoum 2009; Sharif et al. 2024a). Thus, women do not have the opportunity to have resources to fall back on should risk befall their breadwinner, i.e., husband or father (Kabeer et al. 2018).

Addressing the employment gap and shortage now requires viewing the enrolment of women not just as a positive motion but also as an imperative and practical step (Al-Din 2021; Gurjao 2007). It is critical towards bridging the gender gap in developing nations, such as Egypt (World Economic Forum 2023). Although women are now strongly represented in various professions via their educational skills (Bourdieu 2001; Begeny et al. 2020), most female graduates are practically excluded from positions of authority in industries and politics (Bourdieu 2001), and some private organisations prefer to employ males (Mertehikian and Parrado 2024). Meanwhile, women's empowerment begins with the ability to make strategic life choices that are on par with men's and reaching the pinnacle of their career (Kabeer 1999), which are unavailable or perhaps denied in many developing nations. Although Ahmed and Gielen (2017) opined that cultural and labour market barriers may be the underlying reasons for limited job opportunities for women, further investigation is essential to draw interesting conclusions and formulate practical recommendations. Given the limited amount of research on the barriers that prevent a smooth transition for women from higher education to the workplace in Egypt, it is crucial to explore the experience of such barriers from the point of view of working women. Therefore, this study is exploratory and intended to function as a platform to facilitate the design of further large-scale quantitative studies on such barriers. A qualitative approach, through a focus group study, was used to explore how working women perceive such barriers in Egypt and how they have overcome them with the following overarching objectives:

1. To explore the potential barriers of girls' education in Egypt;
2. To explore the barriers to decent employment for girls and women in Egypt; and
3. To identify how to address the barriers to girls' education and issues surrounding decent employment for girls and women in Egypt.

In other sections of this paper, a review of past studies on the present employment of women and the transition from higher education to employment in Egypt was conducted. The methodology adopted to achieve the objectives of this study was extensively described. The qualitative data received from the respondents were thematically analysed and discussed in juxtaposition with past research findings. Thereafter, practical recommendations were proposed and conclusions were drawn from the study.

## 2. Literature Review

The population of Egypt was 109 million as of 2021 (Hamzawy et al. 2023), with about 32% being less than 15 years old (Ahmed and Gielen 2017), 51% aged 25 years and below, and 5% 65 years and above (UNICEF 2022). This implies that a considerable percentage of the population is at an employable age. Unfortunately, 2019 statistics show that 28% of Egyptians were not in education, employment, or training (UNICEF 2022), shrinking the workforce further in the country. Although 57% of the population resides in rural areas, with many engaged in agricultural-related activities that do not require education or training (El-Ramady et al. 2013); the general unemployment rate in urban areas is still alarming among youths (Prince et al. 2018). On the part of young women in Egypt, unemployment is not only high but also an agelong trend (UNICEF 2022).

Despite efforts by different international, national, and non-governmental organisations to establish equal opportunities in the labour market for both males and females, women in many countries still face various shortcomings in labour participation (Al-Kazi 2011). The gender gap in Egypt still needs strategic attention, as the global gender gap ranked Egypt 134th out of 146 countries as of 2023 (World Economic Forum 2023). Significant improvement has not been recorded in the gender gap indicated by the World Economic Forum for about two decades (Assaad and El-Hamidi 2009). There is progress in empowering women in Egypt, but the gender gap remains an issue in the country (Samak et al. 2018). Priority may be given to men in search of jobs, perhaps because of the patriarchal structure and expectations of men as breadwinners (Barsoum 2018). Complementarily, Ahmed and Gielen (2017) indicated that priority might be given to women whose provider (husband) had lost the ability to work for one reason or another. Sika (2017) also found that Egyptian women prefer men for job opportunities when jobs are scarce. This could be attributed to some factors that need to be explored to achieve the goals of equal opportunity, a liberal labour market, education, and career progress for women in Egypt.

According to recent statistics, unemployed youths aged 15–24 are about 16% of the total unemployed in Egypt (World Bank 2024). The survey of 15,000 youths conducted by Sieverding (2012) revealed that 88.5% of the women in Egypt aged 15–29 are out of the labour force or unemployed. The percentage of women who are uneducated across all the groups of education from primary school to university is twice that of men (Sieverding 2012), perhaps because most of the cultural notion that women could get married early and would primarily be concerned with household responsibilities (Farahat 2009). Interestingly, many unemployed married young women opined that being a housewife is the reason for their unemployment (Sieverding 2012). Taking care of household responsibilities is considered a significant task of women in Egypt (Farahat 2009); even employed females still face this challenge, although some coping strategies are being adopted by many. Beinin (2012) revealed that about half of Egyptian women are economically active, but 22% participate in the formal economy. Thus, the role of breadwinning is continually allotted to men, while women are unpaid for domestic duties and reproductive work (Kabeer 2010; Sieverding 2012).

A quality education serves as the crucial link for a seamless transition to employment, yielding significant advantages. In instances where access to a top-notch education and training is lacking, expatriates often resort to limited employment opportunities, leaving the local population grappling with unemployment (Haak-Saheem and Brewster 2017). The educational deficit, coupled with inadequate facilities, leaves students ill-prepared for the demands of the labour market. Presently, graduates from rural areas and those with low-income backgrounds often perceive their education as insufficient, lacking in reliability, and offering poor career prospects (Hamilton 2019). Students in rural settings also face disruptions in their education, potentially leading to unemployment, limited job prospects, and heightened chances of social exclusion from peers (Greer and Kirk 2022; Van Praag and Clycq 2020).

A study by Assaad and Barsoum (2009) highlights the challenges faced by young job seekers in Egypt, particularly women, in securing career-oriented positions post-graduation.

This aligns with the findings of the International Labour Organization (ILO) study, revealing that 83% of Egyptian youths encountered difficulties in transitioning from education to careers (ILO 2006), with a majority being women (Al-Din 2021). Illiteracy still prevails among young women in Egypt (Sywelem 2015), especially in rural areas because the education system tends to focus on urban areas (Sika 2016). Females are likely to be uneducated in Egypt, with 21% of women aged 25–29 regarded as being illiterate compared to 12% of men (Elbadawy 2014). The majority of the Egyptians who abruptly drop out of school because of poverty are women and are likely to have dropped out of primary school (Sika 2017). Sadly, among the educated young people aged 15–29 in Egypt, unemployment is around 85%, and most are women (Sika 2017). The number of unemployed young females is five times the number of unemployed males in Egypt (Barsoum et al. 2014) despite the increased number of educated females from 2006 (Elbadawy 2014) and increased enrolment of females in secondary schools, vocational education centres, and higher institutions (Elbadawy 2014). Keo et al. (2019) revealed that employment among young women in urban areas has remained static between 1998 and 2018. Unfortunately, limited labour force participation for women and a high unemployment rate have constantly been reported in Egypt (Barsoum et al. 2014).

According to Amin and Al-Bassusi (2004), more women in Egypt are likely to acquire an education but less likely to obtain employment. Thus, young women and men appear to have equal chances for obtaining an education in Egypt, but their life experiences in obtaining employment are different (Sika 2017), perhaps because most women in Egypt prefer employers to consider men for job opportunities when jobs are scarce (Sika 2017). Furthermore, Egypt continues to grapple with unemployment and the limited involvement of women, as evidenced by Angel-Urdinola and Semlali (2010), possibly attributed to specific factors. It becomes crucial to qualitatively explore the underlying barriers hindering women in Egypt from smoothly transitioning from higher education to employment, aiming to uncover the core issues at hand.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Focus Group Method

A focus group is an exploratory group discussion approach for obtaining diverse perceptions on specific topics in a domain (Krueger and Casey 2009). It is an inquiry method that originated from sociology and has become increasingly used in numerous research disciplines (Merton and Kendall 1946). Focus groups are often classified into various categories based on the number of participants that form them. The classifications include dyad (two participants), triad (three), mini-group (from three to six participants), small group (from seven to eleven) or super-group from eleven to twenty participants (Cooper and Schindler 2014). Of the five classes of focus groups, the small group is considered as being the most appropriate for obtaining extensive information from participants and is manageable for a single moderator (Liang et al. 2018). Participants in focus groups can freely express concerns, opinions, and perceptions under the purview of the moderator(s). The moderator(s) of focus group discussions is/are also required to stimulate participants to obtain diverse perceptions and insights (Fisher 2011). In addition, the moderator(s) play(s) a crucial role in avoiding or minimising dominant voices in the group while encouraging quiet participants to share their views on the discussed topic (Smithson 2000; Krueger and Casey 2009). The moderator(s) is/are also expected to know about the discussed topic to ensure that participants stay focused on the subject (Kidd and Parshall 2000). Focus groups are also expected to be relatively homogenous regarding the participants' organisations or professions (Yu and Leung 2015).

### 3.2. Sample

The focus group participants were women working as academic or administrative staff at three different universities in Cairo and were purposely selected for this study. An e-mail was sent to the target population to explain the purpose of the focus group discussion

for invitations. The purposive sampling technique was utilised to have participants with different social, educational, and work backgrounds for optimising the data quality and relevance. Each focus group consisted of 6–8 participants to facilitate group interaction and provide fair and equal opportunities of expression among the participants (Liang et al. 2018). The group sizes in this study were in accordance with the suggested minimum group size (Krueger and Casey 2009). Five focus group discussions were planned during the design stage of the study; however, only four focus group discussions were conducted as a result of saturation in data collection. Table 1 shows the background information of the focus group participants across the four groups. All the focus group participants in this study were female; aged 20–29 (16%), 30–39 years (38%), 40–49 years (38%), and above 49 years (8%); and were working for the aforementioned private educational institution. Most of the focus group participants were married (77%), with salaries between 21,000.00 and 40,000.00 Egyptian pounds. Their educational backgrounds included bachelor's (35%), master's (26%), and PhD (39%) degrees, and they all belonged to the upper middle social class. In addition, most focus group participants (59%) had more than ten years of working experience. Based on the background information of the focus group participants, they can be considered as being suitable to provide valid information for drawing relevant conclusions in the study.

**Table 1.** Background information of the focus group participants.

| Background Information | Categories | Groups | | | | Frequency | Percentage |
| | | FG1 (7) | FG2 (8) | FG3 (8) | FG4 (8) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Female | 7 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 31 | 100% |
| Job role | Academia | 6 | 8 | 7 | 7 | 28 | 90% |
| | Administrative | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 10% |
| Age | 20–29 years | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 16% |
| | 30–39 years | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 12 | 38% |
| | 40–49 years | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 12 | 38% |
| | Above 49 years | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 8% |
| Marital status | Single | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 23% |
| | Married | 5 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 24 | 77% |
| Religion | Christian | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 16% |
| | Muslim | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 26 | 84% |
| Education | Bachelor's degree | 1 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 11 | 35% |
| | Master's degree | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 26% |
| | Doctorate | 4 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 12 | 39% |
| Monthly income (local currency in Egyptian pounds (E£) | <20,000.00 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 12 | 38% |
| | 21,000.00–40,000.00 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 17 | 54% |
| | 41,000.00–60,000.00 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 8% |
| Years of professional experience | 1–5 years | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 19% |
| | 6–10 years | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 22% |
| | 11–15 years | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 18 | 59% |
| Profession | English | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 18 | 59% |
| | Psychology | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 10 | 32% |
| | Business | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 9% |

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

To obtain extensive information from the participants, 28 questions were drafted to reflect the contents required to achieve the study's objectives. These questions were evaluated by a panel of five experts in the field of social science to gain inter-rater reliability. Based on the experts' evaluations and comments, similar questions were merged, while the redundant and irrelevant ones were excluded. Finally, ten questions pertinent to the aims and objectives of the study were retained. Prior to the commencement of the research, the approvals of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the British University in Egypt's ethics committees were sought and obtained. As mentioned earlier, the aim was to raise

individuals' awareness about the barriers preventing Egyptian women from transitioning smoothly from higher education to the workplace. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were asked to participate voluntarily in the data collection process. Their identities continued to be kept strictly confidential, and they were free to stop participating at any moment. All the electronic data and the raw video recordings were stored on a secure, password-protected server.

Two moderators knowledgeable in the study's domain conducted the focus group discussions. One of the moderators presented the purpose of the study and the ground rules, such as equality in discussions; no hierarchies; freedom to provide suggestions, object, and doubt; and confidentiality in the data provided (Chan et al. 2012). These ground rules are essential to mitigate potential pitfalls in the focus group discussions (Beasley and Jenkins 2003). The qualitative data from the participants were collected via audiotapes, flipcharts, worksheets, and immediate notetaking in the discussion process (Leung and Chan 2012). These approaches are useful for ensuring data validity, participants' ability to review all the ideas, stimulation of new views, and cross-checking of participants' statements to avoid misinterpretation (Yu and Leung 2015). Three research assistants used the orthographic transcription technique within 24 h of conducting each focus group to generate a verbatim record of each discussion. After that, a thematic analysis technique was used to identify the major themes that described the content of the focus group discussions. In summary, the methodology suggested by Howitt (2010), comprising (1) planning the study, (2) optimising the choice of the group's participants, (3) optimising the group's structure, (4) planning how many focus groups, (5) planning what questions to ask and when, and things that the moderator(s) does/do, was adopted in this study.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Barriers to Women's Education in Egypt

Four themes of barriers to women's education in Egypt can be deduced from the discourses of the focus group participants. They include cultural, economic, family, and structural–educational barriers (see Table 2). Some direct quotes from the focus group participants are rendered in italics in the discussion section and juxtaposed with previous findings appropriately.

### 4.1.1. Cultural Barriers

For ages, some countries have had cultural preferences that favour male children (Phillips 2003; Bako and Syed 2018). However, civilisation and development have eroded this primitive and archaic culture, especially in developed nations. In this study, a focus group of participants revealed that *some parts of Upper Egypt still embrace traditions and customs* that indicate a preference for male children in education-related matters. In other words, *the parents prefer to keep their girls from school* (FG1-P2 and FG2-P1). Perhaps because Upper Egypt is still largely rural and uncivilised (Sallam and Ahmed 2020) and engages in subsistence agriculture, in which education may not be considered as being essential by the rural residents (El-Ramady et al. 2013). Not only do cultural barriers hinder girls in Upper Egypt's access to Western education but also the women refrain from the use of basic health services after delivery, which Chiang et al. (2013) revealed to be linked to cultural barriers. In Egypt, some parents fail to send their girl children to schools because of the expectations that the female children would be given a hand in *getting married at a very young age* (FG1-P2). This confirmed what is obtainable in some developing countries across the globe, especially residents in rural communities from poor backgrounds or uneducated parents and guardians (Workineh et al. 2015; Setiadi 2021; Kohno et al. 2020). The belief that a Western education is not necessarily required to raise a family also contributes to the mindset for not sending female children to school in Egypt (FG4-P1). Based on this study's results, an unwritten distinction exists in Egyptian culture because participants FG4-P1 described the male as a breadwinner while raising the family, which is the female's responsibility. Although breadwinning for the family is important and indispensable, the

father's involvement in parenting and being at home is also crucial, as shown in the study by Sriyasak et al. (2018) in Thailand. On the other hand, the *parents' levels of education* informed their attachment to the agelong belief that the father must be the breadwinner. This finding aligns with the submission of Farahat (2009), which indicates that most of the female respondents who are medical practitioners in Egypt have parents who are also medical professionals. At the same time, the mother who stays at home, as stated by the focus group participants (FG2-P1), may not be worried by seeing her daughter also follow suit. This implies that the educated would likely marry each other and ensure their children (both male and female) are also educated. In contrast, uneducated parents may not educate their female children (Amin and Al-Bassusi 2004).

**Table 2.** Barriers to women's education in Egypt.

| Themes | Discourses |
| --- | --- |
| Cultural barriers | • *Some parts of Upper Egypt still adhere to old traditions and customs. For example, they prefer to keep their girls from school and prioritise their marriage at a very young age* (FG1-P2);<br>• *Some traditions do not encourage girls to pursue their education* (FG1-P2);<br>• *If they have to choose whom to send to school, the males would be chosen because females will eventually get married and have children. People do not consider education necessary to build a household* (FG4-P1);<br>• *Culturally, it is perceived that males are the breadwinners and not females* (FG4-P1);<br>• *I also think it is a cultural issue. The parents prefer the girls to marry and not be educated* (FG2-P2);<br>• *Some parents in Upper Egypt are not educated. Therefore, they prevent their daughters from going to schools or only allow them to study to a certain level, such as primary school only* (FG2-P1). |
| Economic barriers | • *In some classes, educating the boy rather than the girl is more important. After all, he will be the breadwinner in the future, and the girl will marry, especially in poor areas* (FG1-P1);<br>• *I guess it is about deciding whether the family will spend their money on the boy or the girl. Should I spend it on the girl, for her education, private lessons, books, and so on, or should I pay this money for the boy? The boy will later be a family supporter and will be responsible for the family, not the girl* (FG1-P2);<br>• *People experiencing poverty are often displaced for labour and to search for job opportunities in other governorates, especially among janitors. Sometimes, they have to move to another city and take the girls with them, but they can leave the boys in their origins, where they can learn and get an education* (FG1-P4);<br>• *I think this is relevant to the social class because I think the mindset of parents now, even in Upper Egypt, is that if they have the money, they will allow their daughters to pursue their higher education* (FG1-P3);<br>• *Some parents cannot afford school expenses. Although education is claimed to be free, some fees must still be paid, so the students cannot go to school* (FG2-P1);<br>• *Sometimes, for economic reasons, some families would allow the males to continue to work afterwards and earn a living, and the girls were given different priorities, so they would not spend money on them because it would seem useless* (FG3-P1);<br>• *When it comes to prioritising, I think many people, even if they don't admit it, will choose "Let us do this for the boy"; he needs a career and a good job. But the girl will eventually get married, so there is no need to spend more money on this if they have to choose* (FG4-P2). |
| Family barriers | • *Another part is that girls marry early, like 15 or 16 years of age. There is this idea of "unofficial marriage" because it is not allowed by the law to marry before the age of 18. So, they do this "unofficial marriage", and when she is 18, the marriage is made official* (FG1-P5);<br>• *The motherhood responsibilities do not allow some women in the upper middle class in Egypt to pursue postgraduate studies* (FG1-P6);<br>• *For girls, the future is to get married, stay at home, take care of the children, and do house chores. So, if we have this kind of irrational mindset, we consider it not important to educate the girl child* (FG2-P3);<br>• *When a girl receives a scholarship, her parents may prevent her from travelling because she is travelling alone. If she is married, her husband can refuse her from travelling because of family responsibilities and so on* (FG2-P1);<br>• *As an associate professor, my mother has never been prouder with me more than the time I made a good meal for my husband, and he (my husband) called her to say that he was very happy that I did this, and she was so happy* (FG3-P2). |

**Table 2.** *Cont.*

| Themes | Discourses |
|---|---|
| Structural–educational barriers | <ul><li>*If you see the ratio of primary schools where we have boys and girls and how they go to prep schools and secondary schools, you will see a huge difference. There are only two schools for girls and five schools for boys. When you go to a higher-level secondary school, there is only one school for girls* (FG1-P1);</li><li>*Some uneducated parents enrol the girls in school without allowing them to attend or learn; they are enrolled to allow them to write exams* (FG1-P3);</li><li>*Schools are poorly equipped, so they resort to private coaching centres* (FG2-P1);</li><li>*It is not good for a female to be a physiotherapy doctor because she has to touch males. It is better if she studies pharmacy or dentistry. . . . I prefer a male surgeon to a female surgeon* (FG1-P1);</li><li>*Female students' potential in medical school choice is often affected by the hassle of choosing an area of specialisation* (FG4-P2);</li><li>*Males almost dominate the STEM field, and if a female decides to study mechanical engineering, she will always have this kind of stereotype as a tomboy* (FG1-P5).</li></ul> |

### 4.1.2. Economic Barriers

The focus group participants also reported economic barriers as a crucial factor affecting girls' education in Egypt. The limited financial resources of parents living in poor areas in Egypt are revealed to be a potential reason why male children are supported in educational pursuits (see Table 2). According to FG1-P2, a barrage of questions on the expenses required for private lessons, books, and so on, which are necessary for an education, are used as the premise for decision-making. More importantly, it was mentioned that *the boy later will be a family supporter of a sort, and he will be responsible for a family, not the girl* (FG1-P2), which makes the parents use their limited economic resources for the male children's education. The financial responsibility expected of men could make women in Egypt prefer that their husbands be employed even if there are more qualified female job applicants (Sika 2017). However, Ahmed and Gielen (2017) indicated that priority may be given to women whose provider (husband) had lost the ability to work for one reason or another. Interestingly, FG-P3 stated that *if the residents in Upper Egypt had sufficient money, they would allow their daughters to pursue higher education.* These findings corroborate that the residents in Upper Egypt are low-income (Belaïd and Flambard 2023). To lessen the financial burden for educating children by poor citizens, the government often provides subsidies and free education for children. However, it was mentioned that despite government support, *parents cannot afford the expenses of education; although it is claimed to be free or with no fees, there are fees to be paid, so the students cannot go to schools* (FG2-P1). This can be attributed to the poverty level in Upper Egypt, which doubles the national average (AlAzzawi 2020; Belaïd and Flambard 2023).

### 4.1.3. Family Barriers

Moreover, the focus group participants explained family barriers in their responses to the barriers to women's education in Egypt. The marriage arrangements between families in Egypt are regarded as a potential hindrance to young girls in the country. Parents often betroth their daughter informally at a very early age of about 15 or 16, while the union is made official as soon as the girl is 18 years old (FG1-P5). Thus, the need to educate a daughter who may become a mother in a few months may not be considered. The results of this study are in agreement with past findings on the early marriage of girls in Ethiopia (CSA and ICF 2017). Similar findings are possible in 73 countries with permissible standpoints allowing marriage for girls below 18 years old (Marphatia et al. 2017). It is worth noting that some women fortunate to have a bachelor's degree may be unable to proceed with postgraduate studies because of family responsibilities as mothers (FG1-P6). Sadly, FG2-P3's statement purported that *the future of the girls is basically to get married, stay at home, take care of the children, and do house chores. Therefore, the rationale that women should be home-based does not justify the years of acquiring knowledge or getting an education* (FG2-P3).

Conversely, a mother's education is important in a child's upbringing and home (Chen and Li 2009). Interestingly, the myth that women ought to be family-centric is mainly reported in the focus group participants' sentences. According to participants FG2-P1, *when a girl receives a scholarship, her parents or betrothed husband may prevent her from travelling to further her education.* This finding is at variance with the results of a (Chapman and Mushlin 2008) study in Sierra Leone and Djibouti, where parents embraced scholarships as against the supposed benefits from a dowry when they give their girl child to be married at age 12 or 13. A participant also said, '*My mother has never been more proud of me being an associate professor than when I made a good meal for my husband, and she was over the moon*' (FG3-P2).

### 4.1.4. Structural–Educational Barriers

Additionally, structural–educational barriers in Egypt contribute to the educational malady of women. According to FG1-P1, *there are only two schools for girls and five for boys in primary school, which means they are no longer there, while there is only one secondary school for girls.* It can also be deduced from the statement of a focus group participant that uneducated parents also prevent their female children from attending lectures in school. Some *female children, especially uneducated children, attend school for examinations after enrolment* (FG1-P3). On the other hand, *some schools are not well equipped, so children resort to private lesson centres* (FG2-P1). These results confirmed what is obtainable in some countries in Africa, such as Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Djibouti (Magaki et al. 2021; Chapman and Mushlin 2008), possibly because of the impact of the long war in some areas and other factors.

### 4.2. Barriers to Decent Employment for Girls and Women

This study also explores the barriers to decent employment for girls and women in Egypt to uncover the underlying barriers to transition from higher education to a career. The barriers are grouped into stereotypical thinking and discriminations based on the qualitative data.

### 4.2.1. Stereotypical Thinking

Stereotypes are regarded as being a human attribute that could be used to explain a group's mindset (Dweck and Yeager 2019). In this study, the stereotypical mindset that *men are the breadwinners and women stay home* hinders women from obtaining decent jobs (FG2-P4). Although these results partly confirmed past findings that some organisations may still prefer to employ men (Williams 2023), it is not because of breadwinning responsibilities. Females also take up the role of breadwinners, while husbands care for the family (Meisenbach 2010). Other gender-stereotypical views include *females as weak, incapable, and not as competent as males*, as reported by some focus group participants (FG1-P1 and FG4-P3). In fact, FG1-P5 explained an erroneous belief that "*I used to think that a male dentist is going to have more force to pull out the tooth*". The emotional tenderness of women is also used against females during job searches. For instance, some recruitment organisations or employers perceive that women are primarily emotional and, thus, cannot be objective in certain jobs (FG3-P1).

On the other hand, the detailed prowess of women is also viewed as pettiness (FG1-P4). Therefore, *female bosses are considered harsh compared to their male counterparts* (FG1-P1 and P4). Meanwhile, the meticulousness potential of females is essential for project and team performances (Chaluvadi 2015). In fact, for a complex phenomenon, like corruption, past findings have revealed that organisations and countries headed by women perform better in the fight against unethical behaviours (Swamy et al. 2001). In addition, there is an *Islamic religious misconception that men should earn more money than women* (FG2-P3), which creates a barrier for women to obtain a decent job. These results confirmed that some religious misconceptions may need a better explanation to avoid the pitfalls of misapplications (Syed 2008).

### 4.2.2. Discrimination

Women face discrimination at different levels: during recruitment before securing a job and on the job (during the promotion process). According to a focus group participant (FG1-P4), some *recruitment organisations and employers prefer to employ men because of the possibility that a woman could get pregnant and take maternity leave after a while*. Some recruitment organisations would ask if a woman applicant is planning to have children any time soon, which may determine the possibility of being offered the job (FG4-P1), *just like air hostesses are expected to not give birth within two years of their appointment* (FG1-P4). Surprisingly, the participants reported that some companies would not hire a female because they believe men should be the breadwinner (FG1-P4). Perhaps men being breadwinners may be the result of a cultural belief because women have also been breadwinners in recent decades across many developing nations (Jurczyk et al. 2019). There is also unfair treatment in the wages given to female employees. FG2-P5 stated that *we have a wage gap, which usually reflects that women receive only 70% of what men receive*, perhaps because of the misinterpreted religious script expressed by (FG3-P3) in Arabic (see Table 3). These results further corroborate the findings that women's wages are less than men's for the same job and job description in Egypt (Al-Din 2021) and Bangladesh (Kabeer et al. 2018). In addition, it has been reported that it is not common for women to hold some leadership positions, especially at universities in Egypt. Although females are not very common as vice chancellors at African universities, the few females in these positions have performed exceptionally well in Uganda (Nakamanya and Bisaso 2023), Australia, South Africa, and the U.K. (White et al. 2012).

**Table 3.** Barriers to decent employment for girls and women.

| Themes | Discourses |
| --- | --- |
| Stereotypical thinking | • *Mindsets like the man being the breadwinner and the woman staying at home to do the housework* and belonging to the kitchen hinder women from getting decent jobs (FG2-P4);<br>• *There is a stereotype that females are weak and are not as good as males. . . . I will go to a male surgeon because they are more efficient* (FG1-P1);<br>• *Perceiving women as primarily emotional,* they cannot do certain jobs because they will not be objective (FG3-P1);<br>• We used to think about some things. *We usually go to the male dentist because I used to think he would have more force to pull out the tooth* (FG1-P5);<br>• *Some fields are strictly known for females* (FG1-P5 and P1);<br>• There is this misconception. For example, *if she is a female leader, she will always be tougher than a male leader. Alternatively, the males will refuse to have their top manager be a female, and females prefer male managers* (FG1-P1);<br>• *Females tend to be more detailed and meticulous, so they would be harsh as bosses* (FG1-P4);<br>• *I guess one of the misconceptions that women should be paid less comes from Islamic religious misconceptions that men should take more money than women* (FG2-P3);<br>• The unconscious beliefs and stereotypes *that women cannot pursue their careers along with home responsibilities* (FG4-P2);<br>• *There is an assumption that women are incapable.* Since she will have her home, husband, or children, she will not be capable for controlling or managing her work and home responsibilities (FG4-P3). |

**Table 3.** *Cont.*

| Themes | Discourses |
|---|---|
| Discrimination | • *During the screening of new employees, they prefer men because a woman might get pregnant and eventually take maternity leave.* If we have two candidates and want to choose one for the job, it would be the man (FG1-P4); <br> • *I know two friends who were asked in the job interview, "Are you planning on having kids?" The answer would determine whether they would be accepted* (FG4-P1); <br> • Choosing between a woman wearing a hijab and a woman without a scarf for a leadership position always presents a problem (FG1-P6); <br> • I remember a personal experience at my graduation at the International Conference Hall, where they sought translators. The person in charge told me, *"Well, you can, of course, apply, but you should get rid of your hijab; we do not accept veiled women working as translators"* (FG1-P4); <br> • As a fresh graduate, some employers take females specifically, *but we have a pay discrepancy* (FG1-P1); <br> • *Some companies never hire females; they only hire males because they are the breadwinners.* There is a group of companies that do this (FG1-P4); <br> • There are certain jobs, like air hostesses, *where they are not allowed to give birth within two years when they are first appointed. I think this is a kind of discrimination because they are not allowed to live their lives or to have free will* (FG1-P4); <br> • *The wage gap usually reflects that women receive only 70% of what men receive* (FG2-P5); <br> • I think workplace harassment is actually a thing, and there is currently an ongoing T.V. series called (sout w Soura). It is tackling this exact thing (FG2-P6); <br> • *There is discrimination when it comes to high positions. They always prefer a leader to be a man. It is very rare to find a female university president in Egypt* (FG2-P4); <br> • *The stereotype is that she takes care of the children and other responsibilities and is not dedicated to work* (FG1-P5); <br> • *The problem is that sometimes females discriminate against each other,* also known as Queen Bee Syndrome (FG1-P4); <br> • *Egyptian social culture stems from religion. Some religious assumptions are mistaken and need to be corrected. For instance,* "الرجال قوامون على النساء" "ناقصات عقل و دين" *translates as "Men are superior to women, and women lack in reason and religion". So, how would men easily accept having a woman* boss (FG3-P3)? |

## 5. Recommendations and Implications of This Study

### 5.1. Recommendations

This study used focus groups to explore the potential barriers for women's transition from higher education to employment in Egypt. The thematic analysis of the qualitative data from the focus group participants revealed that the barriers to girls' and women's education could be categorised as cultural, economic, family-related, and structural–educational. To minimise the identified barriers, some solutions were elicited from the focus group participants (see Table 4). The focus group also provided some practical recommendations to address the barriers to the education of girls and women in Egypt.

The culture-related barriers indicate most indigenous citizens' inherent beliefs and perceptions about women. To eliminate or reduce the culture-induced barriers hindering women from transitioning to gaining employment, it is recommended to organise a public enlightenment campaign to address the social sideline. Although a focus group participant explained that *there is a campaign in which people volunteer to knock on the doors of lower social classes and lower middle classes to explain the importance of education for girls* (FG1-P4), more effort is required in creating awareness via *social media* (FG2-P1) and *art* (FG2-P4). Employers, families, and society should be targeted to unveil the importance of women's empowerment in various organisations. Women who successfully combine careers and family responsibilities should be invited to share their experiences to further convince the target audience in the public enlightenment campaign. *Presenting female role models who have achieved something significant after graduation and attained great positions* (FG2-P1) could encourage other women not to be discouraged by their career aspirations. The stories of prominent female architects, such as Louise Blanchard Bethune (the first woman member

of the American Institute of Architects) and Norma Merrick (the first African American woman architect), and other influential females in various sectors (Sharif et al. 2024b) can trigger the thoughts of women in Egypt to change the status quo.

**Table 4.** Solutions for education and transitions of girls and women from focus group participants.

| Themes | Discourses |
|---|---|
| Awareness enhancement | <ul><li>The first step is *creating awareness. There is a campaign in which people volunteer to knock on the doors of people in lower social classes and lower middle classes to explain the importance of education for girls* (FG1-P4);</li><li>We can *provide scientific explanations for the effects of the mother's education on children's behaviour, psychological well-being, education, cognitive functions, and cognitive development* (FG2-P5);</li><li>I also believe that *media has a big role in spreading awareness* (FG2-P1);</li><li>*Presenting role models who have achieved something after graduation and attained great positions* (FG2-P1);</li><li>*Art can also help in the awareness campaign; I learned more from music, drama, and theatre* than books (FG2-P4).</li></ul> |
| Law and policy changes | <ul><li>*There should be some policy change at* some point. Nowadays, they do not give this "Decent Life" stipend to someone with a kid who does not attend school (FG1-P1 and P4);</li><li>*I think this has to start with law enforcement in the policy* (FG3-P1);</li><li>*The class capacities, tools, materials, and teacher training should be reviewed* (FG1-P1);</li><li>*I believe financial support sometimes might help.* The governmental and non-governmental bodies should work on that (FG2-P2);</li><li>The whole idea of education throughout Egypt has to change. *We need to focus more on ethics, skills, culture, and breaking stereotypes* (FG2-P3).</li></ul> |
| Employability skills acquisition | <ul><li>*Educate children with soft skills.* Education should be more oriented towards the markets (FG1-P4);</li><li>There should be a match or meeting point between what employers want and what they offer (FG1-P1);</li><li>*There should be volunteering opportunities for students to acquire skills before graduation* (FG1-P1);</li><li>We need to *empower our students with problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, leadership skills, and skills like this* (FG2-P4).</li></ul> |
| Entrepreneurship skills | <ul><li>*Entrepreneurship and a business mindset are very important.* We need to teach our girls how to grow into businesswomen who can think of how to make their own businesses thrive and earn from their abilities or skills, *even if we need to teach them skills or handicrafts* (FG2-P5).</li></ul> |

Economic barriers are also denoted as a critical hindrance to women's education in Egypt. According to (FG2-P2), *financial support from governmental and non-governmental bodies* can go a long way to cushion the financial stress on citizens to afford to educate their children. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can strategically provide financial relief packages for girls and women in Egypt. On the other hand, *policy should be formulated to give a stipend of a "Decent Life" to parents who cannot afford to educate their children* (FG1-P1 and P4). *The policy must also be enforced to* ensure that the target beneficiaries enjoy any subsidy provided by the government or NGOs (FG3-P1). Funds should also be provided to equip educational centres with all the necessary tools and materials to enhance the learning of students in Egypt (FG1-P1).

The family-related barriers identified in the study by the focus group participants can also be addressed through an awareness campaign. The parents of daughters should be sensitised on the possible consequences of early marriage at age 15 or 16 years, such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. The government should ensure that practical steps are taken to discourage any form of unofficial marriage in Egypt. In addition, defaulters should be ensured to be sanctioned appropriately. This study also indicated that some women could not undertake their postgraduate studies because of home responsibilities or other discouragements. Therefore, it is advised that educational institutions should be flexible with postgraduate programmes to suit the learning of married women. Young unmarried women who obtain scholarships in foreign nations should be allowed by their parents to pursue their studies and advance their knowledge, for instance.

This study also found structural–educational barriers as a potential issue for girls' and women's education in Egypt. Education ought to be a platform for advancing knowledge among all the classes of people in society. However, the results of this study revealed the need for some amendments. The findings identified that there were a limited number of schools for girls compared to boys. Therefore, the government must construct more class blocks for girls in various schools. The government should employ trained and experienced teachers to educate girls and women in the expected curriculum, values, and inherent potential in women. The stereotypical mindset that some careers are meant for men should be addressed by professional institutions with proof of international records of women undertaking tasks that are often thought to be masculine-inclined. In addition, the focus group participants recommended the need to *educate children with soft skills* (FG1-P4), such as *problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, leadership skills (FG2-P4), and entrepreneurship skills* (FG2-P5). Students' industrial work experience programmes should also be incorporated into different levels of education in Egypt to enhance their knowledge of courses being taught in schools (FG1-P1).

*5.2. Theoretical Contribution*

This study contributes theoretically to the literature on female education, especially in developing nations. The list of underlying barriers to women's transition from higher education to employment in Egypt is obtained from focus group participants with practical experience in the subject's domain. Drawing on the focus group participants' opinions, these findings enrich the theoretical framework of women's education and the impending barriers to their education and obtaining decent employment. The findings of this study can be useful for governmental bodies, NGOs, academic institutions, and guardians to channel approaches to eradicate the lack of education among women in Egypt mutually.

*5.3. Managerial Implications*

In addition, it is proposed that this study will contribute to the body of knowledge by educating stakeholders on the issues surrounding the education of girls and women in their quest to eradicate illiteracy in developing nations. The knowledge of the barriers that affect the decent employment of girls and women in Egypt can also assist the management arm of organisations and recruitment firms to avoid stereotypical mindsets against women. In addition, organisations may be informed on the need to train their staff and human resource managers in ethics and equality required in the discharge of their professional services. The results of this study may also be useful to trigger organisations on the need to set out funds for corporate social responsibilities to foster girls' and women's education in Egypt, thereby promoting the image of their firms.

*5.4. Societal Implications*

Moreover, the results of this study also have some societal implications. First, all the classes of society must understand the importance for educating girls and women through a sensitisation programme. Second, the family barriers identified in this study must be addressed through formal and informal approaches and possibly backed up with a policy for enforcement. Lastly, society should also be allowed to play an active role in the education system, which can only be possible when they understand the indispensable role of women in all the sectors of the economy.

## 6. Conclusions and Limitations of This Study

The underlying impediments to a successful transition from higher education to employment are investigated in this study through focus groups. The qualitative data from the focus group participants were analysed using thematic analysis in which the barriers to girls' education include cultural, economic, family, and structural education. Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were made:

Generally, some Egyptians, especially in Upper Egypt, believe that their daughters do not need to be educated, especially in higher institutions, because they will end up being married and raising a family. Instead, they prefer to send their sons to school and university.

Despite government financial support for parents, some parents still need help to afford the subsidised fees required for an education. Even though, generally, Upper Egypt residents would love to provide their daughters with a good education if they had enough funds, they still prioritise sending their sons to school with the little they can afford because the boy would become the breadwinner and supporter of the family. Early marriage arrangements contribute more to these barriers. A daughter married at a tender age to a man might have no thought for improving herself academically because the only 'training' she received or 'ambition' she was encouraged to pursue was how to take care of the family. This may deprive her from obtaining an education, even if she has the opportunity to be educated. The lack of infrastructure for many schools restricts children from obtaining a quality education, especially in rural areas, where the majority of Egyptians reside. This research showed that parents who lack an education also encourage their children not to bother because they need to know the value or importance. Likewise, the shortage of schools for girls also limits the interest and zeal to obtain an education.

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations were made by the authors and the focus group participants. The focus group participants' suggestions for addressing the barriers identified in this study could be grouped into awareness enhancement, changes in laws and policies, employability skills acquisition, and entrepreneurship skills. This study's theoretical contributions and managerial and societal implications were presented to minimise the barriers to girls' and women's educational transition in Egypt. Although this study has achieved the intended objectives, future studies are still essential for this work. Therefore, a quantitative study is important to obtain empirical opinions from a large number of respondents to investigate the barriers identified in this study. Through this, divergent and convergent opinions of respondents in various groups can be identified through statistical analyses for proposing relevant recommendations. In addition, similar studies can be conducted in other developing nations to identify if the same barriers are experienced or if other barriers are unique.

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