Title
Why don't Jordanian Women Graduate? A theoretical look at gendered experiences in Higher Education in Jordan

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2jp612sz

Author
Allaf, Carine

Publication Date
2008-02-01
Why don’t Jordanian Women Graduate? A theoretical look at gendered experiences in Higher Education in Jordan

Women, higher education, and the Middle East have been separately studied but no research has taken place on the overlapping of these three areas of study. To illustrate their intersection I will use Jordan to theoretically explore the experiences of women and higher education in the Middle East.

Jordan, part of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, is viewed as a country of social, political, and economic advancement by development agencies such as the United Nations and the World Bank. \(^1\) Jordan currently leads the region in literacy rates and based on these statistics, Jordan is well on its way to achieving gender equity, one of the Millennium Development Goals. Despite these advancements, the female tertiary completion rate is 31% of the male completion rate (The Economic Advancement of Women in Jordan: A Country Gender Assessment, 2005). This is the widest gender gap in the MENA region in tertiary completion. Why is there such a significant gender gap at the tertiary level when Jordan is achieving high literacy rates and gender parity as compared to other countries in the MENA region? Furthermore, why is there little to no data available on the completion rates and educational experiences of women in tertiary education in the MENA region? The numbers presented by organizations such as the World Bank and UNESCO for Jordan do not present an accurate portrayal of what is actually happening and implore the need for in-depth qualitative research.

\(^1\) International governmental institutions such as the United Nations and World Bank are cited throughout this paper because of the quantitative data available. The data (collection, dissemination, meaning) itself can be contested but for the purpose of this paper are a starting point for further exploration.
In this paper, the beginnings of a doctoral dissertation, I hypothesize about what is happening with women in higher education in Jordan by examining the ways in which familial, social, and educational institutions, all dominated by patriarchy, shape and reinforce normative gender roles, leading ultimately to women’s low completion rates at the tertiary level. To do this, I will contextualize gender relations that exist within the socio-cultural structure of Jordan by examining notions of family, society, and education. In doing so, I will examine the gender regime that exists in Jordan’s education and labor system and suggest how these gendered processes contribute to women’s low completion rates at the tertiary level.

Joseph and Slyomovics (2001) write that the gender system in the Middle East can be attributed to the patriarchy of the Arab world. They argue that the dichotomy of the public and private spheres is problematic due to the fluidity of the “triangulation of state, civil society, and kinship or private domain” (p.12) within which patriarchy is inherent. Supporting this triangulation, the gender and development (GAD) feminist framework holistically investigates social, economic, and political life to better understand gender relations in a society. To gain a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of Jordanian women’s positioning, it is critical to first understand their responsibilities, networks, family, and community.

Julia Droebber (2005), a German scholar from the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies in Exeter, spent two years in Jordan looking at women and social transformation. Droebber conceptualizes the family unit in various ways: as networks, resources, relations (within and outside of the family unit), and forms of socialization. Her work illustrates the centrality of the family in Jordanian culture. Family is the basic social unit and most relationships, networks, and socioeconomic activities are derived from within the family.
Barakat (1985) explains that the Arab family “cooperates to secure its livelihood and improve its standing in the community” (p. 28). He continues by describing the interdependency of the family, specifically how one member’s shortcomings is a reflection of the family as a whole. Discussing the importance of family honor within many Arab families, Joseph & Slyomovics (2001) write,

The notion of family honor reinforces patriarchal power by circumscribing women’s sexuality, movement in social arenas, and to some degree, economic opportunities. It enhances the power of fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and male cousins over women (p.6).

Jordanian families prioritize education for both males and females. The Jordanian public school system is sex segregated making it cheap (the minimal school fees are the same for both boys and girls) and ‘safe’ (daughters are being sent to female-only spaces where family honor cannot be tarnished) (Kawar, 2000). Educational access for females, then, is less of an issue. Many studies have linked disparities between men and women in higher education to prior inequities in their schooling experiences (Lewis & Dundar, 2002; Astin 1975; Adelman 1999) although no similar studies have been conducted in the Middle East. The sex-segregated feature of the Jordanian schooling system could lead one to question educational equality and could be one possible explanation for the low completion rates at the tertiary level. Are there quality differences in the sex-segregated classrooms of the Jordanian public school system? My research will allow me to explore this consideration further.

Jansen (2006) also describes the idea of *thaqafa* (culture, education) in aiding women’s access to tertiary education. Education is one way of gaining prestige in Jordanian society. Jansen states, “a degree gives status as being cultured” (p. 478). Jordanian attitudes toward education show that it is valued and considered an asset,
which might be a motivating factor for women to complete their university degrees. In order to attain this prestige, Hanssen-Bauer et al. (1998) found that Jordanian families will more often receive financial assistance from relatives to pay for education than for weddings, hospital bills, repayment of a debt, or even a pilgrimage to Mecca. Many families are also willing to sell property and take out loans in order to pay for education (Jansen, 2006). The weight put on the value of education might be one explanation for the high enrollment rate of women in tertiary education. However, if such prestige is placed on a degree, then why aren’t more women completing their education? And what cultural stigmas are being placed on those women who do drop out of higher education or those that attain their degrees and then enter the labor force?

Despite the high value of education, a majority of Jordanians still view the world of work and business as male-oriented and housework and childrearing as female-oriented (USAID Jordan Gender Assessment, 2007). Jordanian women are enmeshed within a ‘traditional paradigm’ that is “institutionalized and permeates the policy and legal framework” (The Economic Advancement of Women in Jordan: A Country Gender Assessment, 2005, p. 40). The World Bank (2005) describes this ‘traditional paradigm’ to include elements such as: centrality of family, males as sole economic providers, social restrictions on women due to a ‘code of modesty,’ and inequality of power in the private sphere. The World Bank argues that due to this ‘traditional paradigm’ women are limited in their power, and thus, their mobility within society. Droeber (2005) explains that men and women are expected to behave in culturally and socially ascribed ways – ways that fit into the World Bank’s ‘traditional paradigm.’ Jansen (2006) writes that education provides Jordanian females with an “an opportunity to conform to gender expectations while, at the same time, finding their own freedom and recognition therein” (p. 480). This
illustrates how women’s roles in Jordan are in a constant state of motion and change in both the private and public spheres of society.

Kawar’s (2000) household survey illustrates the importance put on education and the perpetuation of the ‘traditional paradigm.’ Her survey found that within the same generation, daughters had higher education levels than sons and had the highest education levels (although it is unclear if these levels are secondary or post-secondary) in their family but that education levels only raised earnings for men and not for women. In other words, women with higher education levels were making less than men with lower levels of education. Kawar (2000) concludes that even with higher levels of education, women still need to live within gendered spaces and maneuver between acceptable occupational roles that ultimately reflect back to their family unit. For example, it is not okay for a woman to be a street vendor or trader like her father but it is suitable for her to be a teacher or a nurse. In fact, the majority of working females are teachers, followed by medical occupations. However, within the medical profession, the majority of women are nurses, pharmacists, laboratory and x-ray technicians, or dental assistants and not doctors (Kawar, 2000).

In her study on women and higher education in the United Kingdom, Edwards (1993) found that women had a difficult time merging family and student roles. The participants in her study shared that they felt the higher education institutions did not value or accept their family life or their domestic obligations and commitments. This study, although set in the UK, is crucial to the further investigation of Jordanian women’s experiences and their own negotiations between family and education, two “diverging pressures” (McGivney, 1996). No similar studies have been conducted in the Middle East.
Looking at the literature presented in this paper, it appears that the family can both “support and suppress women” (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001, p. 8). Jordanian women are in constant negotiation between societal, familial, and self-expectations. In the public sphere, it is expected and acceptable that women succeed academically and also work. However they are limited in these freedoms because they must still fit within the boundaries set by either their families and/or society. Women are limited by the types and levels of degree they can attain and by prescribed areas of the workforce into which they can enter. In the private sphere, women are still expected to fit within their gendered roles of taking care of the household and children, despite their commitments to education and employment. It is this clash, this constant push-pull, which forces Jordanian women to make various choices that could ultimately lead to dropping out of higher education. But what of those women who choose to graduate? And what of those who even go on to work and perhaps at the same time raise a family? Jordanian women, regardless of the choices they are making, need a voice to explain the tensions that they experience on a daily basis.

Literature available on the experiences of Jordanian women in higher education is sparse. By overlapping various bodies of research, this paper has offered a small theoretical glimpse of the experiences of Jordanian women. But what is actually taking place in Jordan? What are the perspectives of the Jordanian women and men? In the social sciences, it is imperative that researchers provide a comprehensive perspective for a situation. Numbers and literature reviews alone do not present the whole picture of what is truly happening on the ground. Although the World Bank’s previous studies point to certain achievements and/or shortcomings of Jordan's education system, a qualitative portion is needed for a comprehensive understanding. The findings of my dissertation
will assist in explaining the low completion rates and lead to advances, changes, and contributions to Jordanian women’s educational experiences.
Bibliography


Jordan Gender Assessment. (2007). USAID.


Why don’t Jordanian Women Graduate? A theoretical look at gendered experiences in Higher Education in Jordan