

**Higher Education Expansion in Egypt: Women's Capabilities
and Agency from Access to Workforce Integration**

By

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of higher education in Egypt has created unprecedented access for women, with enrolment rates reaching near parity. This expansion has been widely promoted as a driver of socio-economic development, yet its impact on gender equality, particularly in the Global South, remains uneven and understudied.

Using a feminist interpretation of Sen's Capability Approach, this research investigates how social norms, institutional structures, and labour market dynamics shape Egyptian women's experiences from access to higher education through workforce integration. The study employs feminist narrative inquiry, analysing the lived experiences of 25 Egyptian women across socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic regions through in-depth interviews. Their narratives reveal three critical phases of constraint and opportunity: (1) access to higher education, (2) experiences within higher education, and (3) transition to employment

Findings highlight how conversion factors, including familial expectations, financial constraints, geographic disparities, and institutional cultures, intersect to shape women's opportunities. However, this study challenges the assumption that quantitative expansion automatically translates into enhanced capabilities and agency for women across their educational and professional trajectories. Pre-university experiences show women navigating conditional support or outright opposition through navigational agency. Within higher education, women develop academic and social capabilities while confronting persistent gender norms, particularly in STEM fields and experiencing sexual harassment. Most critically, the study identifies a paradox: despite educational gains, labour market integration remains constrained by occupational segregation, pay gaps, and caregiving expectations.

This research examines how social norms, institutional structures, and labour market conditions shape the capabilities and agency of Egyptian women from access to higher education through integration into the workforce. It makes three principal contributions: First, it extends the Capability Approach to Egypt's higher education context, identifying limitations of quantitative metrics in assessing gender equality. Second, it clarifies the role of navigational agency in mediating structural constraints. Third, it demonstrates that expansion without addressing institutional cultures and labour market structures results in increased access without proportional gains in agency or opportunities.

Policy implications include the need for gender-sensitive institutional reforms, anti-discrimination measures addressing harassment and STEM barriers, and labour market interventions that recognize care responsibilities. The study concludes that without addressing these deeper structural issues, higher education expansion will remain an incomplete project for advancing women's capabilities and agency in Egypt.

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List of abbreviations

AUC	The American University in Cairo
CA	Capability Approach
CAPMAS	Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
EACPE	Egyptian Association for Community Participation Enhancement
ECA	Extracurricular Activities
ECWR	Egyptian Center for Women's Rights
EDHS	Egypt Demographic and Health Survey
EGP	Egyptian Pound
ERF	Economic Research Forum
ETF	European Training Foundation
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FY	Fiscal Year
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GER	Gross Enrollment Ratio
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOE	Institute of Education
LLMIC	Low- and Lower-Middle-Income Countries
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MOETE	Ministry of Education and Technical Education
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

OAMDI	Open Access Micro Data Initiative
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QS	Quacquarelli Symonds
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SRT	Social Reproduction Theory
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UK	United Kingdom
UCO	University Coordinated Office
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Declaration

I, Doaa Hazem Abonaem, declare the following:

- i. The doctoral thesis that I hereby submit for the qualification of Philosophy Doctor (PhD) in Education and Social Justice at Lancaster University is my own independent work and has not previously been submitted for any other degree or qualification at any other institution of higher education.

Signature

1 Chapter One: Introduction and Background

1.1 Background

The world is witnessing a rapid global expansion of higher education in general over the twentieth century. It was driven by a combination of factors, including the increasing demand for skilled labour in a rapidly globalizing economy. Mass higher education became essential to meet the knowledge-based requirements of the global market, as nations sought to enhance their economic competitiveness and social mobility (Marginson, 2016). Additionally, state policies supporting education as a public good fuelled the trend, contributing to the creation of globally connected education systems (Marginson, 2011). As a result, many more young people worldwide are pursuing higher education, with developing countries now achieving higher enrolment rates than European countries did a few decades ago. The growth is faster in wealthier countries and those with more extensive educational systems. In Europe, the "Bologna Process" exemplifies organized expansion, aligning with global and European goals for a more open and progressive society (Ramirez, 2002). Similarly, the expansion of the higher education system in the UK since the Robbins Report of 1963 has been shaped by increasing demands for universities to respond to social and economic pressures, challenging their traditional autonomy (Bathmaker, 2003). This shift transformed higher education from an elite to a mass system. As a result, participation in higher education grew from one in sixteen in the 1960s to around 50% by the early 21st century (Department for Education, 2021). However, this expansion has raised concerns about funding, quality, and equity, as it has disproportionately benefited students from wealthier backgrounds (Blanden & Machin, 2004).

The "massification" of higher education in Europe, the United States, and the UK throughout the 1960s had a significant knock-on effect on the rest of the world, inspiring similar efforts in many low- and middle-income countries. While the expansion in the Global North was driven by post-war development goals, increasing industrialization, and a push toward greater equity in access to education, the Global South only began to see comparable massification trends

in the early 2000s. This lag reflects differences in historical, economic, and political contexts, with many countries in the Global South prioritizing basic and secondary education before turning their attention to higher education (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

In Egypt, higher education has expanded greatly over the past two decades and particularly post the 2011 revolution. According to the Ministry of Higher education and Scientific research (2021), a comparison between the state of higher education in 2021 versus 2014 shows a positive significant increase in key quantitative indicators of higher education including increase in enrolment rates, universities, faculties, faculty members and published academic papers. Parallel to several other low and middle-income countries, the higher education expansion was associated with a rising percentage of women in higher education (Flashman 2013). In Egypt, although women get more access to higher education, they are still underrepresented in labour market. This indicates that quantitative measures of gender equality alone in higher education expansion do not fully reflect women's political, economic, and societal integration. In addition, the rapid expansion of higher education has surfaced questions about the quality of education, availability of qualified academics, financial resources to match the rate of the expansion.

Statistics can prove a gender equal experience in higher education or even women dominance on campus (UNESCO, 2020; Hewitt, 2020). According to UNESCO (2020), global female enrolment in tertiary education has significantly increased, tripling between 1995 and 2018 and growing faster than male enrolment, leading to a rise in the adjusted average gender parity index from 0.95 to 1.14. In 74% of countries with available data, women are now overrepresented in tertiary education, as well as in all world regions except Central and Southern Asia, where there is gender parity, and sub-Saharan Africa, where men still outnumber women with 73 female students for every 100 male students in 2018. Nevertheless, these quantitative indicators offer an incomplete picture of gender relations in a society and the impact of higher education expansion on women's opportunities in life (Cin, 2017). The increase in women enrolment in tertiary education in Egypt might have led to growing participation in the labour market.

However, quantitative indicators advance a limited understanding of women's empowerment and experiences from access to higher education until their integration in the labour market in Egypt. The paradox between increase educational attainment among women and their employment conditions needs to be further explored from a qualitative point of view and with their own voices. If social and cultural norms negatively affect women's experience related to access, during and post their higher education, the expansion of higher education might do little to bring more women into employment and empower them. Universities do not only affect gender equality inside the campuses but in the whole society as they present significant societal actors, a reflection of the society and shape the wider community (Mader, 2013). When opportunities from higher education attainment and employment do not support gender equality, young women must overcome further obstacles to make a successful transition to the labour market and adulthood in general. Women's effective participation in the higher education and the labour market consequently led to higher involvement in the political and economic sphere which eventually increase growth rates, development and wealth for the whole population.

1.2 Research question

The goal of my research is to identify, consider, and critically question the women's experiences across their different stage of higher education journey from access till integration in the labour market particularly during a period of rapid expansion of higher education in Egypt and its relation to gender equality and women's empowerment. Education plays a crucial role in determining women's employment opportunities. In Egypt, factors such as marriage and household dependents significantly impact women's chances of being employed, highlighting a trade-off between their productive and reproductive roles. While education is essential for human development and gender equality, it has often been overlooked in development strategies and research.

The research aims to investigate how women can act as agents in their own lives, including their access to opportunities and basic capabilities, and what they have reason to value. It addresses several research questions to explore these issues.

Accordingly, my research question is the following:

In light of the rapid expansion of higher education in Egypt, how do social norms, educational opportunities, and labour market dynamics shape the capabilities and agency of Egyptian women from their access to higher education to their participation in the workforce?

Consequently, the key underpinning questions include the following

- How do social, economic, and geographic conversion factors, alongside personal and community relations, shape Egyptian women's access to higher education and influence their aspirations and agency?
- How do Egyptian women's higher education experiences expand their capabilities and agency, and what role do gender norms, discrimination, and socio-political factors play in shaping or constraining their transformative educational journeys?
- How do gender norms, labour market conditions, and social pressures influence Egyptian women's participation in the workforce, and in what ways do they exercise navigational agency to overcome barriers to economic independence and career advancement?

These questions aim to explore the professional, social, personal, and educational lives of women, focusing on how gender has affected their agency and freedoms. By highlighting women's experiences, the research critically examines how gendered and cultural norms within families, community and social institutions, including educational institutions and work institutions, have limited women's freedoms and their capabilities. It provides an evolving account of women's roles in Egypt, showcasing their active struggle for to access higher education till their work in the labour market.

1.3 Motivation

I am interested in this research for a variety of reasons. First, as an Egyptian woman who was part of the Egyptian higher education system as a student and lecturer, I can strongly relate to the topic. I went through the whole journey from access to integration in the labour market. In addition, I continued my graduate studies abroad, which allowed me to critically compare experiences with those in more developed countries. I chose to return to Egypt and work as a lecturer in universities to contribute to improving women's higher education experiences. I was able to then interact with female students and witness their experiences.

My interest in researching this particular topic arises from my professional practice as a project officer in the Education Sector at UNESCO. I work on projects to support education, strengthen Egyptian systems, and address current challenges through a gender equality lens.

One of the key reasons I am passionate about this research is the type of researcher I want to be. As a feminist researcher, I aim to document the rich, textured narratives of others and reflect on how these experiences resonate with my own. I am committed to improving gender equality in Egypt and developing countries. As a married working mother of three, I have personally encountered gender inequalities throughout my educational and career journey. While I consider myself fortunate to belong to the upper middle class, which has afforded me better educational opportunities and career prospects than many in lower socioeconomic classes, this privilege also instils in me a sense of ethical responsibility. I feel compelled to leverage the power and education I have gained both in Egypt and abroad to change the narrative for Egyptian women across all classes and governorates, supporting the feminist movement through my writing.

1.4 Significance and contribution to knowledge

I believe this research is significant as it will yield insights and a granular focus on women's experiences and their broader impact on society as a whole. My research contributes to the existing body of knowledge in two significant ways.

First, this study provides a qualitative understanding of women's experiences in higher education, contributing to the growing body of research that moves beyond numerical data to explore the nuanced realities of gender and education. While existing research includes valuable work on women's lived experiences in higher education, much of it has been concentrated in the context of the Global North (e.g., Peterson, 2011; Jacobs, 1996; Scott Metcalfe & González, 2013). There is comparatively less emphasis on women's experiences in higher education systems undergoing massification in the Global South, particularly in regions marked by rapid socio-economic transformations and persistent gender norms (Subrahmanian, 2005). By focusing on these dynamics, this study explores how women perceive and experience gender equality, from their point of access to higher education to their eventual integration into the labour market. This contribution is crucial as it brings forward the voices of women themselves, allowing for a deeper exploration of their perspectives, challenges, and achievements, which have been largely overlooked in previous studies (Arnot & Phipps, 2003).

Second, existing knowledge that focuses on women's experiences in higher education tend to tackle a certain stage or phase of education. This research fills the gap by offering a holistic view of women's experiences from access to higher education till integration in the labour market to better address social policies. While there is strong significant qualitative research on women's access to higher education (Unterhalter & Aikman, 2007; Ball & David & Reay, 2005; Patinisotis & Holdsworth, 2005) or their experiences during their studies (Morley, 1999; David, 2015; Stromquist, 2007) or gender equality in the labour market (Kabeer, 2012; Gornick, 1999; Kabeer 2021, Arber & Ginn, 1995), there is limited exploration of a comprehensive perspective on women's experiences from secondary education to the labour market, and on how transitions between these phases

shape outcomes. Also, it highlights the systemic challenges that prevent women from attaining leadership positions and offers recommendations for policy changes to promote gender equity in higher education governance (Fouda, 2024).

This context further highlights the significance of the research. There is limited qualitative research about the experiences of women in Egypt within higher education and labour market particularly in light of the recent expansion of higher education (Assaad & Barsoum, 2007, Barsoum, 2019; Said & ElHamidi, 2008). Even though the research will be focused on Egypt, it provides insights and advanced knowledge that can be applied to other developing countries in the region, particularly within the Arab world. This research is significant for education in general and for higher education educators, students and leaders. It is equally important for policy makers, economists and different stakeholders examining the labour market.

Furthermore, the use of the Capability Approach (CA) as a framework allows for a more comprehensive exploration of these issues by focusing on what women are actually able to achieve in their educational and professional lives, rather than merely what is available to them (Sen, 1999). It provides a valuable addition to the existing scholarship by highlighting the importance of personal agency and the societal structures that enable or constrain it.

Overall, this research provides a holistic view of women's experiences in higher education and contributes to the development of more effective social policies that support gender equality. Women play a crucial role as active agents in society, and their education and employment have far-reaching impacts on the economy and community well-being (Kabeer, 2018). Understanding their perspectives is essential for all stakeholders to effectively provide the necessary resources, skills, and knowledge that enable women to contribute meaningfully to society (El Assiouty, 2022). By addressing their unique challenges and aspirations, we can foster an environment that not only supports women's participation but also enhances overall societal development (Walker, 2017).

1.5 The purpose, rational and framework

This research explores how women's educational experiences affect their capabilities and agency, particularly in the Egyptian context, where social, cultural, and economic factors shape access to higher education and labour market opportunities. Education, viewed as a foundational capability (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), enables women to develop further capabilities, exercising agency to lead lives they value. This qualitative study adopts a narrative inquiry approach, involving interviews with twenty-five Egyptian women who have completed higher education. The narrative approach allows for deep insights into how women interpret their educational journeys in relation to their societal surroundings, shedding light on how education can be a transformative force. I used a feminist lens combined with the CA as a comprehensive theoretical framework to examine women's individual experiences in the context of broader societal and educational issues (Cin, 2017).

The study offers new knowledge by covering three key areas: pathways to accessing higher education, experiences during higher education, and pathways to employment. Through these narratives, I examine how gender norms and institutional barriers persist, reproducing inequalities and limiting women's full participation in both education and the workforce. Despite these constraints, education is often portrayed by the participants as a route to economic independence and increased autonomy, challenging restricting family and social norms.

The research employs the CA as a comprehensive framework for analysing gender and development in Egypt. While education is central to expanding women's capabilities, gender justice requires addressing the societal norms and hidden structures that limit these opportunities. The concept of navigational agency is key in understanding how women navigate these challenges, demonstrating resilience and adaptability.

This thesis is important because it provides insights that can inform recommendations for NGOs, international bodies, and national organizations to

work collaboratively with governmental institutions in addressing these barriers, enhancing access to higher education, and supporting women's transition into the labour market. The timing of this research is also important amid higher education expansion and the reform of higher education in Egypt particularly post the Arab spring and political reforms in the past decade. In light of the shifting educational and labour market landscape, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis explores the complex realities of women's lives in contexts like Egypt. It aims to recognize their contributions, examine the factors that shape their access to opportunities, and identify the challenges they face in pursuing higher education and employment as part of the broader effort to promote gender equity. The following section focuses specifically on the Egyptian context.

1.6 Egypt's Context

Egypt is situated in the northeast corner of the African continent, extending into Asia through the Sinai Peninsula. Covering a total land area of slightly over one million square kilometres, only about 8% is significantly inhabited, primarily around the Nile River valley and delta. The country is divided into 27 governorates, the top level of its administrative divisions, and 331 districts. Egypt is home to various ethnic and religious groups, including Bedouins (nomads), Copts, Nubians, and Shiites, though the vast majority are Sunni Muslims. The official language is Arabic. According to CAPMAS, Egypt's population reached 102 million, as of July 2021. Of this figure, around 49.2 million are female. This makes Egypt the most populous of the 23 Arabic-speaking countries and the 13th most populous country globally (UN, 2022). In 2019, an estimated 57% of the population lived in rural areas, compared to 43% in urban areas (World Bank, 2022). Egypt is currently experiencing a demographic window of opportunity. Young people aged 10-24 comprise nearly a third of the population; whilst adults aged 65 and older represent 5.4 per cent of the total population (UNFPA, 2021). To capitalize on the demographic dividend, the education system must equip graduates with essential skills and competencies demanded by an evolving labour market. A crucial challenge lies in the system's capacity to meet the needs of an expanding student population. This growth in the school-aged demographic

will increase demand for educational facilities, infrastructure, and both human and financial resources across all educational levels.

Significant cultural differences exist between rural and urban areas and across social classes. Most Egyptians reside along the banks and in the delta region of the Nile River. Consequently, while the overall population density is relatively low the major cities, particularly Cairo, Giza and Alexandria, are densely populated (CAPMAS, 2004).

Egypt, classified as a lower-middle-income country, has faced economic challenges with low and fluctuating growth rates (UN, 2022). Since implementing extensive economic reforms in 2016, there have been improvements in macroeconomic conditions. However, economic growth declined from 5.6% in FY 2018/2019 to 3.3% in FY 2020/21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact (World Bank, 2021). Unemployment peaked at 9.6% during the pandemic but decreased to 7.6% by late 2020, with significant gender disparities in job losses. Government finances show a fiscal deficit of 7% of GDP in FY 2020/21, limiting fiscal space for sectors like education (World Bank, 2022).

In Egypt, about 29.7% of the population lives in monetary poverty, with higher rates in some regions like Assiut reaching 67%. Government initiatives such as the “Hayah Karima program” and cash transfer schemes aim to improve conditions in impoverished villages. Despite progress in maternal and child health, challenges remain due to the COVID-19 pandemic and persistent inequalities. Malnutrition, including stunting and micronutrient deficiencies, affects many children, while violence against children, including at home and online, remains prevalent. Efforts to address these issues face obstacles including cultural norms and limited resources.

1.6.1 Egypt’s education system

Egypt boasts the largest pre-university education system in the MENA region, with over 25 million students enrolled in public, private, and Azhari schools during the 2021/22 school year (MoETE, 2022). Education in Egypt is constitutionally mandated to be free and compulsory from primary through

secondary stages, with government spending on pre-university education guaranteed to be at least 4% of GDP. MoETE is both the regulator and largest provider with over 38,500 public schools. There are two additional providers: the private sector (national and international) and Al-Azhar Al-Shareef (Azhari education).

In Egypt, while education enrolment shows gender parity across primary, preparatory, and secondary levels, underlying challenges persist for girls. High dropout rates, particularly due to early marriage despite legal restrictions, remain significant (MoETE, 2021). Rural areas experience higher rates of child marriage, impacting girls' health, education, and economic prospects negatively. Despite performing better academically in reading, math, and science at grade 8 level, these achievements do not consistently translate into improved economic opportunities or political empowerment for girls, highlighting untapped potential in Egypt's human capital.

In Egypt, secondary education is structured into general and technical tracks, each culminating in separate certificates after three or five years, respectively. The Thanawiya Amma exam at the end of general secondary education determines access to higher education, predominantly favouring graduates from general schools due to stringent score requirements for technical school graduates. This very high-stakes exam has been the subject of much debate over the years and of recent reform efforts. Secondary education has experienced the largest increase in enrolment at 33%, from 3.3 million to 4.4 million, with roughly half of students enrolled in general schools (51%) and the other half in technical schools (49%) (MoETE, 2021). Despite a substantial increase in enrolment and improved completion rates, disparities persist based on socioeconomic status and regional location, with rural and poorer households facing greater challenges in accessing and completing secondary education (OAMDI, 2020). Gender parity in enrolment exists, but girls are disproportionately enrolled in general rather than technical secondary education, and dropout rates are higher among girls (MoETE, 2021). Although the schooling profiles largely coincide for female and male students for prior basic education level, access to secondary education is somewhat lower for

females than males (82% compared to 85%), whereas completion is lower for males than females (77% compared to 76%) (MoETE, 2021).

1.7 Structure of the thesis

In addition to the introductory (Chapter One) and concluding (Chapter Eight) chapters, the research is divided into the following chapters and subsections.

The second chapter: literature review examines three main themes. The first is the higher education expansion which reviews the global higher education expansion, challenges of the expansion, Egyptian higher education system and its expansion, and Egypt post-colonial and post revolution gender roles. The second sub section discusses the higher education as a road for development and women empowerment with a focus on Egypt. The third section is about the gender inequalities in the labour market.

The third chapter: theoretical framework discusses the Capability Approach and its main concepts. Also, it explains the reasons I chose this framework in particular and its relation to higher education and gender equality. Then, discussed the relation between the CA and employability It briefly mentioned some of the limitations and critiques of the CA.

The fourth chapter is the methodology chapter which covers feminist research methodology including the ontology, epistemology, methodology.

The three discussion chapters are organized in a chronological order of women experience and life events starting from schooling to higher education and finally post higher education. The fifth chapter is titled “pathways to access higher education for Egyptian women. It explores the main challenges and factors affecting women access to higher education including financial and economic concerns, experiences of schools before joining the higher education, geographical expansion of higher education, personal family and community relations and most importantly what girls value, their aspiration and agency.

The sixth chapter discusses the higher education experience of Egyptian women. It discusses the empowering higher education experience as a transformative experience that expanded women's academic, political, social and intellectual capabilities. It also examines the higher education as gendered sites and spaces tapping into women and STEM, stereotyping, gender norms and roles, social and cultural discrimination and sexual harassment.

The seventh chapter examines the pathways to employment. It focuses on the stereotyping and gender norms in the labour market by discussing joining the labour market and finding a job, community, family and internalization of gender norms and pressure, feminization and masculinization of labour market and how women being less valued in the workplace. It also explores gender pay gap and glass ceiling and agency.

2 Chapter Two: Navigating Higher Education, gender and work: Reviewing the Landscape in Egypt and Beyond

The literature review will focus on exploring three themes in order to highlight how my research will both add to existing scholarship and make a new contribution. These three themes are higher education expansion particularly in Egypt, higher education and gender equality and women integration in the labour market (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Trow, 2007; Marginson, 2016).

2.1 Higher education Expansion

2.1.1 Global higher education expansion

In the last century, higher education has undergone remarkable global expansion. In 1900, there were around 500,000 students enrolled in higher education institutions worldwide, constituting a minuscule portion of college-age individuals (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). By 2000, the number of tertiary students had surged to approximately 100 million, marking a two-hundredfold increase and representing about 20 percent of the global cohort (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Particularly, the period following World War II witnessed a significant expansion of higher education across many nations (Varghese & Puttmann 2011). Between 2000 and 2020, global higher education gross enrolment rates nearly doubled from 19% to over 38%, with women being the main beneficiaries as their enrolment rates increased from 19% to 41% (UNESCO, 2021), while developed nations such as South Korea, Canada, and the United States surpassed 80% enrolment (OECD, 2023), signalling progress toward near-universal access in some regions. There are many reasons for the worldwide expansion of higher education. Supply side factors include perceived importance of higher education for the knowledge economy. Demand side factors include the growing population, an increasing number of high school graduate and the perception of university degrees as the primary means of economic improvement and social mobility (Schendel & McCowan, 2016). The higher education expansion has continuing public and private benefits in developing and developed countries (Liu et al, 2016). Though the expansion of higher education is viewed as a

democratizing process that supports access and equality, some research argue that differentiated mass higher education might contribute to greater inequality by creating stratified tiers of institutions, with elite universities offering better resources and opportunities that are often accessible only to wealthier students (Carnoy, 2011, Marginson, 2016). This stratification reinforces social divisions, leaving graduates from lower-tier institutions at a disadvantage in both educational quality and labour market outcomes compared to their elite counterparts, perpetuating existing socio-economic disparities.

2.1.2 Challenges of the expansion

Several debates and issues arise from the expansion of higher education across the countries. The main debates are quality vs quantity, equity and access, and funding and sustainability (UNESCO, 2022).

One of the central debates in the expansion of higher education is the tension between increasing access and maintaining quality. Rapid growth often leads to overcrowded classrooms, overburdened faculty, and a decline in educational standards. Higher education systems globally face a predicament balancing quality, equity, and funding (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010). This quantity-over-quality problem is especially pronounced in low- and middle-income countries, where the infrastructure and academic workforce have not kept pace with the rising number of students (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010). Some scholars argue that while expansion might increase the number of graduates, it could simultaneously dilute the quality of education, leading to a workforce that is credentialed but not adequately skilled (McMahon, 2009; Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011).

While higher education expansion is often portrayed as a means of promoting equality, the reality is more complex. Access to quality education remains uneven, with disparities persisting across socio-economic, geographic, and gender lines (Beamer & Steinbaum, 2019). This is particularly concerning in contexts where public funding is insufficient, and private education becomes the only viable option for many (Morley & Lugg, 2009). Moreover, even in countries

where higher education is more accessible, students from marginalized backgrounds often face additional barriers, such as lack of preparation, limited financial support, and discrimination, which affect their educational outcomes (McCowan, 2004).

Low- and middle-income countries in particular face further challenges to expand higher education. Thus, the equity and access debate is strongly related to funding and sustainability. Challenges include resource limitations restricting available public funding for higher education and the feasibility of cost-sharing with students and families. However, these mechanisms often place a disproportionate burden on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, further entrenching inequality (Schendel & McCowan, 2016). Also, historical constraints mean that higher education in lower-income settings has traditionally served only a small elite, making rapid expansion disruptive (Schendel & McCowan, 2016). Even with funding, these systems often lack sufficient qualified academic faculty to support growth. In addition, quality issues in primary and secondary education often lead to underprepared students entering universities. Moreover, less-resourced contexts often face limited national autonomy due to international organizations and external donors influencing policy agendas.

While the individual benefits of higher education are well-established, it is increasingly recognized that higher education also fosters macro-level development by increasing economic growth and strengthening essential public services (Schendel & McCowan, 2016). Focusing solely on expansion without addressing quality concerns can lead to negative social consequences, particularly the increased socioeconomic inequality (McMahon, 2009). Numerous studies underscore how the expansion of private universities can exacerbate inequalities in access, experiences, and outcomes for students (McCowan, 2004; Morley & Lugg, 2009).

2.1.3 Egyptian Higher education system and its expansion

Egyptian higher education is structured into three main tracks, operating as public or private sectors, consisting of universities offering four to seven-year academic

degrees, and institutes with two tracks: upper-intermediate institutes providing two-year technical degrees, and higher institutes granting four or five-year professional degrees (Abdelkhalek & Langsten, 2020). The trajectory of students through the education system is heavily influenced by their performance in secondary school exams which are closely linked to family socioeconomic status. Notably, children from wealthier families are more likely to pursue the general secondary track, which leads directly to higher education, whereas those from poorer backgrounds have less access to this path with only 20% access rate (Cupito & Langsten, 2011). Admission to universities or institutes in Egypt is contingent upon achieving minimum scores set by the Ministry of Higher Education in the secondary school examination, with varying score requirements across different faculties and departments, even within the same institution (OECD & World Bank, 2010). Students aspiring to higher education submit preference forms listing their desired institutions and faculties/departments. This matching system is administered by the coordination office. Those unable to meet requirements for public university admission may opt for private universities, which often accept lower scores (Barsoum, 2017; Assaad, 2013). While public education in Egypt is tuition-free, additional expenses such as transportation, private tutoring, books, supplies, and attire apply. Despite efforts to expand access and eliminate fees, inequality in accessing higher education persists in Egypt. Extensive research demonstrates that these measures alone do not significantly enhance equality in access to higher education in the short term, a challenge that continues to be well-documented in Egypt and other contexts (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Abdelkhalek & Langsten, 2020).

The transition from education to employment presents significant challenges, characterized by high youth unemployment rates, particularly among women, exacerbated by a labour market dominated by low-skilled, informal jobs (ILO, 2019). In 2018, nearly 60% of individuals aged 15 to 29 were NEET with women comprising 59% of this group compared to 19% for men (ILO, 2018). Reductions in public sector spending have further diminished high-quality job opportunities, and challenges within the labour market, as well as within the education system, are reflected in the mismatch between educational attainment and occupation.

Urban youth face higher unemployment rates (19%) than their rural counterparts (14%), with disparities also observed between Lower and Upper Egypt (16% vs. 14%). Female labour force participation remains exceptionally low at 14%, contrasting sharply with 54% for young males, contributing to high unemployment rates among young women seeking employment. When employed, women are often restricted to limited sectors and lower-paying roles (World Bank, 2018), with managerial positions held by women estimated at just over 6% in 2017. These challenges are compounded by societal norms that place greater household responsibilities on women, potentially prompting them to exit the labour market when balancing work and family becomes untenable.

A study that used a nationally representative sample from the 2013 Survey of Young People in Egypt showed that the expansion of higher education enrolment is rapid for women, rural youth, and middle-class Egyptians, while access to private universities is growing most rapidly for males, youth in Cairo, and the top wealth quintile. It suggests that women are less likely to attend private universities, despite scoring better on the secondary schools' examination, due to economic decisions on the part of the family and because of the inferior reputations of private universities and limited selection of majors. However, there is a gap in qualitative literature that studies women's decisions about higher education analyses discrimination and preferences (Buckner, 2013).

Over the period 2016/17 to 2020/21, allocations to higher education more than doubled from around EGP23 billion to EGP48 billion (CAPMAS, 2021). Over the past decade, the number of universities in Egypt has doubled to accommodate the growing student enrolment. In 2014, 2.3 million students were enrolled in 50 universities nationwide. By the end of 2022, this number had increased to 3.3 million students across 92 universities, including 28 public universities, 27 private universities, and 20 non-profit universities partially funded by the government. Additionally, there are 10 technology universities, six of which opened in 2022-23 (Leila, 2024). In light of this rapid expansion, diversification, and partial privatization, concerns have arisen about equity in higher education opportunities (Abdelkhalek & Langsten, 2020).

The expansion includes an increase in enrolment rates and geographic access, with universities expanding in multiple governorates, unlike the usual trend of Cairo-focused expansion. Research on access to education in general shows that expansion has led to greater inclusiveness, particularly for youth coming from less advantaged backgrounds (Trow, 2007). Nonetheless, empirical studies show mixed results regarding whether expansion actually leads to greater equity of access. The Egyptian higher education policy system has passed through different phases since the 1940s, starting from 'education of the elite' to 'education for all' to 'privatization of education' (Emira, 2014).

2.1.4 Egypt post-colonial and post revolution gender roles

Perceptions of women's roles and rights in Egypt have evolved significantly due to political and socio-economic transformations over the past century. During British colonial rule in Egypt, gender roles were manipulated to serve the interests of the empire. Colonial powers reinforced traditional gender roles to maintain social order and control the population, often limiting women's educational opportunities and confining them to household roles (Salem, 2019). The colonial legacy left a lasting impact on the perception of women's roles in Egypt, with traditions under threat from colonial powers becoming symbols of resistance against European influence, including women's liberation and equality (Marshall & Stokes, 1981; Ahmed, 1992).

Following Egypt's 1952 revolution, in the post-colonial era, the state under President Gamal Abdel Nasser implemented policies to promote social justice, including universal free education. The Egyptian higher education system expanded, with higher education fees eliminated and public sector employment guaranteed for all graduates (Cupito & Langsten, 2011). Women benefited from these reforms, as higher education became accessible to broader segments of society, including women from lower socio-economic backgrounds (McDonald, 1986).

However, while Nasser's socialist state feminism encouraged women's participation in education and the labour force, traditional gender roles were

simultaneously reinforced within the family. The state's broader socialist agenda promoted women's education as part of national development, yet it did not challenge the traditional division of labour at home (Salem, 2020).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Egypt shifted towards neoliberal policies under President Anwar Sadat, which were continued by Hosni Mubarak. These policies included privatization, cuts to social services, and rising unemployment. Neoliberal economic reforms disproportionately affected women, exacerbating gender inequalities both in the labour market and at home. Women bore the brunt of these economic hardships, struggling with fewer employment opportunities while continuing to manage household responsibilities (Anwar, 2020). Privatization also led to increased inequalities in access to education, as private universities expanded and access to higher education became more market-driven, governed by costs and benefits (Galal, 2002). The expansion of private higher education exacerbated class divides, making it harder for lower-income women to access quality education (Levy, 2006; Shavit et al., 2007).

Since 2000, the Egyptian government has focused on developing higher education, aiming to diversify the sector and introduce more private institutions (Radwan, 2016). While public institutions remain tuition-free, the expansion of private higher education, often governed by market logic, has led to concerns about increasing inequality in educational access (Schendel & McCowan, 2016).

Women's political participation has evolved significantly over the past century. In the 2011 revolution, women played active roles, organizing protests and using social media to mobilize despite challenges like sexual harassment and exclusion from formal political processes. Women's experiences of resistance during the revolution were shaped by their gender, adding complexity to their activism (Anwar, 2020). Working-class women, in particular, faced different struggles compared to middle-class women, especially during the neoliberal reforms and revolutionary movements.

Women's activism has continued in the post-revolution period, with many focusing on combating gender-based violence and demanding greater political

inclusion. However, these efforts often confront the persistent influence of traditional gender norms, which create ongoing tension between aspirations for radical change and prevailing societal expectations (El Said, Meari & Pratt, 2015).

Traditions under threat from colonial powers, such as women's liberation and equality, became symbols of cultural resistance against European influence. Lastly, structural inequalities rooted in colonial and apartheid legacies continue to shape access and experiences in higher education, limiting students' ability to expand their capabilities and overcome poverty-related constraints (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022).

2.2 Higher education and gender equality

2.2.1 Higher education and gender equality

Higher education systems are trying to deal with a trade-off and pressure between the demands of quality, equity and funding (Unterhalter and Carpentier 2010). Many studies argue for the strong link between women's education and improved gender indicators in various aspects including labour market participation, health, political participation and poverty (Mandour, 2009; World Bank, 2018; Malhotra et al., 2005). Women's education is consistently associated with positive social and economic impacts, as well as being central to women's rights, their perceived ability to redress structural imbalances, and in providing women with tools to achieve their goals and overcome various conditions and challenges (McMahon, 1999; Schultz, 1961; Unterhalter, 2007).

While significant progress has been made, numerous challenges and debates related to gender equality and higher education remain, particularly regarding access, representation, gender segregation, quality, and learning environment, and gender norms.

Firstly, while there has been significant progress in increasing women's access to higher education globally, disparities persist, particularly in certain regions, disciplines, and levels of education. Access to higher education for women in low- and middle-income countries is often constrained by socio-cultural norms,

economic barriers, and inadequate educational preparation (Unterhalter, 2007; Murphy-Graham, 2012). In addition to accessing higher education, ensuring equal access to all fields of study and encouraging women's participation in underrepresented areas remain critical challenges.

Even in developed nations such as Western Europe and North America, where women's enrolment rates began to surpass men's in the early 1980s, women's increasing participation in higher education is often framed as an individual achievement, neglecting the systemic barriers and gender inequalities they face, particularly in accessing senior academic positions and reflects a multi-level phenomenon of gender inequality that permeates individual, organizational, systemic, and institutional levels (O'Connor et al., 2020; Wharton, 2011; UNESCO, 2012).

Women's underrepresentation in senior academic and managerial positions continues to be a pervasive issue, often attributed to individual-level explanations such as a lack of career ambition or political skills (O'Connor, 2014). However, these explanations fail to account for the broader structural and cultural factors that reinforce male privilege and hinder women's advancement. For instance, gendered socialization, cultural stereotypes, and institutional cultures that favour male-dominated disciplines such as STEM contribute to the persistence of male-dominated leadership structures in higher education (O'Connor et al., 2020). Even in more gender-equal countries like Sweden and Norway, women are less likely to access international research funding or engage in international collaborations, reflecting the disproportionate assignment of family responsibilities to women (Ledin et al., 2007; Reymert, 2022). This imbalance not only affects career progression but also reflects how societal norms intersect with institutional structures, limiting women's ability to compete on equal footing with men in the global academic arena.

Secondly, Gender segregation in higher education is another critical issue, often explained by various socio-cultural and economic factors. Women are underrepresented in STEM fields and in leadership positions within academia (Morley, 2013; UNESCO, 2020). Barone and Assirelli (2020) tested seven

hypotheses to explain this segregation, finding that both institutional and individual-level factors, such as gendered socialization and labour market expectations, reinforce the division between male-dominated and female-dominated fields. This segregation impacts long-term labour market outcomes, with women concentrated in lower-paying fields. While subjects such as education and healthcare have become increasingly feminized, fields like engineering and information technology remain male-dominated (Barone & Assirelli, 2020). Reducing gender segregation is essential to improve women's representation in high-paying fields and their broader economic empowerment. Recent evidence underscores this connection as Seehuus & Strømme (2024) find that women's returns to tertiary education vary significantly by field, with gender-balanced disciplines reducing the wage gap by 12–18% compared to male-dominated ones. Complementing this, OECD (2023) reports that women with tertiary degrees in OECD countries earn on average 84–89% of their male peers' earnings indicating that higher education narrows, though does not close, the gender wage gap.

Thirdly, the quality of education women receive is also a crucial issue. Research suggests that even when women have access to higher education, the quality of education they receive can be affected by gender biases in curriculum content, teaching practices, and institutional policies (Stromquist, 2006; Aikman & Unterhalter, 2013). Furthermore, the prevalence of gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination within educational settings continues to hinder the learning experiences and academic performance of female students (Cin, 2017). Creating inclusive and supportive environments that actively promote gender equality is essential for enhancing educational quality.

Researchers argue that achieving quality education necessitates promoting gender equality and equity, encouraging women to challenge traditional gender roles, norms, and stereotypes (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2013; Goetz, 2007; Murphy Graham, 2012; Robeyns, 2010; Unterhalter, 2007; Cin, 2017). Evaluating education quality should involve addressing the ways in which schooling interfaces with labour market opportunities, society constructs gender roles, educational institutions address women's exclusion both within and outside of

education settings, and how to challenge the social, cultural, political, and economic processes that perpetuate gender discrimination in public spheres and labour markets (Cin, 2017; Aikman & Unterhalter, 2013).

Finally, it is important to highlight why gender equality in education matters. The imperative to expand women's opportunities so they can pursue valued objectives, instigate change, and enhance the capabilities of others is central to capability theorists. Gender equality in higher education is not only an issue of access but of also ensuring that women are not disadvantaged by cultural or institutional barriers. Research has shown that higher education plays a crucial role in women's social mobility, political participation, and labour market outcomes (Ahmed & Hyndman-Rizk, 2020). However, increasing women's participation without addressing the deeper systemic inequalities risks reinforcing gender norms and perpetuating male privilege within academia and beyond.

2.2.2 Higher Education and gender Equality in Egypt

In Egypt, the empirical evidence argues for a relationship between women's higher education and gender equality as well as women's self-autonomy showing a positive effect of education on some aspects particularly participation in decision-making at home (Assaad & Krafft, 2015). Nevertheless, women are often unaware of their possession of this power and of the underlying social, cultural, and especially economic conditions that are necessary for women's higher education to have an advantageous effect on gender equality and women's self-autonomy (Elhalawany, 2009). Studies in Egypt also show that access to higher education has increased women's likelihood of joining the labour force, improved the type of jobs, enhanced marriage outcomes, as well as raised levels of social empowerment (ERF, 2020; Selwaness & Krafft, 2021; El-Hamidi, 2009).

Leading to the Arab spring, unemployment rates were highest among educated youth with high school and university diplomas particularly for women (Herrera & Mayo, 2012). "Bread, freedom, social justice" were what millions of Egyptians chanted when they stormed the streets in January 2011. Conscious of its pivotal

role in addressing socio-economic grievances and justice, focus shifted to education, as it is presumably the bedrock of sustainable socio-economic development nationally and globally. The reforms sought to meet people's demands, foster economic development, and increase employment. Educators look to reflect the revolutionary ideology in education through a more student-centred approaches and radical pedagogies that highlight self-activity, collectivism, and choice if they are allowed and have the capacity to do so (Behrent, 2012). The Arab Spring affected women's social and economic aspirations for their development and empowerment through effectively enhancing their wellbeing and reducing their unemployment (ElAshmawy, 2016).

Egyptian women have been appointed to top positions in several universities as school deans, but not as presidents except once (Khaled 2009). However, according to a discussion by some women scientists, the number of women who reach the position of dean in scientific fields is smaller than the number of men who do so (Al Sharq Al Awsat 2014).

Disparities in educational attainment are notable, with young females more likely to have completed secondary general education (23% compared to 18% for males), while males are more likely to have completed secondary technical education with 32% compared to 29% for females. There are also significant disparities by location and wealth status. For example, young people in rural areas are almost twice as likely to have less than complete primary education compared to their urban peers (15% and 8%, respectively) (CAPMAS, 2020).

2.3 Gender inequalities in the labour market

2.3.1 Higher education expansion and the labour market

The expansion of higher education has been instrumental in promoting gender equity in education, but its impact on labour market outcomes remains a contested subject. The literature identifies several key issues and debates, including the impact of higher education expansion on access and gender equity in the labour market, the mismatch between education and labour market

outcomes, the persistence of gender segregation in different job sectors, the gender wage gap, and the glass ceiling that limits women's career progression.

The expansion of higher education throughout the 20th century has led to a surge in the relative supply of skilled labour (Goldin & Katz, 2008; Chang, 2018; Gordon, 2013). Thus, higher education expansion has been promoted as a solution to gender inequalities by equipping women with the tools and resources to integrate and maximise their benefit in the labour market and foster overall economic empowerment (Chen, 2018; Didier, 2021). A key issue in the debate is whether the expansion of higher education leads to improved gender equity in the labour market. While it may contribute to narrowing the gender wage gap, it does not necessarily translate into increased participation of women in white-collar jobs or address the persistent glass ceiling that limits their advancement to leadership positions (Didier, 2021; Goldin, 2014). This suggests that although higher education expansion may reduce the gender gap in enrolment, achieving greater equality in the labour market requires addressing persistent discriminatory behaviours, entrenched gender norms, and societal expectations (Si, 2022; Lindsey, 2016).

The linkages between higher education and labour market outcomes for women remain a significant debate, including translating and transitioning between education and employment. Women often face gender-based discrimination in the labour market, which can negate the potential benefits of their education (Robeyns, 2010; Sen, 1999). Studies have shown that women are more likely to be employed in lower-paying jobs, face greater job insecurity, and experience slower career progression compared to their male counterparts (Mandour, 2009; World Bank, 2014; ILO, 2018). While women with degrees experience somewhat more equitable outcomes compared to those without, they still face challenges in converting educational attainment into equal labour market opportunities. This indicates that the expansion of education alone is insufficient to overcome the gendered constraints embedded in labour market structures (Cin et al., 2021).

Another critical debate is the mismatch between fields of study and labour market demands, which disproportionately affects women. Horizontal mismatch between

the attended field of education and the labour market can have serious consequences on unemployment, wage penalties, job dissatisfaction, and limited career advancement opportunities for women (Bender and Roche, 2013; Robst, 2007). Some studies argue that females are more likely to suffer from this mismatch where males experience mismatch due to career-oriented reasons while females due to family-related reasons, the job location, or working conditions (Hensen et al., 2009; Farooq, 2011; Robst, 2007; Bender and Heywood, 2011). Even with increased access to higher education, gendered field-of-study choices remain persistent (Barone & Assirelli, 2020). These choices can often be traced back to societal expectations and norms, which steer women toward less lucrative sectors. As a result, although women may gain educational qualifications, they are funnelled into lower-paying jobs that do not align with labour market needs, reinforcing gender disparities in career outcomes (Steinmetz, 2012; Barone, 2011; Tam 1997).

Gender segregation in employment remains another major issue, even as women's participation in higher education has expanded. Horizontal segregation refers to the concentration of women in fields like humanities and social sciences, which often lead to lower-paying jobs. In contrast, men dominate higher-paid STEM fields (Barone & Assirelli, 2020; Reimer et al., 2008). Vertical segregation refers to the underrepresentation of women in senior academic or leadership roles, where women remain less likely to achieve career progression compared to men (Hensen et al., 2009; Bender & Heywood, 2011). Moreover, the existing gender segregation has led to significant gender wage gap in some countries, such as those in the European Union (Addabbo & Favaro, 2011; Assirelli, 2015).

Even in sectors where women have made significant inroads, the glass ceiling prevents many from reaching top positions. The structural barriers that limit women's career progression are deeply entrenched, meaning that despite their higher education credentials, women remain underrepresented in high-status jobs (Powell & Sang, 2013). The persistence of these issues highlights how the mere expansion of education has not eradicated gender segregation in the labour market. The Global Gender Gap Report (2023) by the World Economic Forum estimates that it will take 131 years to close the global gender gap in labour force

participation and leadership positions, demonstrating the slow progress in achieving gender parity. Women account for only 28% of managerial roles worldwide and even fewer in senior leadership positions (ILO, 2021). This underrepresentation at the top illustrates how the mere expansion of education has not eradicated gender segregation in the labour market (Reskin & Roos, 1990; Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2001).

The gender wage gap remains another key issue. While higher education has narrowed the wage gap between men and women in some contexts, significant disparities still exist (Blau & Kahn, 2017). According to OECD data (2021), across its member countries, women earn 13% less than men on average for similar work. This gap is even larger in female-dominated sectors, such as healthcare and education, where women continue to earn less than men in comparable positions (OECD, 2021). The concentration of women in lower-paying fields, combined with the undervaluation of these roles, contributes to the persistence of wage inequality (Tam, 1997; England, 2010). According to Cin et al. (2021), although the gender wage gap is smaller in countries like Turkey, where recent cohorts of highly educated women have entered the labour force, inequalities remain. The wage gap is often tied to the type of work women pursue, which may involve tasks traditionally associated with unpaid domestic work, such as caregiving. This devaluation of female-dominated sectors perpetuates lower salaries, even among highly educated women (ILO, 2020).

Traditional gender norms continue to influence labour market participation for women, even among those with higher education (Kabeer, 2008). Despite obtaining degrees, many women find themselves disproportionately responsible for unpaid domestic and care work, which limits their ability to engage fully in the labour market (World Bank, 2020). The paradox is that even in the world's most gender-equal countries, such as Sweden and Norway, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles and international collaborations due to persistent caregiving burdens and subtle societal biases (BBC, 2019). Chang (2018) notes that social norms often expect men to be the primary breadwinners while women take on caregiving roles, resulting in reduced labour market participation or lower work hours for women. This trend is reinforced by data from

the ILO, which highlights that women globally perform more than three times the amount of unpaid care work as men (ILO, 2019). This dynamic reinforces occupational segregation and contributes to persistent gender inequalities (Charles & Bradley, 2009).

At the same time, higher education has been associated with more egalitarian gender values, which suggests that education can play a role in shifting societal norms over time (Gök et al., 2019). In countries where women have had greater access to higher education, such as the Nordic countries, there has been a more substantial shift towards gender equality in both private and public spheres (OECD, 2017). However, even in these contexts, women still face structural barriers to fully benefiting from their educational qualifications in the labour market.

In summary, while the expansion of higher education has played an important role in increasing women's participation in the labour force, significant challenges remain in translating these educational gains into gender equity in the labour market. Issues such as occupational segregation, the gender wage gap, and the glass ceiling continue to limit women's career progression. The complexities of these issues, show that although higher education provides more opportunities for women, structural inequalities and entrenched gender norms prevent them from fully benefiting from their educational qualifications. Addressing these systemic issues requires not only expanding access to education but also reforming labour market practices and societal attitudes toward gender roles.

2.3.2 Gender Inequality in Egypt's Labour Market

Despite Egypt's notable expansion in higher education, significant gender disparities persist in the labour market, where women experience notably higher unemployment rates than men. Women's unemployment rate stands at 16.5% compared to 4.4% for men (CAPMAS, 2024). While it is higher than the global average of 5.3 (ILO, 2024); it still may seem low but is misleading due to contextual factors. Many women are not actively seeking work due to cultural, social, or structural barriers, which means they are not counted as unemployed

under the ILO definition, thus artificially lowering the unemployment rate (World Bank, 2023). Also, widespread informal employment and high underemployment mask gender inequities, as many women work in low-quality, insecure jobs or roles below their qualifications (ILO, 2022). Thus, the true rate of women's economic exclusion in Egypt may far exceed the officially reported female unemployment rate when considering labour underutilization, which includes discouraged workers and underemployed individuals. For instance, a large proportion of women are engaged in unpaid family work or informal employment, with 34% of the female labour force involved in unpaid family work (AUC, 2008).

Although women's enrolment and graduation rates in higher education have steadily increased, particularly in fields like STEM, their participation in the labour force remains disproportionately low. This disparity underscores that while higher education has helped close the educational gender gap, it has not translated into comparable access to labour market opportunities, particularly in sectors that align with Egypt's economic demands. The same key issues and debates regarding gender in the labour market apply to Egypt.

Egypt's Vision 2030 and the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030 aim to address these issues by promoting political, economic, and social empowerment and protection, in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the education system in Egypt often lacks alignment with private sector demands, which impacts female graduates disproportionately. This structural gap, compounded by broader gendered economic and social constraints, results in many educated women remaining unemployed despite their qualifications (CAPMAS, 2019; World Bank, 2018; Fedi et al., 2019).

A notable factor contributing to high unemployment rates among educated women in Egypt is the mismatch between educational qualifications and labour market needs. While Egyptian women attain degrees across various fields, available employment often does not align with their skills, leading to underemployment, wage penalties, and limited career advancement (Roushdy, 2021). This mismatch is especially pronounced among women, who face more

significant barriers than men in entering the workforce, particularly in high-demand private sector roles that emphasize experience over credentials. For example, young women with university degrees are five times more likely to be unemployed than men with similar qualifications (Population Council, 2012). For women from rural areas, the employment gap is even starker; they are 17 times less likely to find employment than rural men, often due to limited access to networks and resources that facilitate entry into high-quality jobs (British Council, 2020). This mismatch not only restricts the career prospects of educated women but also limits their ability to achieve economic independence and social mobility, exacerbating labour market inequality.

Gender segregation in the Egyptian labour market remains a persistent issue, with women heavily concentrated in lower-paying sectors traditionally associated with caregiving and administrative roles (Constant et al., 2020). Although women's educational attainment has improved, occupational segregation directs women away from high-status, high-paying fields, including STEM, where men remain overrepresented despite near parity in STEM graduation rates. This segregation perpetuates economic disparities and limits women's upward mobility, as they are often channelled into fields with lower pay and fewer advancement opportunities (World Bank, 2018; British Council, 2020). Structural barriers, coupled with societal norms discouraging women from pursuing roles in male-dominated sectors, further reinforce gender disparities in employment and wages. This occupational segregation is evident in Egypt, where only nine job types constitute 95% of women's paid work in the private sector (Assaad & Arntz, 2005).

Gender wage disparities are another significant challenge in Egypt's labour market, where women generally earn less than men, even with comparable qualifications and job roles. Egypt ranks 143rd globally in women's labour force participation, with only 24.7% of women engaged in the workforce, a significant portion of whom are on part-time contracts (CAPMAS, 2024). Despite efforts to promote gender equality, wage inequality remains widespread; the wage gap between men and women is 25%, attributed largely to discrimination against women (Biltagy, 2014). The wage gap is compounded by structural factors within

the labour market, including cultural norms prioritizing men for employment in times of job scarcity, further limiting women's access to high-paying roles (Sika, 2017; World Bank, 2018). Women in Egypt earn less than men across all levels of education and both sectors, with disparities due to systemic discrimination, occupational barriers, and structural constraints (ILO, 2024).

The glass ceiling continues to restrict women's advancement in Egypt, where women face significant obstacles in reaching senior and leadership positions. Factors contributing to the glass ceiling effect encompass gender discrimination, workplace conditions, societal male dominance, family obligations, and deeply rooted gender roles (Abbas et al., 2021). Social norms perpetuate discrimination against women in the labour market and in leadership roles, as they typically position men as superior and primary providers, while women are expected to be obedient to their husbands (Moussa, 2022; Khedr, 2017). As of 2016, women occupied only 7.1% of leadership positions (World Bank, 2018). Cultural norms and societal expectations also shape career choices, reinforcing the notion that certain roles are "appropriate" for women, limiting their entry into technical or leadership roles (Nazier, 2019). However, the government has made strides toward breaking the glass ceiling with several "first-ever" appointments, such as the first female advisor to the President on national security in 2014, the first female governor of Beheira Governorate in 2017, and the first female president of the Economic Court in 2018. More effort needs to be done in the Higher education institutions where there is limited representation of women in higher education leadership roles, despite education being one of the main sectors for women employment, with women representing less than 10% of the leadership positions in higher education institutions in Egypt (Eleraqi & Salahuddin, 2018).

The underrepresentation of women in Egypt's labour market has substantial economic implications, contributing to a significant loss in GDP for the MENA region. A World Bank study estimates that limited employment opportunities for women result in considerable economic costs, as women's exclusion from productive economic activities limits regional growth and innovation (World Bank, 2018). Gender inequality in employment also constrains household incomes,

exacerbates poverty rates, and impedes social development, affecting individual women and broader economic stability.

2.3.3 Structural Challenges, cultural barriers and Policy Implications

Despite advancements in higher education reducing gender disparities, Egyptian women face persistent structural challenges in securing employment. These include the high cost of childcare, the expectation that women should bear the majority of household responsibilities, negative workplace attitudes towards women, lack of mobility, legal barriers, persistent wage gaps, and sexual harassment in the workplace (Constant et al., 2020; El Assiouty, 2020). Egypt has only 12,500 daycare facilities for a population of 90 million people, which is significantly inadequate (Barsoum, 2017).

Single women in Egypt identify job scarcity and poor job quality, such as low pay, long hours, informality, and jobs not aligning with gender norms, as major obstacles. Married women face additional challenges related to time deprivation and weak family and social support, which further hinder their employment opportunities (Krafft et al., 2022). Studies argue that long working hours, which conflict with social expectations, impede women from holding private sector STEM roles (British Council, 2020).

Cultural factors significantly influence labour outcomes in Egypt and the broader Middle East. The low participation of women in the labour force is linked to patriarchal familial structures, where women often depend economically on men (Barsoum et al., 2009). The decline in women's labour force participation is partly due to reduced public sector hiring and insufficient compensation from the rise in private sector employment, which has largely expanded in informal sectors (Assaad & El-Hamidi, 2009). Marital status and sector of employment also impact women's labour participation, with married women more likely to continue working if employed in the public sector but often leaving the workforce if employed in the private sector (ibid).

Academic literature on women's employment in the Arab region has often reflected assumptions about their limited economic activity, overlooking the

structural and cultural barriers shaping their participation (Assaad & Krafft, 2015). Unlike the global trend of increasing women labour force participation due to globalization, women in Egypt have very low participation rates (Assaad, 2005). There is a notable absence of research exploring how social policies affect women's work opportunities, particularly for mothers (Williams, 2010; Damaske, 2009). The challenges women face in balancing paid work with childcare responsibilities remain underexplored in the Arab world (Barsoum, 2017). Similarly, discussions on the division of household chores and issues like the "double day" and "second shift" are rare in the Middle Eastern context (Hochschild, 1989). Literature on job insecurity, feminization of poverty, and challenges faced by educated women entering the labour market is also limited (Kudva & Beneria, 2005; Barsoum, 2004).

The development of women's wage work in Egypt began as part of a modernization effort by the state in the 1950s and 1960s (Barsoum, 2017). During this period, the state's industrialization plans included a vision for women's roles, resulting in "state feminism," where the state took responsibility for women's reproductive roles and employment opportunities (Hatem, 1996). Despite economic growth, inequalities persist, as evidenced by rising unemployment rates and the ongoing disparity in labour force participation between men and women (Al Assiouty, 2022). The presence of dependents, such as children and the elderly, significantly reduces the likelihood of Egyptian women being employed by more than 66% (UN Women, 2020). Egyptian law provides 90 days of paid maternity leave and the option for unpaid leave for up to two years, but this is limited to two occasions throughout a woman's employment (Barsoum, 2017).

Research identifies various factors influencing women labour force participation, including age, educational attainment, location, and marital status (Selwaness & Krafft, 2021). These factors are interconnected and observed across many developing countries. For example, marriage often discourages women from participating in the labour force (Salem, 2016; Assaad, Krafft, & Selwaness, 2017). Similar trends are noted in countries like Turkey, India, Argentina, and Bangladesh, where cultural norms surrounding marriage contribute to low

women labour force participation despite economic growth (Özsoy & Sevilay, 2010; Gündüz-Hoşgör & Smits, 2008; Sarkar, Sahoo, & Klasen, 2019; Cerutti, 2000; Tanaka, Takahashi, & Ōtsuka, 2020). Additionally, household responsibilities disproportionately borne by women further constrain their economic participation (Constant et al., 2020; Dingel, Patterson, & Vavra, 2020; Katrin Elborgh-Woytek, 2013). Geographical location also plays a role; women in rural areas often face higher unemployment rates or are more likely to be out of the labour force compared to their urban counterparts. Social norms and cultural beliefs, as well as perceived challenges within the private sector, also shape women's economic participation in Egypt (Assaad R., 2019; Barsoum, 2010).

2.4 Gaps in literature

Despite a growing body of research on women in higher education, significant gaps persist, especially regarding the lived experiences of women from Egypt, the Middle East, and conservative societies.

Firstly, existing literature heavily emphasizes quantitative data on access and enrolment rates. Although valuable, such data often overlooks the rich qualitative insights that women themselves can provide about their educational journeys and the challenges they face in entering and remaining in the workforce (Ahmed & Hyndman-Rizk, 2020; McCowan, 2004; Schofer & Meyer, 2006). This is especially relevant in Egypt, where unique cultural and institutional barriers influence women's agency, aspirations, and outcomes in ways that diverge from Western contexts (Ahmed, 1992; El Said, 2020). The expansion of Egypt's higher education sector, though well-documented quantitatively, lacks in-depth qualitative analysis regarding its impact on gender equity and educational outcomes. Current studies frequently emphasize growth metrics over the nuanced effects on women's academic and social experiences, especially in male-dominated fields where gender biases persist (Schofer, 2005; Barakat & Shields, 2019; Morley & Lugg, 2009). Further exploration is needed to understand how the expansion impacts women's experiences across different socio-economic contexts (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010; McMahon, 2009). Additionally, women in conservative societies face unique pressures balancing

academic pursuits with family obligations, where social expectations around marriage and family roles often temper educational and career aspirations (UNESCO, 2021; Parvazian & Gill, 2017). It is worth noting that much of the literature on gender and higher education in the MENA region, including Egypt, is relatively dated due to limited recent empirical research and data availability. This highlights a clear gap in up-to-date scholarship on women's capabilities and agency in higher education, which this study aims to address.

Secondly, there is a substantial gap in research exploring the complete educational lifecycle for women, from the socio-cultural factors influencing high school experiences and aspirations to higher education and eventual transitions into the labour market. This comprehensive view is essential for capturing how challenges and supports evolve through each phase, affecting women's long-term trajectories. By neglecting this continuum, existing research fails to highlight how socio-economic backgrounds, family expectations, and cultural norms shape educational and career outcomes in developing countries (Zayed, 2019; Assaad & El Hamidi, 2009). More research is needed to explore how institutional environments, faculty attitudes, extracurricular activities, and hidden curricula contribute to gender disparities and where reforms could support gender equity which in turn has a knock-on effect by limiting women's participation and progression in the labour market, perpetuating occupational segregation and wage gaps (Stromquist, 2006; Murphy-Graham, 2012). While some studies address field-of-study choices and their labour market implications, more research is required to examine why women select certain fields and how these decisions influence their workforce experiences, including the role of societal expectations, financial considerations, and institutional support (Bender & Roche, 2013; Robst, 2007).

Thirdly, the paradox of labour market participation is a critical issue, particularly in Egypt. Despite broader access to higher education, Egyptian women's workforce participation remains low. While numerous studies focus on structural barriers like legal and economic conditions, they often overlook internalized social norms and family expectations that shape career aspirations and workforce retention. Addressing these qualitative gaps is essential to understand

how women's perceptions of agency and societal roles affect their educational and career choices. Economists and sociologists note the low workforce participation among Egyptian women as a persistent concern; however, there is a need for firsthand accounts to capture how women navigate these barriers (Zeitoun, 2018; Al Assiouty, 2022; Hendy, 2015; Barsoum, 2017; Amer, 2007). Studies centred on women's voices can provide a fuller picture of the socio-cultural obstacles often overlooked in policy analyses focused on structural reforms.

Additionally, although access to education has expanded, research rarely examines how this access translates into equitable outcomes for women of varied socio-economic and geographic backgrounds within Egyptian higher education. A deeper exploration of how intersections of gender, class, and geography affect outcomes would provide a more holistic view of equity within the educational system (Morley & Lugg, 2009; McCowan, 2004). This is crucial given that Egypt's higher education system still exhibits significant disparities, particularly for women from rural or economically disadvantaged communities, who often face heightened barriers to academic and professional success.

Finally, while research on gender dynamics in the labour market addresses issues like the gender pay gap, occupational segregation, and the glass ceiling, it frequently overlooks women's strategies and lived experiences in navigating these barriers. Some studies focus on external factors like wage disparities or promotion rates but often miss the qualitative aspects of how women experience and respond to workplace inequalities (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Goldin, 2014). Longitudinal studies tracking women's career trajectories could offer valuable insights into the lasting impact of higher education on their lives and capacities, particularly in fields like STEM, where gender biases are deeply embedded (Bender & Roche, 2013; Robst, 2007; Garibaldi, 2014).

In summary, this research aims to address these gaps by centring the voices of Egyptian women, capturing their experiences as they navigate high school, university, and the workforce. It seeks to document the socio-cultural, institutional, and personal factors influencing each stage, contributing to a

comprehensive understanding of how gender, education, and labour market dynamics intersect in Egypt. By amplifying women's voices, this study supports policies and practices that reflect the complex realities of gender equality and educational access in Egypt and similar contexts. This is particularly important given the limited research that applies the capabilities framework to analyse the intersections of gender, higher education, and labour market participation in the Egyptian context.

3 Capability Approach and Agency: A Lens on Higher Education and Gender Equality

3.1 Capability Approach overview

In recent decades, the function and effect of women in higher education, particularly in developing countries, has undergone significant transformation, considering the higher education expansion, reflecting a broader revolution in societal dynamics and gender equality. The Capability Approach, developed by economist Amartya Sen (1999) and further elaborated by Nussbaum (2000), provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding and evaluating the impact of women's higher education on their individual well-being and the overall development of societies.

The CA is an economic and ethical theoretical framework that focuses on human well-being and development rather than traditional measures such as income or GDP. It focuses on the freedom that individuals have to exercise and achieve what they value, and have reason to value instead of solely assessing well-being based on financial and materialist aspects and resources. Thus, it shifts the focus from what people possess to what they can do or become. Sen's (2009) defines the CA as "an intellectual discipline that gives a central role to the evaluation of a person's achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her actual ability to do the different things a person has reason to value doing or being". It is a conceptual framework for a range of evaluation aspects, including the assessment of individual well-being and wellbeing freedom; the evaluation of social arrangements or institutions; and the design of policies and other forms of social change in society (Robeyns, 2017). The CA has been used and applied in many fields and contexts, such as poverty assessment, gender inequality, and social policy, and it has informed debates on human rights and social justice, providing a more holistic, humanitarian, and individual-centred perspective on well-being.

Robeyns (2017) argues that the CA is an open-ended, underspecified framework that can be applied and interpreted in many ways. Nussbaum attempted to utilise

Sen's work into a more concrete application. Nussbaum (2000) stated the aim to "go beyond the merely comparative use of the capability space to articulate an account of how capabilities, together with the idea of a threshold level, can provide a basis for constitutional principles that citizens have a right to demand from their governments". Sen argues for the 'equality of capability'; while Nussbaum's articulation focuses on a 'threshold of capabilities. They both recognize empowerment as an important aspect of human development. Sen offers a more abstract version of capabilities theory, while Nussbaum's offers a more substantive Aristotelian version and attempts to apply the concepts to women's lives (Gasper, 1997).

3.2 Main concepts of the Capability Approach

The concepts and the theoretical framework of the Capability Approach ought to be interpreted and conceptualised according to the research fields implied (Salais 2009). To better understand and discuss the approach; it is essential to define the main concepts that shape the CA.

3.2.1 Capabilities

In the context of the CA, capabilities refer to the real freedoms or opportunities available to individuals to achieve the kind of lives they have reason to value (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017). Unlike traditional economic measures that focus on income or material wealth, capabilities encompass a broader spectrum of human development by considering the actual possibilities people have to pursue different ways of living (Nussbaum, 2000). Capabilities can fall under the main aspects of life as physical or health, social, economic, political, and intellectual capabilities. Capabilities can be described as the set of functionings (beings and doings) that a person can achieve, given their personal characteristics and external circumstances (Sen, 1999). Examples of 'beings' are being well-nourished, being educated, and being part of a supportive social network; these also include negative aspects such as being depressed. Examples of the 'doings' are caring for a child, voting, smoking, consuming food. This means that

capabilities are not merely about access to resources but about having the genuine ability to utilize those resources to live a fulfilling life (Alkire, 2002).

The approach is particularly relevant in developing countries where access to education is important, but the capability to benefit from education depends on various factors such as the quality of teaching, cultural attitudes towards girls' education, and familial support (Robeyns, 2017; Nussbaum, 2003). It can also be related to gender equality in education, where girls may have access to a school, but their capability to achieve may be constrained by factors such as economic needs, gender norms, or school facilities.

3.2.2 Functioning

Sen (1999) draws a distinction between functionings and freedom. Functionings are the various things a person may value doing or being and the practical realisation of one's chosen way of life (Walker, 2006). However, capabilities define the overall freedom to lead the life a person has reason to value (Sen, 1992; 2009). Thus, one can argue that functioning corresponds to achievement and capabilities corresponds to the freedom to achieve.

Functionings are the realized achievements of individuals, the "beings and doings" that people manage to accomplish. For example, a person who does not go to higher education may or may not be free and able to do that; the notion of capability seeks to capture precisely the fact of whether the person could pursue higher education if they wanted to. Thus, while going to university is a functioning, the real opportunity to pursue higher education is the corresponding capability.

Functionings and capabilities are defined in a value-neutral way, meaning not all functionings are inherently positive (Robeyns, 2017). Some functionings can have negative value, such as experiencing extreme stress, or engaging in violent acts. These are examples of "bad functionings," where the outcome is undesirable, and society would be better off without them (Robeyns, 2017; Stewart, 2013). For example, the capability to commit rape should not be considered a valuable capability to protect, illustrating how some capabilities can be harmful (Nussbaum, 2003).

3.2.3 Conversion Factors

In order to evaluate capability sets, it is also important to identify and build the capacity of conversion factors. Conversion factors, shaped by personal, environmental and socio-economic factors, can constrain the capability achievement of individuals, especially from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Nambiar, 2013). These factors affect an individual's ability to convert resources into valuable functionings, where functionings represent the "beings and doings" that individuals value and have reason to pursue (Sen, 1999). Conversion factors can be personal (e.g., intelligence, health, or skills), social (e.g., gender norms, social hierarchies, or cultural expectations), or environmental (e.g., geographic location, climate, or infrastructure) (Robeyns, 2017; Alkire, 2005). The interplay between these factors underscores the complexities of capability development, revealing how access to resources alone does not guarantee equitable well-being outcomes (Nussbaum, 2003).

The concept of conversion factors is critical to understanding why individuals with similar resources or opportunities may have vastly different capabilities. Structural inequalities, personal characteristics, and environmental barriers contribute to this divergence, emphasizing the importance of addressing not only resource allocation but also the contextual factors that shape capability realization. For instance, a disabled person may require more than equal access to education they may also need supportive technologies, accessible infrastructure, and inclusive social attitudes to achieve the same educational outcomes as a non-disabled peer (Alkire, 2002; Mitra, 2006). As pointed out by Crocker and Robeyns (2009), this highlights the importance of focusing on "effective freedoms," where the goal is not just the availability of opportunities but ensuring that individuals have the substantive freedom to utilize those opportunities in ways they value.

The dynamic nature of conversion factors is also central to the CA. These factors are not fixed but can be reshaped through deliberate policy interventions and

collective social choices (Robeyns, 2017). For example, transformative policies that address social norms, such as gender-sensitive educational reforms or anti-discrimination laws can alter socio-cultural conversion factors, enabling individuals to access and benefit from opportunities that were previously inaccessible. Drawing on the work of Walker and Unterhalter (2007), the educational sphere offers a compelling lens to examine how structural and institutional conversion factors can mediate access to valued capabilities like learning and employment, especially for marginalized groups.

By incorporating this multi-dimensional understanding of conversion factors, the CA provides a more nuanced and holistic framework for assessing well-being and equity. This perspective not only recognizes human diversity but also aligns with the broader goals of justice and equality by identifying areas for targeted interventions that can expand freedoms and reduce disparities (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2003).

3.2.4 Agency

The Capability Approach emphasizes the importance of individual agency, which is understood as the ability to make choices and act according to one's values and preferences (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017). Sen (1999) asserts that development should be seen as a process of expanding real freedoms that individuals enjoy. Thus, agency involves enabling individuals to be active participants in shaping their lives and in influencing the conditions under which they live, rather than being passive recipients of aid or resources (Dreze & Sen, 1995; Crocker & Robeyns, 2009). This reframes development from simply providing resources to focusing on expanding people's capabilities, allowing them to choose and achieve the functionings they value.

Claassen (2018) introduces the concept of navigational agency, which is particularly relevant for individuals who navigate complex social structures and systemic barriers. Navigational agency refers to the strategies and actions individuals use to exercise agency within limited or constrained contexts (Claassen, 2018). It highlights how marginalized groups facing intersecting

oppressions might navigate unequal systems to achieve their desired functionings. Unlike other conceptions of agency, navigational agency does not assume an ideal, constraint-free decision-making environment. Instead, it focuses on the real, often unequal contexts in which individuals must negotiate and assert themselves (Claassen, 2018; DeJaeghere et al., 2020).

Navigational agency encompasses strategic entry/exit decisions in systems, conflict resolution amid structural barriers, reforming institutional practices, and creating emancipatory alternatives, all while centring marginalized voices and aspirations (Claassen, 2018; Walker & Mkwanaenzi, 2019). As Claassen (2018) outlines, individuals must navigate between practices that accept them and those that marginalize them. The entry into practices involves strategic decisions that may involve aligning oneself with institutions or spaces that offer limited recognition but still provide opportunities for some form of participation. In navigating between these practices, individuals develop coping strategies that range from resilience to negotiation, adapting to or transforming structures that do not fully allow them to flourish.

For women, navigating practices may involve entering spaces such as higher education institutions that provide opportunities for empowerment but may also perpetuate gendered expectations. In such contexts, strategies to navigate these barriers could involve pursuing academic goals despite societal restrictions, creating networks of support, or pushing back against gendered academic or social practices.

The difference between navigational agency and participatory agency lies in the fact that navigational agency is about movement within constrained structures, where individuals act to assert their presence and make choices within unequal contexts (Claassen, 2018). In contrast, participatory agency focuses more on engagement and the potential to reshape and influence practices from within. While participatory agency allows for the transformation of the practices one engages in, navigational agency is more concerned with how individuals move between and within those practices in the first place.

Both Sen's and Nussbaum's approaches have faced critiques for not fully addressing the structural inequalities that limit individuals' ability to exercise their capabilities. Sen's emphasis on capabilities as a measure of freedom often overlooks how unequal power dynamics, social structures, and systemic discrimination shape individuals' opportunities to achieve their functionings (Nussbaum, 2000). Navigational agency addresses these critiques by incorporating a more dynamic and contextualized understanding of how individuals interact with societal structures. It emphasizes the agency of individuals in negotiating their path within these structures, while acknowledging that these structures may be unjust or limiting (Claassen, 2018). Thus, navigational agency provides a more nuanced framework for understanding agency in contexts of systemic inequality, helping to bridge the gap left by the traditional formulations of the CA.

Some Critics of navigational agency argue that this framework may inadvertently shift the responsibility for addressing structural inequalities onto the individual, particularly it may not hold across all contexts, especially for historically oppressed or marginalized groups (Richardson, 2020). While navigational agency highlights resilience and resourcefulness, it should not be seen as replacing efforts to remove systemic barriers. This critique resonates with feminist concerns about the potential of focusing too heavily on individual adaptation at the expense of necessary structural transformation.

Navigational agency is deeply connected to aspirations, as individuals navigating constraints must adjust their goals and pursue those they believe are attainable within the environment they occupy. Aspirations are the goals, desires, and values that individuals hold, and they are influenced by the available opportunities, social norms, and personal circumstances (Hart, 2012). DeJaeghere et al. (2020) argue that aspirations are shaped by what people value and what they perceive as achievable within their social and material realities. Thus, navigational agency is not only about overcoming barriers but also about reframing and pursuing aspirations within the limitations of those barriers.

For example, women in patriarchal societies may aspire to higher education and professional careers, but societal norms, economic barriers, and discrimination can limit their opportunities. Navigational agency allows them to find ways to overcome these constraints and pursue their goals. However, as Mkwanzani (2019) emphasizes, aspirations are dynamic they evolve through education, social exposure, and engagement with new possibilities. True agency exists when women not only have the freedom to attend higher education but also have the autonomy to choose their field of study, participate fully in academic life, and pursue a career of their choice thereafter (Robeyns, 2017; Claassen, 2018).

3.3 Why the Capability Approach?

At the proposal stage, I considered several theoretical frameworks, including Patti Gouthro's feminist theory of the Homeplace. Gouthro (2004; 2005; 2009) explores the home as a site of learning, care, and work, and critiques the dominance of neoliberal values in adult education. Drawing on Habermasian concepts of the system and lifeworld and Fraser's (1990) critique of androcentrism, her work highlights the public-private divide and its gendered inequalities. While insightful, Gouthro's theory primarily focuses on informal learning and adult education, making it less applicable to my research on formal higher education and its transformative potential in expanding women's capabilities.

Feminist social reproduction theory and Marxist feminist perspectives, such as those by Fraser (2017) and Weeks (2011), were also considered. These theories critically examine the intersections of gender, labour, and capitalism, emphasizing how educational institutions perpetuate social reproduction. While they offer valuable critiques of structural inequalities, they focus more on labour dynamics than on how education can foster agency and aspirations. These frameworks lack the nuanced perspective needed to analyse how women navigate systemic barriers and expand their capabilities within higher education and the labour market.

The Capability Approach, by contrast, provides a comprehensive framework for analysing how higher education shapes individual well-being, agency, and societal change. Developed by Sen (1999) and expanded by Nussbaum (2000), it focuses on the interplay between individual freedoms and structural constraints. This approach enables an exploration of how women convert higher education opportunities into valued capabilities and functionings, considering the role of social, economic, and cultural conversion factors (Robeyns, 2005). Using the CA, learning outcomes can be redefined to go beyond qualifications and human capital, focusing instead on fostering students' well-being and valued attributes (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022).

The CA is particularly valuable for understanding the Egyptian context, where women face systemic challenges in accessing higher education and the labour market. Cin (2017) highlights that while women have surpassed men in higher education enrolment in some contexts, enrolment rates alone provide an incomplete picture of gender relations. This research also draws on Subrahmanian (2005), who underscores the importance of qualitative methodologies in understanding gender equality, arguing that deeper insights into processes and outcomes are needed beyond numerical parity.

Applying the CA enriches this research by examining the interplay of individual aspirations, systemic barriers, and institutional practices. It aligns with Alkire's (2002) call to recognize individual experiences while identifying the enabling conditions necessary for expanding capabilities. Moreover, narrative inquiry complements the CA by creating space for women to reflect on and articulate the capabilities they value, consistent with Sen's (1999) emphasis on reflective self-evaluation.

Historically, Egyptian women have faced systemic barriers to education and the labour market, but their experiences also highlight the transformative potential of education. By adopting this approach, this research aims to capture the complexities of women's experiences and explore how higher education fosters both individual and societal progress.

While both capabilities and functionings are integral to Sen's framework, this research focuses primarily on capabilities as the central evaluative space. The emphasis is on examining women's real opportunities to pursue education, employment, and personal aspirations within the social, cultural, and institutional contexts of Egypt. The aim is to highlight the freedoms and possibilities available to them, rather than solely the outcomes they achieved.

3.4 Capabilities, gender and higher education

When exploring the intersection of gender and higher education, I found four key themes emerging from the literature: the importance of higher education for expanding substantive freedoms, the impact of colonial legacies on educational access and participation, the transformative potential of higher education in addressing gender inequalities, and the structural barriers that persist, limiting women's ability to fully benefit from education. These themes help frame the critical discussions surrounding women's agency in education, particularly in post-colonial contexts like Egypt, where both societal norms and systemic barriers shape women's educational experiences and opportunities.

Higher education plays a dual role within the Capability Approach: it is both an individual right and a public good. It equips individuals with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities needed to lead fulfilling lives, and simultaneously contributes to societal transformation by fostering equity, inclusion, and well-being (Walker et al., 2022; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Mukwambo (2019) offers a capabilities-based redefinition of higher education quality, moving beyond standard metrics to emphasize how education enhances student wellbeing, critical agency, and long-term opportunities. For women, particularly in contexts marked by structural inequalities like Egypt, higher education must transcend issues of access to address the economic, social, and cultural conversion factors that enable or constrain the transformation of educational opportunities into meaningful functionings (Alkire, 2002; Unterhalter, 2007; Walker, 2003).

Higher education has the potential to expand women's substantive freedoms, including the ability to participate meaningfully in the labour market, engage in

civic life, and lead flourishing lives (Nussbaum, 2000; Walker, 2003). Walker identifies core educational capabilities including autonomy, voice, and respect, as central to fostering human development and achieving gender equity. These capabilities align closely with Nussbaum's (2000) list of central human capabilities, particularly those related to affiliation, bodily integrity, and practical reasoning. However, in many contexts, including Egypt, structural inequalities such as entrenched social norms, limited geographic accessibility, and economic constraints continue to restrict women's participation and achievement (Robeyns, 2006; Cin & Walker, 2016).

Subrahmanian (2002) and Terzi (2007) emphasize that higher education should not only provide knowledge and skills but also cultivate the capacity to deliberate over means and ends, foster critical thinking, and enable women to challenge and reframe existing gender norms. The intersection of education with societal norms requires an understanding of the conversion factors both enabling and constraining that affect women's ability to transform educational inputs into valued outcomes (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

Secondly, it is important to consider the impact of colonial legacies on educational access and participation. Martinez-Vargas (2020) introduces the concept of decolonial approaches to higher education, arguing for the prioritization of local knowledge systems and linguistic inclusivity. In Egypt, these colonial legacies intersect with entrenched gender norms, exacerbating inequalities in access and participation. Higher education should serve as a transformative space where women can develop confidence, critical thinking, and the capacity to make strategic life choices, all of which are essential for addressing systemic barriers such as gender discrimination and regional disparities (Walker, Wilson-Strydom, & Mukwambo, 2022).

Additionally, higher education has great transformative potential in addressing gender inequalities. Walker and Unterhalter's (2007) exploration of gender and education highlights the transformative potential of the CA in achieving equity. They emphasize that gender equality in higher education must be assessed not only in terms of access but also in terms of outcomes, including the

empowerment of women to exercise their agency and achieve well-being. This perspective is supported by Vaughan (2007), who notes that agency and aspirations are central to understanding how women navigate structural constraints and realize their potential.

Stromquist (2006) contributes to this discussion by identifying the multidimensional gains of education, which include psychological (self-esteem), cognitive (critical understanding of reality), and political (awareness of inequalities) advancements. These align with Sen's (1999) and Nussbaum's (2000) emphasis on the instrumental and intrinsic value of education in expanding human capabilities. Walker (2007) and Kabeer (2003) emphasize that assessing gender equality in education requires considering both individual freedoms and the empowerment gained through education. These perspectives must also reflect structural constraints, aspirations, and choices that shape women's lives.

Calitz (2018) highlights the public-good dimension of higher education, emphasizing its role in fostering equity and inclusion for marginalized groups. This aligns with Sen's (1999) view of education as a fundamental capability essential for human development. Walker and Boni (2020) extend this argument by highlighting the importance of participatory research in fostering epistemic justice, particularly for marginalized populations such as women in post-colonial contexts.

Despite the transformative potential of higher education, structural barriers persist. Gender norms, occupational segregation, and systemic discrimination often limit women's ability to translate educational achievements into economic opportunities (Robeyns, 2006).

Addressing gender inequality in higher education requires a focus on the institutional and societal structures that shape women's experiences (Unterhalter, 2007; Walker, 2003). For instance, participatory methodologies that engage women in identifying valued capabilities are crucial for understanding their aspirations and constraints. These methodologies align with Sen's (1999)

emphasis on democratic deliberation in the selection and prioritization of capabilities.

Feminist research methodologies offer a robust approach to capturing women's voices and experiences, particularly in contexts like Egypt, where systemic inequalities persist (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). The CA provides a valuable framework for analysing these dynamics, emphasizing the need to address conversion factors and expand substantive freedoms.

3.5 Women's Labor Market Participation and the Capability Approach

Higher education is widely seen as a key enabler of women's labour market participation, yet significant gaps remain in understanding how it translates into meaningful improvements in women's lives, particularly in contexts like Egypt. While educational opportunities have expanded for women, they often fail to yield fair wages, quality jobs, or sustained workforce participation due to systemic barriers (Cin, Karlıdağ-Dennis, & Temiz, 2020).

Quality higher education should enhance graduates' capabilities to access meaningful and dignified work, understood not only as economic activity but as a means of expanding agency, social participation, and wellbeing (Mukwambo, 2019). From the perspective of the Capability Approach, access to higher education signifies an expansion of women's capabilities, enabling them to realize their potential and exercise agency in various domains (Sen, 1999; Deprez & Butler, 2007). Beyond enhancing women's competitiveness in the labour market, higher education positively impacts their well-being by fostering autonomy, resilience, and critical thinking (Walker & Fongwa, 2017). It aligns with Sen's (1999) concept of economic self-sufficiency and equality, equipping women with skills for diverse employment opportunities while increasing their earning capacity to escape poverty (Gittel et al., 1993).

However, access alone is insufficient. Conversion factors such as social norms, childcare responsibilities, and limited job quality often hinder the translation of educational achievements into meaningful workforce participation (Bonvin, 2012; Ehab, 2022). For instance, societal expectations around marriage

and motherhood frequently limit women's ability to secure sustained employment.

Despite the advantages of higher education, barriers such as unequal wages, unsafe working conditions, and the glass ceiling persist, restricting women's full participation in the labour market (Dean et al., 2005). Social norms and control over income by family members further diminish agency, particularly in contexts where formal employment opportunities are scarce (Kogel, 2004). Women pursuing entrepreneurship also face constraints from household responsibilities and societal expectations, which limit their business success (Langworthy, 2024).

The CA provides a valuable lens for analysing women's labour market participation through the concepts of process freedom (voice in decision-making) and opportunity freedom (access to valuable jobs) (Sen, 2002; Bonvin, 2012). Key determinants of "valuable work" include fair wages, safe conditions, and flexibility. Structural inequalities, social capital, and personal agency are crucial conversion factors that shape women's opportunities and trajectories in the workforce (Soffia, Hall & Skordis, 2023).

Walker and Fongwa (2017) integrate CA with employability, emphasizing that higher education should foster technical and soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking to enhance students' capabilities and employability. These capabilities must be practically applied in real-world settings, underscoring the need for systemic changes in higher education to promote equity and social justice.

While higher education is essential for improving women's labour market participation, its transformative potential depends on addressing systemic barriers, enhancing job quality, and fostering capabilities for meaningful employment (Soffia, Hall, & Skordis, 2023). By integrating a human-centred approach to labour market challenges and emphasizing the societal role of higher education, policymakers and institutions can ensure that education not only

promotes economic advancement but also achieves broader social justice and gender equity.

3.6 Critiques of Capability Approach

While Amartya Sen's Capability Approach has been influential in reframing discussions around well-being and development, it has faced several criticisms. One key criticism relates to the operationalization of the CA and its lack of a definitive list of essential capabilities. Critics like Sugden (1993) and Williams (1987) argue that without a specific list, the framework lacks clarity and practical applicability. This absence creates challenges for researchers and policymakers in measuring and comparing well-being across different contexts. Similarly, Beitz (1986) raises concerns about how the approach allows for interpersonal comparisons of well-being, specifically regarding the valuation of capabilities and the relative weights that should be assigned to each. This critique underscores the difficulty in applying the CA in empirical research and policy analysis, as there is no universally agreed-upon method for evaluating and prioritizing different capabilities.

Furthermore, Gasper (2002) critiques Sen's framework for presenting a "thin" concept of personhood that lacks concreteness and ontological grounding. This criticism points to the abstraction of the CA, which, while flexible, may also lack the specificity required to address complex social issues effectively. Additionally, Sen's emphasis on human freedom and individual well-being has been critiqued for not adequately addressing social responsibility and the role of social structures in shaping individual capabilities. This limitation suggests that the CA may be overly individualistic, potentially neglecting the communal and relational aspects of human life that are crucial for understanding well-being.

In the context of education, Unterhalter (2001) argues that Sen's approach is under-theorized. While Sen links education to the expansion of capabilities and freedoms, Unterhalter (2001) points out that simply increasing access to schooling does not necessarily lead to an expansion of capabilities, particularly for women in certain educational contexts. She highlights the case of South

Africa, where female students may face sexual harassment in schools. In such environments, education does not enhance capabilities; rather, it may diminish them and negatively impact their lives. This example illustrates the need for a more nuanced understanding of how education functions within different socio-cultural contexts and how it might fail to deliver on the promise of expanded capabilities.

Nussbaum's adaptation of the CA also faces criticism. Gasper (2004) argues that her approach does not adequately account for cultural differences, focusing more on a dignified existence rather than human flourishing. This critique suggests that Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities might not be universally applicable, as it may not fully consider diverse cultural contexts and values.

Despite these critiques, the CA remains a valuable framework for analysing well-being and development. One of the primary reasons for using the CA is its flexibility and considers a broader range of human experiences recognising that individuals may value different things. This broader perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of well-being that goes beyond traditional measures. While the approach may not provide a specific list of capabilities, this flexibility allows it to be adapted to different contexts and tailored to address specific issues. In the context of higher education, this means not only providing access to education but also ensuring that educational environments support women's development as agents capable of making decisions that affect their own lives and futures (Unterhalter, 2003). Additionally, the CA's emphasis on the importance of agency and empowerment provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of gender inequalities. It highlights the importance of enabling individuals to make choices and have control over their lives, which is crucial for understanding women's experiences in higher education and labour market in contexts like Egypt. Robeyns (2003) argues that the CA can be used to analyse how social norms, institutional practices, and cultural expectations restrict women's capabilities in both educational and professional settings. Moreover, The CA highlights the importance of conversion factors which is critical for understanding the challenges women face in education and labour

markets. By examining these conversion factors, researchers can better understand the complexities of gender inequality in higher education and labour markets (Robeyns, 2005). Finally, by focusing on capabilities, policymakers can identify specific areas where interventions are needed to remove barriers and expand opportunities for women. For example, policies might focus on providing scholarships for women, creating safe and supportive educational environments, or addressing discriminatory practices in hiring and promotion within the labour market (Sen, 1999).

In summary, this research uniquely amplifies women's voices in Egypt, examining higher education expansion and initiatives promoting women's participation in education and the labour market through a feminist, capability-based lens. It explores how women's valued aspirations, agency, and well-being are shaped by structural barriers and the socio-political factors influencing their ability to convert education into meaningful opportunities. Framing education as both a form of well-being achievement and a process of exercising agency, this research advocates for education policies that are context- and gender-sensitive, grounded in the CA (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Walker, 2001; Cin & Walker, 2016).

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the feminist research methodology I undertook to understand the complexity of the journey of women in accessing higher education till their integration in the labour market. The research question behind this research is: In light of the rapid expansion of higher education in Egypt, what is the status of gender equality and women empowerment from the view of women's experiences from access to higher education till their integration in the labour market? In the first section, I explain ontology, epistemology and methodology of this research, the rationale for using feminist research methodology and the principles I followed as a feminist researcher. The following sections presents the research design in detail including feminist narrative inquiry as a method of data collection, access to participants, sampling, interviewing, ethical considerations, data analysis and limitation of the methodology. In this research, I focus my dedication to transformative paradigms in developing countries similar to the Egyptian context, along with the feminist Capability Approach, by framing the study methodologically as a narrative inquiry.

4.2 Feminist Research Methodology

4.2.1 Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology

With the methodology, the researcher affirms what ontological, epistemological and theoretical suppositions were made. Grix (2002) describes what researcher thinks can be researched as their ontological position, while what we can know about it as their epistemological position and how to go about acquiring it as the methodological approach. The ontological belief guiding this research is that systematic inequalities exist in women's lives particularly their position in education and labour market in Egypt. A constructivist ontology aligns with feminist research goals by highlighting the importance of marginalized voices and advocating for social change based on the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This ontological stance assumes that reality is socially constructed and varies

according to individual experiences and contexts (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The focus is on understanding the lived experiences of women, acknowledging multiple realities, and emphasizing the influence of social contexts, such as gender norms and institutional practices, on these experiences. This ontological consideration feeds into a feminist epistemology. Feminist epistemology has emerged as a widely recognized concept capturing the endeavours of females engaging in qualitative or quantitative research with the aim of addressing and challenging various layers of social inequalities (Douvét & Mauthner, 2006). Feminist epistemology theorists have used the term variously to refer to women's ways of knowing, knowledge, or experiences particularly the multiplicity of women's voices (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Duran, 1991). It also encompasses conceptions of gender and gendered experiences on the production of knowledge (Anderson, 1995). Feminist epistemologists advocate that scientific knowledge production should actively serve the interests of marginalized, exploited, and oppressed groups (Collins, 2000). Feminist research probes for the experiences of women to guide the whole research process (Landman, 2006). The feminist perspective opposes the imposition of externally prescribed frameworks when interpreting women's experiences (Maynard, 1994). Therefore, through putting the lives of women at the forefront of research, a feminist epistemology is the most appropriate tool which can allow me to understand the inequalities in women's lives.

Limitations of feminist epistemology include the conflict between objectivism and relativism; where recognizing the existence of multiple, sometimes contradictory, women's standpoints make it impossible to determine an objective one (Halberg, 1989). Additionally, experience as a basis for knowledge is extremely vague, as experiences are influenced by their contexts and are never identical for all women. This relates to the issue of representation as the researcher is epistemologically noticeable due to the possibility of misrepresenting women voices or overgeneralize experiences (Alcoff, 1991).

4.2.2 Feminist Research

Feminist research focus on employing feminist theory, highlighting women's experiences, emphasizing reflexivity, and aiming to create positive social change (Harding, 1987). A feminist epistemological perspective requires a corresponding feminist research methodology to generate knowledge centred on women. Key principles of feminist research methodology include empowering women through theory and practice; creating feminist knowledge rooted in the realities of gendered social existence; and challenging male-centric biases in disciplines by integrating women into research samples (Harding, 1987; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

To uphold these principles, it is crucial for feminist research to employ rigorous qualitative methodologies that ensure credibility and trustworthiness. Since qualitative research is integral to feminist inquiry due to its focus on lived experiences and contextual understanding, researchers must adopt a meticulous and systematic approach to data analysis. This involves thoroughly documenting, organizing, and transparently presenting the methods employed, thereby allowing readers to evaluate the credibility of the analytical process. Such rigor aligns with feminist commitments to reflexivity and accountability, ensuring that research outcomes are robust and grounded in participants' realities.

Overall, while feminist research has made significant contributions to understanding gender inequalities and advancing social justice, it is not without its limitations and critiques. One of the critiques is that studying women's experiences only would mean ignoring the social world that produces these experiences (Hammersley, 1992). Limitations of feminist research include challenges related to potential bias in data interpretation due to researchers' personal perspectives, the risk of essentializing women's experiences, and the exclusion of other intersectional identities beyond gender.

4.2.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity in feminist research is a crucial point as part of the methodology. Researcher reflexivity serves as a tool to reveal and articulate biases,

assumptions, and implicit power dynamics within the researcher-researched relationship (Harding, 1991). The production of theory is viewed as a social activity, which is culturally, socially, and historically embedded, thus resulting in “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988). This awareness is important for being accountable for the knowledge produced (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002). The reflexive positioning tends to take the form of positioning in terms of subject positions such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and geographical location. There's also discussion about how researchers position themselves in their research projects. This means considering how their own identities intersect with those of the people they're studying. However, some critics argue that focusing solely on the researcher's identity limits the discussion of reflexivity. They suggest that researchers should also reflect on a wider range of influences, including personal, emotional, and theoretical factors (Hertz 1997; Letherby 2002). Overall, reflexivity in feminist research involves being aware of how our own subjectivity and the broader social context shape our research and the knowledge we produce. It's about constantly questioning and reflecting on these influences throughout the research process.

As the researcher, I tried to be aware of how our own thoughts, experiences, and biases affect the research we do and the knowledge we produce. In feminist research, this is especially important because researchers recognize that their own identities and perspectives can shape the way they collect and interpret data (DeVault, 1996; Naples, 2003, Harding 1993). Denzin (1997) describes it as ways in which “our subjectivity becomes entangled in the lives of others”. As an Egyptian woman who completed her higher education in Egypt then travelled abroad for post graduate studies and currently, I am part of the Egyptian labour market while being a wife and a mother, I was able to strongly relate to the participants and their stories. I positioned myself as a researcher collaborating with the interviewees based on reciprocity, trust, and mutual respect. To enhance reciprocity and reduce power imbalances, I encouraged interviewees to lead the conversation and minimized my own interference. I believe they were able to relate to me too and encouraged them to speak freely while trusting that I would understand and appreciate them given our somehow similar situations. My

approach to reflexivity involved acknowledging that my social background, beliefs, prejudices, and values could potentially influence the research process.

Throughout my research journey, I was transitioning between being an insider and an outsider and my insider-outsider status constantly evolved as I navigated between these roles. By listening to their narratives, which were rich with complexities and contradictions, I gained deeper insights into the social, cultural contexts I had partially experienced, read about in textbooks, discussed with my community, and conversations with friends. While I was familiar with the culture and context, my role as an insider allowed me to learn more about other Egyptian women who were much less privileged than myself. As an outsider, I was focusing on asking the questions. I couldn't forget that I was part of the community and my insider position as well. It was crucial for me to avoid imposing my experience or their experiences as a universal standard, recognizing that truth varies among individuals due to their diverse life experiences.

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Narrative inquiry as a Feminist Methodology

Feminist researchers employ a variety of research methods, including conducting interviews, performing ethnographic research, and analysing quantitative data through surveys and questionnaires. Interviews are supported by development, feminist, and CA (Chambers, 1995; Narayan, 2005; Robeyns, 2005). It enables participants to act as "active agents of knowledge" allowing their voices to influence research outcomes by revealing what they value (Harding, 1995). Thus, the CA aligns with feminist methodology by recognizing the significance of individuals' actual lives, acknowledging each person as ethically significant and a focal point of moral consideration. It offers a normative framework to evaluate institutional environments, gendered constraints, processes, and the socio-economic and political circumstances that influence or enable conversion factors for capability achievement. This approach enabled me to link individual lives to broader social structures.

Narrative inquiry can be described as the 'study of experience as a story' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). Its advantage is being human-centred (Griffiths & Macleod, 2008). By shedding light on the experiences of marginalized groups, narrative inquiry defies existing stereotypes and misconceptions by emphasizing the heterogeneity and diverse perspectives within and between groups, showcasing the various ways reality can be understood.

Feminist narrative research is a qualitative research approach that focuses on women's stories and experiences through the collection and analysis of personal narratives to understand the impact of gender, power, and social structures on individuals' lives (Miller, 2017). Feminist narrative research often emphasizes the subjective nature of experiences and the need to consider diverse perspectives in academic and social discourse (Woodiwiss et al., 2017). Epistemologically, the use of narrative inquiry as a feminist methodology establishes an interactional relationship and exchange between researcher and respondent while challenging traditional power dynamics and provide a platform for diverse perspectives. It also emphasizes the opportunity for researchers to gain a deeper understanding of women's lives and experiences contributing to a more comprehensive and inclusive body of knowledge (Miller, 2017). Some of the challenges include the complexities of storytelling, the potential for bias in interpreting narratives, and the ethical considerations of representing individuals' experiences. This is in addition to the challenges of constructing culturally acceptable accounts of experiences and the potential for power imbalances in the research process (Woodiwiss et al., 2017). Moreover, limitations and critiques of narrative inquiry include concerns about the subjective nature of narratives, which can lead to questions about the reliability and validity of findings. Since narratives are inherently shaped by individual perspectives, there's a risk of bias or selective representation in data collection and analysis. Furthermore, there can be challenges in generalizing findings from narrative research due to its focus on specific contexts and individual experiences, which may limit its applicability to broader populations or settings (Moen, 2006). Nonetheless, narrative inquiry offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of women and allows for

analytical generalization to similar research contexts, thereby enriching our understanding of broader social processes and gendered realities.

The focus on narrative analysis extends beyond just the content to include an examination of plot and language, considering both what is said and how it's said. Additionally, in narrative research, interpreting data requires recognizing the context in which stories are told, highlighting the importance of understanding both the narrative itself and its surrounding circumstances. Thus, relating the narrative to the Egyptian context and emphasizing the geographical location of the participants, particularly the ones coming from Upper Egypt, was vital. Although the research does not seek to make broad generalizations, it was important to select diverse locations and universities that would allow for some representation of the diversity within and among public and private higher education institutions.

4.3.2 Sampling and participants

Generic purposive sampling was used to select interview participants guided by the research question as the main criterion for selection (Bryman, 2012). Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique where participants are intentionally chosen based on specific criteria, knowledge, or experiences to focus on traits relevant to the study and effectively answer the research questions (Patton, 2002). The criteria used were in accordance with age, higher education completion, nationality and geographical location. To generate sufficient data, a sample of twenty-five Egyptian women who completed their higher education and aged between 22-33 were individually interviewed. I made a conscious decision to recruit women who are Egyptian and completed their high school and higher education studies inside Egypt.

The focus of the interviews was on women who had completed their higher education, both married and single, working and not working and with different socioeconomic conditions. Considering the comprehensive and detailed nature of a narrative inquiry, it necessitates working with a small number of research participants (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). However, Egypt is heterogeneous, a

large country with huge social and cultural differences between its regions particularly between the main cities such as Cairo the capital, and between Upper Egypt or the Sinai area. Greater Cairo is more modern, open, with more opportunities, while Sinai and Upper Egypt are more conservative, economically less developed, more rural, and traditional. Thus, I tried to engage women from different geographical locations and different socioeconomic backgrounds for diversification purposes, capturing heterogeneous experiences for a more holistic views and inclusive understanding. Also, geographical features affect education accessibility, transportation, infrastructure that might lead to conservative families' reluctance to send their daughters to educational institutions for fear of harassment and rumours that can damage family honour (Cin & Walker, 2016). Given the multidimensional nature of higher education in Egypt, I included participants from different universities and faculties. This is a brief introduction to the women presented in the research. The table in the appendix gives a brief idea of the participants' basic information to familiarize the reader with them and showcase the diversity of the sample selection.

4.4 Research Methods

The narrative interview is an instrument of narrative inquiry designed to elicit deeply contextualized and subjective accounts of human experiences. I did a form of narrative inquiry interviews characterized by a semi-structured format with minimal input from my side, giving the participants a fairly complete opportunity to narrate their experience of life as a whole since high school till now, highlighting the most important aspects (Atkinson, 1998). Prior to the interview, I prepared an interview guide divided into three sections for the three periods. Interviews generally followed the same pattern; greeting the participants, asking about their basic demographic data such as name, age, family background, relationship status, the academic discipline/institution they graduated from, year of graduation, field of study and whether they were currently or even been employed. A pilot study was conducted with two participants to test the interview questions and process; no revisions were required, as the questions were clear, and the interview flow effective. Consequently, the same format was retained for all subsequent interviews. Interview times ranged from 60 to 120 minutes.

The women were randomly selected based on the above criteria from my personal and professional networks in the higher education field as previously mentioned. Women were reached through snowball sampling and networks. All interviews were conducted online. I gave interviewees the choice, but all of them chose online due to their busy schedules, long travel distances, and convenience. For moms, their interviews were set after their children slept, for working wives it was right after working hours and so on based on their own preferences. However, limitations and challenges of online interviews include the lack of physical presence, which can be essential for offering comfort in sensitive studies; videoconferencing also limits the researcher's ability to assess participants' environments and observe full body language. Additionally, this method may exclude participants without access to technology or those uncomfortable with it, particularly that technical issues can also distract both interviewers and participants, affecting the quality of the interview and recordings (Irani, 2018). Thus, while digital methods enhance access to global participants, they also pose challenges related to technological infrastructure, ethical considerations, and power dynamics, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach that acknowledges the diverse social and spatial contexts of both researchers and participants across different regions (Cin et al., 2023). As a feminist researcher, I tried to be reflexive about the exercise of power in the research process including making clear the ethics of the research practice and epistemic accountability (Ramazanoğlu, 2002). Narrative inquiry through semi-structured interviews aimed to stimulate participants' testimonies of their lives, careers, and higher education studies. Semi-structured interviews follow predetermined set of open-ended questions and guided conversation but have the flexibility to explore topics in more depth as needed (Kvale, 1996). I used semi-structured interviews to give the interviewees the freedom and flexibility to set the flow and agendas for the conversations permitting unexpected topics to emerge (McIntosh, & Morse, 2015). Feminist narrative research methods, as other qualitative and interpretive research, assumes inter-subjectivity between the researcher and participant. This method includes asking, listening, reading, locating, co-creating, representing, and interpreting stories of women to expand the application of these stories (Messias & DeJoseph, 2004).

The interviews were divided into three thematic sections. First, I explored women's pathways to higher education, using the CA to analyse challenges related to gender, institutional expansion, and their choices of universities and faculties. The second section focused on their experiences as female students, including relationships with peers and professors, aspirations, and the transformative role of higher education in their lives probing both challenges and positive outcomes. Finally, the third section examined pathways to employment, addressing obstacles like childcare, the glass ceiling, and mobility, while encouraging participants to reflect on how they overcame these barriers. Throughout, I emphasized agency and social structures to understand perspectives on gender justice. The open-ended format allowed women to share freely, often empowering them to articulate narratives of constraint, liberation, and societal expectations.

I attempted to gather an intensive study of the cases then engage in a theoretical analysis (Bryman, 2012). This aimed to generate a new contribution to knowledge in this field providing a unique insight into the women's experiences in higher education and labour market. Using a narrative inquiry design also addresses the gap in addressing these issues at an institutional level.

Throughout the interviews, topics such as employment, family dynamics, marital relationships, extended family interactions, support provided by relatives to employed women, household finances, and transportation all intertwined seamlessly. As a working mother myself, these diverse aspects seamlessly merged during the interviews.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As is customary in doctoral research, I was only permitted to proceed with fieldwork after presenting evidence to my institution's research ethics committee of having reflected on the potential impact of this research, of measures taken to abide by the ethical guidelines of my discipline. In addition to obtaining necessary institutional approvals prior to commencing the study, I prioritized not only securing participants' consent but also ensuring their comprehension and

endorsement of the research procedures. To facilitate this understanding and endorsement and to enhance research transparency and motives, I provided detailed descriptions of my research objectives alongside informative forms. Throughout this research, ethical principles were consistently upheld to honour the narratives of the women involved. Their willingness to participate was ensured through a comprehensive approach: each woman was briefed on the process, guaranteed confidentiality, and consulted regarding any concerns about the time and effort required (Cin, 2017). They were provided with an informed consent document, which they reviewed and signed. Additionally, participants retained the autonomy to withdraw from the study at any stage and could request the cessation of recording during our discussions, though none chose to do so. Given the sensitivity of some of the topics discussed, particularly those relating to gender discrimination, and experiences of harassment, care was taken to ensure that participants felt comfortable and supported throughout the interview process. Participants were reminded that they could pause, take a break or withdraw from the interview at any time without any consequence. In cases where participants expressed emotional discomfort, information about available psychological and counselling services was shared. The interviews were conducted in a manner that prioritised participants' emotional wellbeing. I grappled with the challenge of maintaining participant anonymity and confidentiality, particularly considering that participants were required to engage in online meetings and interactions. To address this concern, participants were kindly requested to refrain from activating their cameras during these sessions unless they feel otherwise. To protect confidentiality, all names used are pseudonyms, and identifying details were modified or omitted. Quotations were carefully reviewed to ensure that participants could not be identified. Interviewees were given the choice to conduct the interview in English or Arabic. Most preferred Arabic and a few felt more comfortable with English. Following the interviews, I commenced transcription. Subsequently, I translated the Arabic material into English, mindful of the challenges inherent in translation across languages, particularly in studies like mine where data collection occurs in a language other than the research language. This raised concerns about the reliability and impartiality of translation in conveying the original meaning of the

data. To address this, I conducted back-translation to ensure alignment between the original text and its translation. Acting as both researcher and translator, I had the unique opportunity to deeply engage with the stories, cross-cultural nuances and interpretations. The participants discussed some very private and critical situations, such as sexual harassment during the commute, work, universities, and even from professors. I found myself in an ethical dilemma, trying not to interfere and make them comfortable to tell their whole story but at the same time wanting to encourage them to speak up and seek their rights. I tried to build their self-confidence every now and then by telling them how strong they are and that they should always be proud of themselves. This encouraged them and made them feel comfortable speaking more as they felt it was a safe nonjudgmental environment.

4.6 Data Analysis

Upon completing the data collection phase, the analysis phase was crucial in interpreting the recorded interviews and the results, particularly within the theoretical framework. In order to analyse the data, I audio recorded the interviews, transcribed the interviews, reviewed the data and then analysed the data to be presented and discussed. I used deductive and inductive thematic analysis, as it is theoretically flexible for analysing qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998). This approach involves identifying, analysing, and elaborating on themes present in the data. Initially, I employed inductive analysis, wherein I coded the data without attempting to fit it within my theoretical framework or preconceived analytical constructs. This was done to allow the data to speak for itself and expand the range of potential themes that could arise (Braun & Clarke, 2020). This process provided me with several themes related to gender, inequality, freedoms, and education, including stereotyping and gender norms, sexual harassment, and gendered division of labour. I grouped these themes under three main time periods: access to higher education (pre university), during higher education, and labour market (post higher education). In doing so, I organised my analysis following a life-trajectory sequence. Next, I proceeded with a deductive analysis aimed at identifying themes related to theoretical framework. This involved extracting themes from the earlier inductive analysis

that corresponded to CA and agency. This approach facilitated a transition from broad data exploration to a more nuanced analysis guided by my theoretical and analytical interests (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Subsequently, for each identified theme, I conducted an analysis to determine the narrative it conveyed, carefully reflecting on its relevance to the overarching research question and its contribution to the gender justice discourse throughout the thesis (Cin, 2017). In undertaking this process, I situated my thematic analysis within a feminist epistemological framework, theorize the socio-cultural and economic contexts, as well as the structural conditions shaping individual experiences. The analysis of the data across interviews involved examining which elements of dominant discourses were visible in the women's narratives (Mauthner 2000). Following this, I started writing an analytical narrative aimed at addressing the gender justice argument posed by my research topic. Thus, I selected extracts that reflect and demonstrate the themes I chose. The chart below demonstrates the thematic analysis and the themes identified from the interviews:

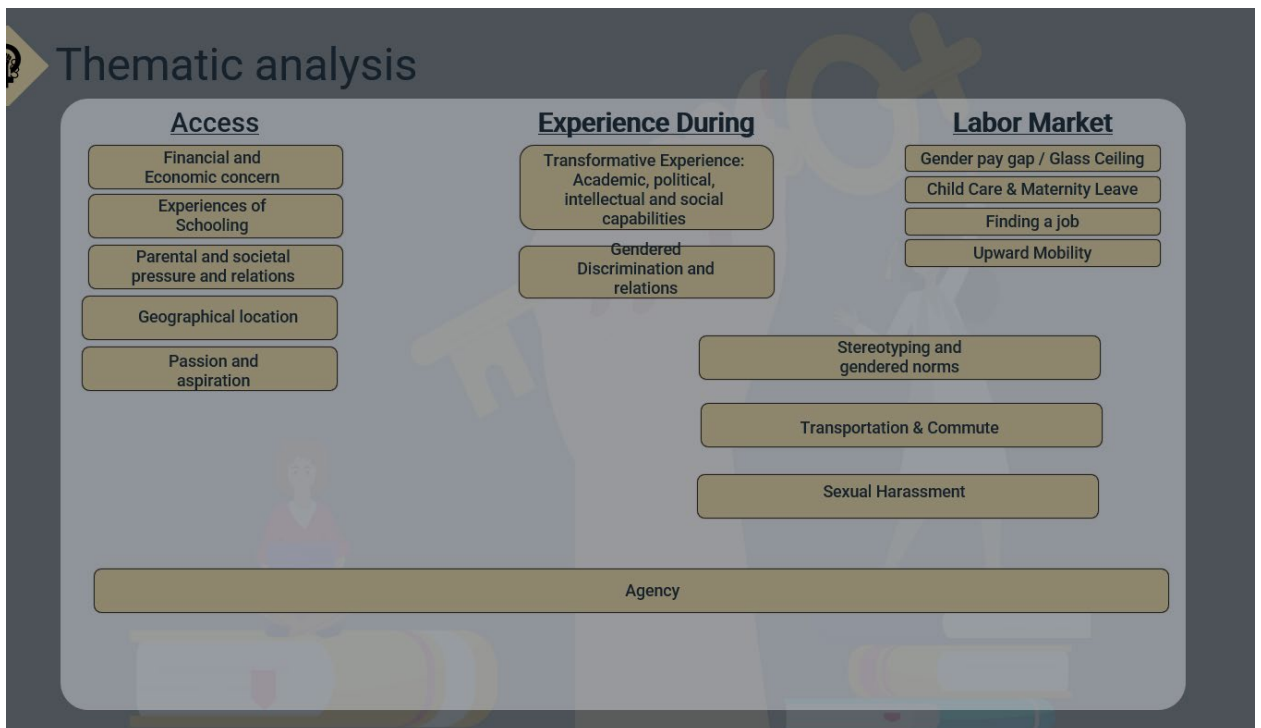


Figure 1: Thematic Analysis

As demonstrated, some themes were cross-cutting. Thus, during the analysis, I had to either include those themes where they were more relevant or discuss

them differently based on the context and analysis. I mostly used the latter approach, as I discovered that, for example exercising agency to access university is different than in the labour market.

For analysing narratives, several narrative approaches were considered. However, I mainly followed the sequential use of narrative analysis followed by analysis-of-narratives as identified by Polkinghorne (1995). Polkinghorne's approach emphasizes the sequential nature of narrative analysis, first focusing on the individual narratives themselves and then analysing them collectively to identify overarching themes and patterns. Thus, it involves conducting a detailed analysis of individual narratives to understand their unique characteristics and meanings. This is followed by a comparative analysis across multiple narratives to uncover commonalities, differences, and deeper insights. The result is also known as 're-storied narrative' (Ollerenshaw & Creswell 2002). Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis provides a methodological framework for identifying and interpreting themes in qualitative data, which can then be used to enrich the analysis of narratives as conceptualized by Polkinghorne (1995). Themes identified through data analysis offer a way to delve deeper into the structure and content of narratives, revealing the ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences and construct their stories.

While I tried to represent as many testimonials as possible, I came to the realisation that certain women expressed more about specific themes or aspects of their lives than others. It was also necessary to ensure that the participants whose data were presented in the thesis reflected the overall diversity of the sample. In the next three chapters, I present my findings under three key sections. The study offers new knowledge by exploring: the diverse pathways to accessing higher education, women's experiences during their higher education journeys, and the transitions and challenges in their pathways to employment.

5 Pathways to Access Higher Education for Egyptian Women

In this chapter, I present a deep analysis of the lives of the women interviewed to feature and discuss the social, cultural, political, environmental, and contextual conversion factors that hinder or inspire women's access to their valued capabilities and their full agency. These factors are interlocking and influence equitable access to higher education. The expansion of higher education in Egypt includes an increase in enrolment rates and geographic access with universities expanding in multiple governorates, unlike the usual trend of Cairo-focused expansion with almost 49.2 percent of the total number of students in tertiary education in Egypt. Considering this rapid expansion, diversification, and partial privatization, concerns have arisen about equity in higher education opportunities (Abdelkhalek, 2020). Research on access to education in general shows that expansion led to greater inclusiveness particularly for youth coming from less advantaged backgrounds (Trow, 2007). Nonetheless, empirical studies show mixed results regarding whether expansion actually leads to greater equity of access. Sen's work emphasises the importance of quality access to education, particularly higher education, to achieve economic self-dependence, equality, and gender equity for women (Deprez & Butler, 2007). Access to higher education in Egypt is expanding in both the public and private sectors but access in the public sector is governed by performance on secondary school exams and is growing rapidly for women, rural youth, and middle-class Egyptians (Buckner, 2013). However, access to private universities is growing rapidly for males, youth in Cairo, and the top wealth quintile. While many quantitative and qualitative studies (Zi & Qui, 2018; Tomaszewski et al., 2022; Mueller, 2007; Hanushek, 2002; Woessmann, 2004) discuss the effects of income and race, family background, aspirations on access to higher education, very few examine how students make choices about access, the intertwined factors affecting these processes and outcomes, and the extent to which expanding access alone achieves equity (Altbach et al. 2010). The road to higher education was not easy for those women and it is worth disclosing. I was inspired by literature on developing African context to identify my own conversion factors, similar to the approach of Walker, McLean, Mathebula & Mukwambo (2022), where through

their research and gathered life-history data and were able to identify seven overlapping contextual conversion factors. These were grouped into (1) material (money/funding); (2) educational (schooling); (3) environmental (geography, community development); (4) social (information and support, and extended families and significant others); and (5) personal (personal attitudes, values and characteristics). Aligning with their framework but shifting focus to a gender lens and feminist perspective, I identified four main conversion factors which are (1) experiences of schooling before higher education, 2) financial and economic concerns, (3) geographical expansion of higher education across the country, and (4) personal, family, and community relations. A final discussion explores (5) what women value, their aspirations and agency as a mean to address these conversion factors. Through thematic analysis of interviews and narrative data with women in higher education and Egypt's socio-cultural landscape research, I derived and refined these factors to foreground gendered barriers and agency. While each will be discussed separately, a full understanding can't be achieved without factoring it that these influences are intersecting. Addressing these conversion factors is essential in expanding capabilities and in understanding functionings beyond individual power and achievement (DeJaeghere, 2019). This chapter does not aim to compare participants' pathways into higher education, but rather to analyse what their accounts collectively reveal about the structural and social conversion factors that shape women's access to educational opportunities in Egypt.

When examining the experiences of Egyptian women before entering higher education, a complex and often contrasting picture emerges. Their journeys reflect a spectrum of experiences ranging from highly supportive environments that fostered their educational aspirations to situations where support was conditional, often accompanied by significant control over their choices, particularly in selecting fields of study. At the other end of the spectrum, some women faced outright opposition to their pursuit of higher education yet demonstrated remarkable individual agency in holding onto their dreams despite the challenges. In this chapter, I will first provide an overview of the diverse experiences these women encountered before university, shedding light on the

interplay of positive and negative conversion factors that shaped their access to higher education. I will explore how familial and community influences, school environments, and socio-economic conditions acted as both enabling and constraining forces. A critical aspect of this discussion is the role of navigational agency, which allowed these women to manoeuvre through obstacles, negotiate their educational paths, and assert their aspirations within complex social and cultural landscapes.

5.1 Experiences of schooling before Higher education

In this section, I will lay the groundwork by examining the diverse experiences of women in their schooling years leading up to university. Their journeys reveal a mixed and nuanced picture, while some encountered supportive environments that encouraged their academic pursuits, others faced significant barriers such as restrictive gender norms, limited subject choices, and family-imposed constraints. The high school experience plays a pivotal role in shaping pathways to higher education, serving both as an enabling and constraining force.

I will explore how positive conversion factors, such as encouragement from teachers and access to quality schooling, facilitated women's transition to higher education. Some women benefited from supportive teachers who guided them and provided motivation to pursue their aspirations, while access to better schooling environments allowed them to develop their capabilities and aspirations more effectively. On the other hand, negative conversion factors emerged from gender-biased expectations, inadequate school resources, and the restrictive nature of the Egyptian education system. The lack of information and career guidance, particularly in public schools, further restricted young women's choices, leaving them to rely on family expectations and the centralized university admission system, which allocates students based on grades and geographical distribution rather than personal preferences or capabilities.

Despite that many women were successful in coming over the economic constraints, their experience in high school was also pivotal role in their pathway to access higher education. The high school experience is mainly comprised of

the high school system and then the guidance from the school community and teachers. Unterhalter (2012) highlights that schooling can be considered as both a space for delivering rights or expanding capabilities and for reproducing existing hierarchies and exclusions for women. Firstly, let us explore the high school experience of the interviewed women as it had a dynamic impact in terms of enabling their aspiration or limiting their dreams. Nadia, a 29-year-old woman from Upper Egypt was in a single sex school, thus are her colleagues were women with almost no interaction with males at all. The Egyptian education system tends to be single-sex education system after the primary stage (Badr, 2012). The main reason is not educational outcome rather than parents being conservative. Nadia asked her dad if it is due to lack of trust in her, but he said that he trusts her but not the people she can deal with. Still, this felt disempowering and as if she is unable to protect herself as a woman or unable to stand up for herself or possessing the political agency¹ to have a voice and speak up when it is needed. Lack of interaction and exposure made accessing higher education a distressing situation for both female students and their parents where there is will be co-ed educational setting for the first time. Even the school was limiting her freedom of choice of university and faculty through lack of information. The conservative society limited girls access to exposure and information which are necessary to building capabilities. Lack of information limits their capabilities in terms of freedoms to choose access, faculty and university and exercise of their functionings with reason to value. Most of the interviewees wished they had more information before they accessed higher education to make better decisions. Rewan, a 26-year-old university graduate, stated

“I was too young to make such a big decision. I was always called a doctor by my family so I felt I must fulfil their dream without proper

¹ Sen (1999) defines agency as a person's ability to act on behalf of what they value, including economic, social, and political actions. Political agency refers to the capacity to articulate and assert one's rights within structural constraints. This complements the concept of navigational agency the strategies marginalized individuals use to negotiate barriers within systems (Walker & Cin, 2020). navigational agency enables individuals to manoeuvre through existing barriers in unequal systems, political agency complements it by fostering collective resistance and efforts to reshape those very systems

knowledge of what it is. I had no idea about how to make this decision, what options do I have and what are the criteria”.

Maha also emphasised the same point by saying

“I had to choose what I want to do for the rest of my life at the age of 17. I had no counselling at school, orientation session or career fairs at public school to guide me. I had no information about life in higher education and the options I have. My fate was decided by the coordination committee and my family”.

Due to the high-class size in Egypt particularly in rural areas, there limiting one to one interaction with teachers to enable educators to guide and encourage students. Many interviewees especially from Cairo highlighted that they barely went to school except for the needed attendance as they were focusing on having private tutoring lessons to get the needed scores to access prestigious faculties. Their teachers actually encouraged them as they themselves give private tutoring. It provided a very limiting high school experience for those girls. On the contrary, Heba, a female teacher who lives in Sinai in a Bedouin Community, which is a very conservative community, had a very positive high school experience

“During high school, I had an encouraging female teacher. She is the one who gave me wings to fly. She made me feel I am capable of doing anything and achieve all my dreams. She persuaded and aided me to access university. I chose faculty of education. I am now a teacher and trying to do the same thing with my female students and inspire them.”

Another crucial issue is the system itself which is quite restrictive as the Egyptian system limits the choice and freedom of access as argues by many as it is regulated by the regulations of the Universities Coordination Office (UCO), both in terms of grades and geographical allocation. This office is the body entrusted with receiving the wishes of Egyptian students who hold a secondary school diploma, Al-Azhar high school certificate, certain technical certificates, or certain equivalent diplomas, whether from inside or outside Egypt, then coordinate those

wishes in accordance with numbers specified by the Egyptian faculties and universities. Its readiness to receive them, and the total grades are the basis for nomination to those colleges or institutes. Some faculties are perceived highly prestigious thus receive high demand and require extremely high grades in high school such as Medicine and engineering. Amal, a 29 woman from Cairo, had a dream to join faculty of Medicine

“I always had a dream to be a doctor and worked so hard to achieve it especially that I was doubted from people around me, I got a very high grade in Secondary diploma around 94% however that was not enough to be accepted at the faculty of Medicine who took students with grades above 96%. I was devastated and crushed. I couldn’t enter medicine at a private university as my family can’t afford it”.

Amira wanted to experience higher education away from her home city

“I wanted to travel to Cairo or another city than Aswan to build my independence, experience better education, more choices, and more activities. Aswan is a very conservative city where opportunities and freedom for girls is very limited particularly when it comes to higher education. Due to the geographical distribution, I was forced to stay in upper Egypt”.

This system hinders women to exercise their freedoms and capability to access higher education where they have the ability to enter university but with limited choices in terms of location and faculty. Amal wishes there was another mechanics in terms of ability tests and portfolios to qualify for university entrance. With more universities opening up, there is more choices being available. However, still there is unequal access to the university due to not only to the secondary education system but also to limited places available to its graduates at public universities in Egypt. Moreover, Amal clarified that her dream to pursue medicine might have been affected by the pressure from family and community as other faculties are not perceived as prestigious as medicine

“I believe the Egyptian system in distribution to faculties based on my high school grades is unfair especially with the perception that certain faculties are the prestigious for example faculty of education accepted from 60% so can you imagine that the system is promoting teachers that didn’t do that well in their high school studies and gives fallacy perception about working in education.”

Another factor, as aforementioned, is the challenges girls face to access high school which is a necessary step to access higher education. This is due to many reasons including parental pressure, monetary, geographical locations of high school which might be far in rural areas, early marriage, and lack of awareness (Varoujan, 2013). Heba talked about the challenges she faced as a student, and she sees daily as a teacher for girls to continue their education especially that roads near the valleys and mountains are not very safe.

“As a female teacher and student in the past, I experience first-hand the difficulties to reach schools in rural area particularly that this part of our governorate is mainly composed of desert, mountains and valleys. It takes a long time to reach schools and longer to reach universities. Parents and female students are afraid of the road, being harassed or any other threat. We must be in groups and during the day in sunlight.”

The narratives of women such as Nadia, who struggled with the conservative constraints of a single-sex school environment, and Amal, who was unable to pursue her dream of studying medicine due to the rigid grading system, highlight the systemic limitations. Conversely, women like Heba experienced a more empowering high school journey, where supportive teachers encouraged their aspirations and provided guidance beyond family pressures.

In summary, the high school experience for women in Egypt can either serve as a stepping stone toward higher education or as a barrier, depending on societal norms, access to information, and structural support. Geographic, cultural, and institutional barriers further complicate this, particularly for those in rural or conservative areas. However, despite these challenges, many women

demonstrate agency by navigating these obstacles to pursue higher education. Their experiences highlight the need for structural changes to provide better access, information, and support for young women, enabling them to make informed choices and realize their full potential.

5.2 Financial and Economic Concerns

Financial and economic concerns emerged as a critical factor influencing women's access to higher education. This section on financial and economic concerns explores their dual impact on women's access to higher education in Egypt. Financial constraints often act as barriers, limiting educational opportunities and reinforcing gendered social norms, particularly in marginalized communities where families prioritize male education due to perceived higher returns. However, positive conversion factors, such as scholarships, family sacrifices, and part-time work, have enabled some women to overcome these challenges. The discussion highlights the interplay between financial concerns and other conversion factors like family support and geographical expansion, shaping women's educational pathways. The analysis draws on personal narratives, such as those of Maha, Amira, and Farida, which illustrate diverse experiences of financial struggles and successes. Additionally, the section emphasizes how access alone does not ensure participation or recognition in higher education, reinforcing the importance of enhancing capabilities to enable meaningful participation. The narratives reveal that while financial constraints hinder access, economic aspirations also motivate women to pursue higher education as a means to achieve financial independence and agency. The Capability Approach underscores how economic factors act as constraints and opportunities for women to expand their life choices and agency.

Assaad (2010) highlighted the fact that the degree of accessibility to university education in Egypt is affected by more factors than ability and effort, i.e. wealth, family background and gender. Funding and monetary factors remain the most persistent challenge for accessing higher education for both males and females. However, women are disproportionately affected as families in marginalized societies often prioritize investment in boys' education, perceiving it to yield

higher returns (Unterhalter, 2005). A study showed that 38% of Egyptian mothers believe that parents send their son to the university if they could afford to educate only one child, compared to 7% who said they would send their daughter (EDHS, 2000). Parents prefer not to invest in their daughters' higher education because they do not expect them to economically contribute to the family, a myth that is becoming self-fulfilling, despite research proving that educating women yields far-reaching benefits for the women, their families, and the societies in which they live, particularly in developing countries (King & Hill, 1993). Higher education in Egypt is a quasi-free highly competitive education system in public universities and expensive private universities. Maha, a 29-year-old university graduate stated:

"I struggled to convince my parents to pursue higher education as they believed it is a waste of time and money. They wanted me to get married and preferred to spend the money on my marriage preparation and furniture".

In this context, Maha faced a financial struggle that even if the money was available, her parents preferred not to spend it on her education. Maha was lucky that she was able to finally convince her parents by promising that she will keep her education cost at a minimum and that it would give her a better chance to find a well-paid job to save for her marriage, as they wished. Not many girls are successful as Maha in convincing their parents or finding the necessary financial support. Even with fee-free higher education, many students still face significant financial hardships that hinder their participation and progress in university (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022).

Access to the university depends on enrolment in general secondary schools. There are around 2.2 million students in technical education, a higher number than the 1.9 million in secondary education due to not getting the minimum grades for secondary education or the significantly higher cost associated with general secondary education due to private tutoring and materials (ETF, 2020). Schooling is almost free, but parents still bear additional costs for school tuition, books and school uniforms, private lessons and transportation (Varoujan, 2013).

The dropout rate reached 2.1% for females in preparatory stage, compared to 1.4% for males in the same year (CAPMAS, 2022). Amira, a 31-year-old woman from Upper Egypt, discussed this point

“Since preparatory school I felt I had to work more than my brothers to be very successful and not to give my family any reason to drop me out of education or choose TVET track. I tried to minimise the need for private tutoring and books during secondary school so that I don’t cause additional financial burden.”

Women are less likely to attend private, despite scoring better on the secondary school’s examination, due to the financial challenges and because some families believe private universities have inferior reputations and limited selection of majors (Buckner, 2013). Farida, a 31-year-old woman who dreamt of entering the American University in Cairo, which is the highest ranking prestigious private university in Egypt and the most expensive as well, argued:

“I wanted to join the American University in Cairo, but it is one of the most expensive in Egypt and there is no student loans or other common financing means in Egypt. I was lucky I was accepted in a scholarship due to my high grades in high school; otherwise, I wouldn’t have been able to join and pursue my dream”.

Although she received a scholarship that waived tuition fees, other costs remained; such as books, transportation, and social expectations like clothing and appearance necessary to socially fit in.

The case was not the same for Dalia, a 27-year-old woman who comes from a relatively wealthy family. She describes her experience of accessing university by saying:

“It was normal for me to continue my studies and enter university as it is the case for all my family and community. I was in a private international school and all my colleagues also got enrolled in universities. My family

could afford the university fees, so I applied and got accepted at a prestigious private university as I wished”

The difference between Dalia and Maha or Amira is in terms of capabilities. Due to Dalia’s family economic background, she had access qualified teachers, private courses, and books while for Amira and Maha have been deprived from necessary resources. The functionings of Dalia and Maha and Amira are the same, but their capabilities differ. These unequal circumstances can lead to unequal capacities to choose, and the number of choices, as choices are shaped by the opportunities available and the context (Nussbaum, 2000).

While the public higher education is free in Egypt, eliminating hidden financial costs, such registration fees and books, in universities and secondary schools may act as an enabling conversion factor for women’s access to higher education. Nonetheless, access is not the sole indicator for gender equity as access does not equate to participation or recognition for marginalised and underrepresented communities, what matters is ‘the capability to participate in higher education’ (Wilson-Strydom 2015). The education context, social relations, respect, participation and recognition, and many other socio-economic aspects impact the capabilities of learners to participate in higher education and utilise the outcomes gained from it (Cin & Dogan, 2020). Farida concluded her interview by saying

“I wish there was incentive programs by the government to increase access of women to higher education such as conditional cash transfer programs, student loans, scholarships and financial aid at both private and public universities”.

In my interviews, it was evident that financial constraints are a key reason discouraging women’s access to higher education but as aforementioned, some were fortunate enough to overcome it.

Looking at the monetary aspect from a different angle, it is also a reason and goal to access higher education for many. Many of the women interviewed expressed that one of the reasons they chose to continue their education is to

have better income in the future. Expanding the economic capability and competing for well-paid jobs in a competitive labour market pushed many to access higher education to increase their chances. Hadia, a 30-year-old single woman expressed that by saying

“Married or not, I care about my economic independence to have full control over my life. I wanted to go to a prestigious university and then get a good job and be able to support myself fully”.

Thus, money becomes a means and an end at the same time. They value economic freedom as part of creating a good life with well-being and agency. While economic concern can limit access to higher education, many women pursue it precisely to achieve economic independence. Consequently, the economic factor is both a conversion factor and a capability women wish to expand.

5.3 Geographical Expansion of Higher Education across the country

Building on the previous discussion of financial and economic challenges, studying in another city was often economically demanding and out of reach for many women, making higher education an unattainable goal. The expansion of higher education institutions beyond Cairo into other governorates has played a crucial role in improving access for women, particularly those from rural and marginalized communities. This expansion serves as a positive conversion factor by bringing universities closer to home, thereby addressing long-standing geographical barriers that previously hindered women’s educational aspirations. However, despite this progress, economic challenges related to accommodation, transportation, and other hidden costs remain significant obstacles, particularly for families with limited financial resources. Moreover, deep-rooted social norms and family expectations continue to shape women’s educational choices, with many families unwilling to allow their daughters to travel alone for higher education. As reflected in the experiences of women like Amira and Ola, the availability of nearby universities has opened new opportunities for younger generations, contrasting with the struggles faced by earlier generations.

Nevertheless, for many women, geographical proximity alone is not sufficient; additional financial and social support mechanisms are essential to fully realize their educational capabilities. This section explores how these intersecting factors, geography, finances, and social norms, affect women's ability to access and benefit from higher education opportunities.

Although statistics might show that there are no significant gender disparities regarding secondary and university education accessibility and attainment across regions in Egypt, except for certain governorates, women from rural and poor backgrounds still face geographical obstacles in accessing higher education. More specifically, women from rural areas who belong to the lowest income quintile and have illiterate parents have only a 2% chance of pursuing a university education; a male with the same characteristics has a 9% chance (Pantelmann, 2019). In contrast, women from urban areas who belong to the highest income quintiles and have educated parents have a 100% probability of attending university, compared to 97% for males (Pantelmann, 2019). Thus, it is argued that the inequality of opportunity, freedom and expansion of capabilities is more evident for women when their ability to participate in higher education is affected by income, family and community background and geographical variables. Assaad (2010) argues that higher education is more likely to be viewed as a necessity for boys who come from rural areas, whereas it is often viewed as luxury for girls under similar circumstances. The expansion of universities especially in governorates other than Cairo was a strong support for families to pursue their girls' higher education. Heba elaborated on this point and told her own struggle to access university and convince her family as the nearest university to Arish district was four hours away in Suez university, and she was accepted in the second nearest university which is eight hours travel. Heba stated:

"I am so happy that my younger sister and girls in my area won't have to struggle as I did as due to the expansion of higher education currently there are many other options nearby including public and private universities. For the first time we are seeing Bedouins girls access university".

The geographical expansion and awareness opened opportunities for girls in certain communities where higher education was not an option to have the capability to access higher education. This expansion was an enabler for the development of other capability sets, including social, educational and agency. The same situation was encountered by Ola, a 30-year-old woman from Ismailia. Ola stated

“My dream was to study applied arts however this faculty was not available in the nearby university in Suez Canal area. My family didn’t agree that I would travel to Cairo to pursue my dream, so I had to stay in my home city. I was obliged to choose from the available faculties or drop out. I chose faculty of science. Nowadays there are around four new universities nearby instead of only one. I wish there were available a decade ago as it would have given me more choices”.

As seen, some of the participants were able to benefit from the geographical expansion while others witnessed the difference in opportunities between them, older generations and their younger sisters who were able to catch the geographical expansion.

5.4 Personal, family and community relations

The geographical expansion of universities in Egypt has created more opportunities for women by reducing economic barriers associated with long-distance travel. In many cases, this expansion has acted as a positive conversion factor, particularly in rural areas, where proximity to institutions has encouraged family support for women's education. Parents with higher education levels or from urban areas are generally more supportive, recognizing the value of higher education for career advancement. However, in more conservative and rural communities, deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and traditional gender roles persist, limiting women's educational choices despite improved access. Family and community relations thus play a dual role either enabling or constraining women's agency and aspirations based on factors such as geographical location

and cultural attitudes. This section explores these dynamics and their implications for women's capabilities in higher education.

Scroope (2017) describes Egyptian society as a largely collectivist society where family plays a significant role for Egyptian people and the needs of one's family or community often take precedence over personal needs or desires. The family consists of both the nuclear unit and the extended family, and the individual is subordinate to the family. In Egypt, family and community relationships significantly influence educational access, acting as both enabling and disabling conversion factors. While urban families tend to provide more support for their daughters' education, rural families in conservative regions, such as Upper Egypt, often enforce traditional gender roles that limit educational opportunities for women. This geographic variation highlights the complex role of family and community in shaping the capabilities and agency of girls seeking higher education.

Egyptian society emphasises traditional family values such as loyalty, communal living and sharing. Sons and daughters tend to stay with their parents until they marry. The household structure is patriarchal, with authority in the hands of the most senior male (Hoodfar, 1997). Egyptian society is conservative, where women are expected to show greater social compliance patriarchal attitudes and fulfil traditional roles such as child rearing and household labour (Amin & Al-Bassusi, 2004). Most of the interviewees discussed how their education related decisions and access were affected by their fathers, uncles, older brothers and later their husbands limiting their basic capabilities and functionings.

Parents and society promote gender bias and stereotypes by imposing educational choices that align with perceived gender norms and femininity. These biases restrict women's choices and aspirations, particularly in conservative communities. Amina, a 27-year-old from Damietta, shares a vivid account of how her dream to join the faculty of arts was suppressed by her parents' refusal to allow her to study outside her home city:

"My dream and passion were to join the faculty of arts, and I had the talent. However, I didn't pass the required exam to join the faculty of arts in my home city. I was devastated. I wanted to join the same faculty at a private university in Cairo, but my parents refused completely to let me leave Damietta Governorate. I was forced to join the Arabic literature faculty, and it was four years of torture after losing all the passion and will. I teach my daughter to always fight for her dream and never give up."

Amina's experience exemplifies how family acts as a disabling conversion factor, limiting her capability to pursue a passion and a career path of her choosing. Her story demonstrates how geographical and cultural restrictions rooted in gender bias severely limit women's education and personal growth.

In many rural areas, especially in Upper Egypt, family dynamics tend to reinforce patriarchal norms, placing restrictions on girls' educational opportunities. Nadia, a young woman from Upper Egypt, describes how her family particularly her uncles exerted control over her educational decisions. Nadia explains:

"I felt that everyone in my family and extended family especially my uncles had a say in whether I should continue my higher education or not and which faculty to choose. Most women in my extended family didn't have go to university. I was told science faculties are not for girls."

In Nadia's case, her family acted as a disabling conversion factor, limiting her ability to pursue a field of study she was interested in. This experience is common in rural areas, where traditional gender roles and cultural conservatism restrict the capabilities of girls, forcing them to conform to societal expectations.

Similarly, Leila, also from Upper Egypt, faced limitations due to family control. Although she managed to access higher education, her choices were restricted by her uncle, who had taken responsibility for her after her father's death. Leila reflects on how these limitations affected her:

"I didn't have a choice back then. I was forced to enter the one university in my city with limited faculties. I wanted more choices in terms of faculties, quality of education, and exposure. My uncle refused to let me travel, and I can't forgive him for taking control of my life."

Leila's situation reveals how geographic isolation and conservative family attitudes in rural areas act as disabling factors, limiting women's access to higher education or forcing them into fields they do not wish to pursue.

In addition to geographic and cultural factors, economic background and parental education play a crucial role in determining access to higher education. Once wealth is accounted for, parental education is a major factor in educational accessibility in Egypt (As-Saad, 2010). Families with educated parents are more likely to support their daughters' academic aspirations, regardless of socioeconomic status, thus functioning as an enabling conversion factor.

Urban families, particularly those in cities like Cairo, are more likely to provide support for their daughters' educational ambitions. Lobna's story exemplifies how family support can challenge societal norms and enable women to pursue their goals. Despite resistance from others, Lobna's father encouraged her to pursue a degree in STEM, even when her mother expressed concerns about its impact on her marriage prospects. Lobna shares:

"Despite everyone being against me joining a STEM faculty, my dad was my biggest supporter. My mother was afraid it would affect my marriage and thought I should focus on marriage instead of studies. Now, I have my own company, and I owe all my success to my father."

Lobna's story highlights how family can act as an enabling conversion factor, supporting young women in achieving their educational and professional aspirations. In urban areas, where access to educational institutions is better and gender norms are gradually evolving, family support plays a crucial role in expanding the capabilities of girls.

The geographic disparity in family support for education is a critical factor in understanding the enabling and disabling roles that family and community can play. In urban areas like Cairo, access to higher education is more widespread, and families are generally more supportive of women pursuing non-traditional fields. As a result, young women in urban areas often have more freedom to choose their field of study and pursue careers in sectors traditionally dominated by men.

Rural regions like Upper Egypt are more conservative, and families often enforce stricter gender norms. The lack of nearby educational institutions and societal expectations for women to prioritize family over career limit their capabilities. As Leila notes, the recent expansion of higher education opportunities in rural areas is slowly shifting these dynamics, but many women, like herself, were not able to benefit from this change. She shares:

"I wish the expansion happening now had occurred a long time ago. My sister now has several choices in terms of universities, studies, and faculties. She is more empowered and able to speak up as there is societal change and more awareness."

Many families would support their daughters to access higher education but not to travel or have a long commute. Thus, girls find themselves facing a choice between attending a university and faculty they don't want or not attending higher education at all. Therefore, the expansion of higher made a significant difference in gaining the support of parents, expanding the capabilities of girls and eliminating some conversion factors that limited access higher education. it is one of the factors that has changed family relations where currently we are seeing parents supporting and encouraging their girls to join universities despite all challenges as in the case of Lobna. This change in society is expanding and causing a domino effect, especially in communities where this is new, such as Bedouin communities, as highlighted by Leila.

5.5 What women value, aspirations, and agency

This section builds upon the previous sections on financial and economic concerns, the geographical expansion of higher education, and family and community relations by examining how Egyptian women's values, aspirations, and agency intersect with key conversion factors, economic constraints, geographical accessibility, and family and community influences, in their pursuit of higher education.

The concept of navigational agency is central to understanding how women in Egypt navigate their educational paths amidst family dynamics, social expectations, and institutional constraints. Building on Claassen's (2018) framework of navigational agency, this section explores how women's ability to move within and between social practices affects their access to education and their aspirations.

The concept of agency, as framed within the Capability Approach, is fundamental to understanding how women navigate the challenges they face in accessing higher education. Claassen (2017) identifies two types of agency: participational agency, which refers to one's ability to act within social practices, and navigational agency, which involves the capacity to move between practices while making autonomous decisions. These two forms of agency highlight how societal structures can both enable and constrain individual action. I explore how women navigated their way to attend university and how their navigational agency was driven by their aspiration to achieve what they value. The discussion highlights the diverse ways women assert their agency, whether by challenging gender norms or adapting to social pressures, while emphasizing that access to higher education extends beyond enrolment to the realization of their valued aspirations and long-term capabilities.

In Egypt, women's ability to mobilize their agency is shaped by conversion factors, including societal norms, family expectations, and economic constraints. These factors, coupled with gender norms and patriarchal attitudes, often restrict women's access to higher education and their ability to pursue their aspirations

freely (Kabeer, 1999). This concept is particularly relevant for women in Egypt, whose educational journeys are often shaped by complex, intersecting social practices, including family responsibilities, community expectations, gender norms, and aspirations for higher education. The concept of navigational agency extends beyond simple participation in higher education; it involves strategic decisions regarding entry and exit from these practices, conflict resolution, reforming existing practices, and even creating new practices that better align with personal goals. Women exercise this agency to overcome structural barriers and constraints, striving for autonomy and transformation within both their educational and social contexts.

The ability to enter and exit educational pathways is often constrained by societal and familial expectations. Women in Egypt frequently encounter pressure to adhere to traditional roles, particularly regarding family responsibilities and marriage. Despite these pressures, women who are determined to pursue education use their navigational agency capabilities, such as personal resilience, aspiration-driven decision-making, and social support systems, to gain entry into educational pathways. As Maha reflects

"Despite my very young age back then and all the constraints, I knew that I must continue my education. It is what I valued and believed in."

Maha's experience highlights the internal drive and conviction that enables women to enter educational pathways despite external pressures. However, entry into education often comes with the need to make decisions about exiting, particularly when other social expectations, such as family roles, demand attention. Maha's story exemplifies the role of aspirations in driving women's agency.

Navigating between family and educational responsibilities often leads to conflict, and resolving these tensions is central to women's educational journeys. Ozmantar-Keser et al. (2023) argue that identity is a crucial element in developing one's political agency. It is essential for women to have the freedom to reason, function, communicate their voices, and make choices that shape their

future and contribute to their community and society. Hadia, an environmental engineer, exemplifies how women resolve conflicts between societal expectations and personal educational goals

“The society was pressuring me to fit into a certain stereotype which is getting married and stay at home to raise the kids. However, I wanted to access higher education because I believed I had other roles that owe to myself and the society. I wanted to make a difference, and I knew university was the right path for my goal.”

Women such as Hadia may face significant tensions between familial and societal roles, but agency enables them to make choices that prioritize their personal aspirations. Hadia’s ability to negotiate between societal pressures and her educational aspirations exemplifies the agency capabilities of emotional resilience and social navigation. By resolving these conflicts through negotiations with the family and compromises, Hadia was able to forge a path that allowed her to enter higher education.

Many women navigate not only personal barriers but also challenge societal norms that restrict their access to education. The ability to reform existing practices, such as gendered educational pathways, is key to navigational agency in this context. To do so, they draw on capabilities such as strategic thinking, self-advocacy, and access to role models. These capabilities enable them to challenge norms and make decisions that expand their potential. Amal’s determination to pursue science, a field traditionally dominated by men, highlights how women use navigational agency to challenge gender norms.

“I got higher grades in secondary school, and my parents encouraged me to study medicine as the most prestigious faculty, but I had a dream since I was a child to be one of the very few Egyptian women scientists. I had role models I wanted to emulate. Since I had a goal to achieve, I was always motivated and willing to face challenges. I wanted to break the stereotype that girls shouldn’t pursue science.”

Amal's aspiration to pursue a career in science, despite familial and societal pressures to choose a more conventional path, demonstrates how women navigate and reform restrictive gender norms within education. The aspirational capabilities Amal developed through her exposure to role models and her self-advocacy allowed her to confront and challenge the normative expectations of women's educational choices in Egypt.

According to Bonvin and Laruffa (2020), aspirations are a form of "navigational agency capability" that reflect not only individual desires but also the relational dynamics that trigger these aspirations. Aspirations also have the potential to serve as transformative capabilities. Mkwanzani (2018) highlights how women's agency can be constrained or enabled by the aspirations they form, often shaped by the availability of opportunities and the influence of familial and community relationships. In Egypt, these relationships often impose limitations such as expectations surrounding marriage, caregiving, or the adherence to traditional gender roles that can stifle women's freedom to pursue certain educational or professional goals.

In some cases, women are not only navigating and reforming existing practices but also creating new opportunities for themselves and others. This is evident in the experiences of women who seek out alternative educational experiences, such as studying abroad or choosing prestigious institutions despite familial resistance. They develop capabilities like independence, self-reliance, and openness to new experiences to pursue such alternatives. Hoda's decision to study at the American University in Cairo, despite her parents' lack of support, reflects the creation of new opportunities for self-expression and independence.

"I got a scholarship at the American University in Cairo which is prestigious private university away from my home city. My parents were not very supportive. My aspiration was to have a different exposure, different environment, and a chance to spread my wings. Deciding to live away from my family was difficult but I was looking forward to being independent and be fully responsible for myself. I knew that it will be a self-discovery experience."

Hoda had to negotiate with her family to gain their acceptance, balancing their concerns about distance and independence with her aspirations for quality education and personal growth. She navigated between the more traditional expectations of her home environment and the open, diverse academic space of AUC, learning to adapt and assert herself in both. Hoda's choice to study away from her town exemplifies how women use navigational agency to create new practices that enable personal growth, independence, and a broader range of opportunities.

Some women face additional challenges, such as health issues or community opposition, that complicate their ability to fully access higher education. However, their navigational agency capabilities help them reclaim their agency and persist in their educational journeys. Dina's story illustrates the significant challenges that women often face in navigating their educational aspirations in the context of familial and health-related obstacles.

"I always wanted to be a doctor; it was my dream and my choice. I didn't receive any support from my community or parents. They all thought it is for men due to the nature of study and job afterward and the work hours and load. My mother was afraid it would affect me getting married. Also, I have an autoimmune disease similar to rheumatoid fever, so my family did want me to join a practical faculty with many labs work and long study hours. They thought I wouldn't be able to do it physically or socially. All these challenges made me more determined. Despite these constraints, I actively negotiated my position within my family, balancing their concerns while asserting my right to pursue the education I valued."

By persisting in her studies, she moved between restrictive social norms and her own aspirations, finding ways to challenge expectations while maintaining ties with her family. Rather than simply resisting or complying, she navigated through these challenges by demonstrating capability, determination, and resilience while also managing the constraints imposed by her health condition.

Women's ability to navigate higher education is also shaped by the responsibilities they shoulder within their families. For example, Amira's experience of balancing multiple roles as the eldest daughter highlights how women often face additional constraints while pursuing their education. This is further complicated for women like Rania, who had to assume maternal responsibilities following the loss of her mother. Rania's story is one of navigating multiple roles that affect her ability to fully access education

Aspirations and the capacity to navigate educational systems are crucial capabilities that enable students to overcome barriers and achieve their educational goals (Gale & Parker, 2019). By viewing aspirations as a central capability of navigational agency, we recognize that women's ability to access and benefit from higher education is not solely determined by institutional structures but is also shaped by the relational dynamics within their families and communities. These dynamics influence how women navigate entry and exit from education, resolve conflicts between different social practices, and, ultimately, shape their educational and career trajectories.

While government efforts to expand higher education through increased universities are commendable, structural inequalities persist, disproportionately affecting women from disadvantaged backgrounds due to competitive exams, high private tuition fees, and entrenched cultural norms (McCowan, 2016; McMahon, 2009). Sen's (1992) distinction between capabilities and functionings underscores that true accessibility requires not just institutional expansion but also the freedom to pursue education aligned with women's aspirations. Achieving this demands policy reforms such as scholarships, loans, and affirmative action alongside cultural shifts to challenge restrictive norms. Without systemic change, higher education will remain out of reach for marginalized women, reinforcing socio-economic disparities despite increased enrolment opportunities.

6. Higher Education Experience of Egyptian Women

In this chapter, I investigate the women's experiences during their higher education studies to explore the transformative journey they encountered, including the opportunities to expand their capabilities and choose what they value, and the challenges they faced in overcoming gender norms and their disadvantaged position as women in the Egyptian higher education system. The higher education experience and its constraints or conversion factors had a significant effect on their capabilities and agency. The women's narratives focused on the following themes: first, how the higher education was a transformative experience on many levels, second the discrimination they faced based on gender, particularly in terms of sexual harassment and stereotyping from peers and professors, especially in STEM fields. Experiences of education processes that emerged from interviews included curriculum, extra-curricular activities, the socio-political context, and the environment (DeJaeghere & Vavrus, 2011; Cin, 2017). The experiences they gained during their higher education years helped shape their future not only in terms of work but their personal and social decisions too.

The women's educational experiences showed that higher education provided opportunities that Egyptian women were socially and culturally deprived from, particularly the social capability of engaging in mixed-gender relations and participating in activities they want. In addition, it expanded their capacity to take the lead in their own lives and have a strong voice to build a life they valued living (Cin, 2017). Despite the geographical expansion of Egyptian higher education, the quality of education and institutional support remains a significant concern, influencing women's ability to convert educational opportunities into valued capabilities.

Using the Capability Approach, this chapter highlights how higher education serves as both an opportunity and a constraint for women, where access alone does not guarantee the realization of valued capabilities. It is through their higher education journey that women navigate various enabling and disabling

conversion factors, expanding their capabilities in some areas while facing persistent challenges in others.

6.1 Higher Education as a Transformative site

The empowering higher education experience was transformative and expanded women's academic, political, social and intellectual capabilities. Higher education should serve as a transformative space that supports students' pursuit of the good life by enhancing their freedoms, capabilities, and what they personally value (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022). The transformative higher education experience expanded women's academic capabilities, which include gaining subject-specific knowledge, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving abilities that enhance their potential for professional and intellectual growth (Nussbaum, 2011). Their social capabilities were enriched through socializing, forming support networks, and engaging in mixed-gender interactions, which contributed to their confidence, communication skills, and ability to navigate diverse social settings (Walker, 2006). Political capabilities developed as women gained awareness of their rights, participated in leadership roles, and engaged with social and political issues within and beyond the university context (Unterhalter, 2003). Lastly, their intellectual capabilities were strengthened by exposure to new ideas, self-reflection, and the development of critical autonomy in their decision-making and life planning (Robeyns, 2017).

The capabilities were expanded through both positive and challenging incidents which were both transformative and helped those women grow, gave them more autonomy in shaping their lives, improved their status within the family and gave them a greater voice in household and financial decisions (Lewis et al. 2008). Leila stated

“Higher education was an empowering self-discovery experience. I discovered my strengths, capabilities, skills and my weaknesses too. I got to nourish my academic and social skills. I felt that I used to live in small bubble during high school and that I was finally out to the real world. I was too naïve at the beginning.”

Nora highlighted that as well by saying

“Higher education changed my life. I felt I grew on many levels; I got to deal with different people and different situations. During university, I used to go to camps, engage with different activities and people, use transportation alone, and face many problems.”

Firstly, the university gave them the chance to pursue further knowledge after completing their secondary school and grow their academic skills and capabilities. Amal stated

“University developed and sharpened my knowledge, academic skills, research skills and subject specific knowledge from great professors. I was able to engage in enriching academic and scientific discussions that I don’t think I would have got that opportunity otherwise. Consequently, I became a critical thinker and inquirer. Since I was a science major, I got the practical and theoretical knowledge which isn’t available elsewhere especially for women.”

While some found that curriculum and learning outcomes were meaningful, others found the curriculum irrelevant to the 21st century skills and knowledge but they found the will to pursue the knowledge elsewhere through different diplomas and courses. The Egyptian high school diploma focuses on memorization rather than research and analytical skills, so it was difficult for some to adapt to the transition in terms of curriculum and required skills. Amal continues

“I did not expect university to be that hard especially that my parents expected that I would get high grades in university as I did in high school not factoring that it requires different skills”.

Some of the students had a different set of expectations academically and regarding the learning style. They thought the material and communication would more interactive, linked to the real world and engaging not depending on

memorization. These academic challenges encouraged students to be more independent, inquirer and taking the initiative. Others saw it as an opportunity that the university taught independence and more student-centred approach and taking the initiative to find the opportunities and knowledge. Hadia explained

“In architecture school, unlike school, I found myself forced to acquire self-learning and research skills as no one will feed you the knowledge with a spoon like in school. Also, science is evolving fast, and I needed to be up to speed with continuous research and new software or else one can easily fall behind. I learned to be adaptive and flexible on both professional and personal level. “

The situation in terms of quality and relevance of curriculum and teaching exacerbates in Upper Egypt and rural areas away from the capital. Amira states

“In upper Egypt, we didn’t receive the same educational quality as the capital or main cities. The good professors prefer to go to Cairo or big cities. Sometimes we did not even have enough professors that agree to stay so the university would “borrow” from other nearby universities. Thus, these professors would give the lecture and leave straight away. We didn’t have time to speak to them before or after the lesson.”

Gender and social relations at universities, in addition to socio-political context were crucial in the process of women’s transformation to acquiring powerful voices through the development of their political capability set of developing political knowledge to speak up on their ideas and increasing their political participation and their agency in being part of collective movements to bring change (Cin, 2017). Some of the participants were in the university during Egypt 2011 revolution. They found in the university and through their colleagues the venue to participate in the revolution, raise political awareness and even take parts in political parties and participate in elections. The university was a place to mobilize people, share conversations and have intellectual discussions with

the different professors and friends that enabled to form political voice and action. In addition, many of the political parties had student arms or branches at universities as they count on students as crucial human capital part for their political activities and elections. Jihan said

“Universities had a big role to play during and post the 2011 revolution. My parents always advised me to stay away from politics but through the groups, clubs and political parties in the university I started building my own opinion and participate in elections and political events.”

Independence can also fall under the political voice for women. Many talked about how the higher education experience, particularly for the ones who had to travel to attend university, shaped their independence and resilience. Hoda proudly said

“Coming from a conservative society where my parents used to do everything for me, university developed my independence as I was living alone for the first time in my life. I was responsible for everything including food, managing financial, paperwork, chores and transportation. The achievement off being able to manage everything on my own made me grow and unacceptable to be controlled by anyone since I don’t need them and can manage by myself.”

As the discussion with colleagues and professors was essential to expand the political capabilities, it leads to the inter-related expansion of social capability as well. The social aspect is the capability most mentioned by almost all interviewees as many were coming from gender-segregated education or from schools in rural areas or relatively small secondary schools. Jihan, 28-years-old from a village in Benha stated

“It was a totally different experience than school. It was the first time to be in the same educational setting as other boys. Actually, I come from a very conservative family, so it was the first time I

interact with males outside the family. It was overwhelming at the beginning. At the first year we used to sit the boys in one side and the girls on the other side as we were not used to sit together during the lectures. Women including myself did not ask a lot of questions or participate as much in classes as we were not used to talk in front of boys. Things changed throughout the university years, and I build a very strong self-confidence and interaction with both males and females”

While Jihan faced some problems adapting to new cultures, social classes and living alone and fitting in without changing her values, she still thought that gender relations opened up opportunities and exposure to get recognition and social capabilities under the male dominated Egyptian socio-cultural context of patriarchy

“Coming from a village conservative single sex to going to university it was a transformative first time to have such discussions and debate and meet people from all over the country and get exposed to different knowledge.”

The social setting and interaction empowered them with the voice and agency to deal, argue, participate and communicate with all kinds of people. The social interaction with other women’ colleagues and professors formed social support and gender empowerment where they shared the higher education experience together and be able to discuss the challenges and advise one another. Amal confirmed the expansion of her networks

“I gained many networks through the university including connections and mentorship with my professors and instructors whom I’m in touch with till today and I am part of several groups from university where we have our own kind of support system.”

Speaking up is a big part of the social capability. Nora highlighted that

"I come from a place where women are not expected to debate to speak up. This was true at families, school and even university where women were expected not to debate with professors or assistants. So, when I used to debate or question things to better understand I was perceived as misbehaviour. I learned that speaking up and having a voice is my right in all settings and places."

It is enlightening to witness women challenging gendered practices and discriminatory practices that form constraint to their social capability of being treated equally without discrimination and their intellectual capability of feeling self- confident and breaking reproduced learning gendered assumptions and perceptions that influence women identity by suggesting that certain courses, activities or attitudes are not culturally appropriate or that girls should remain in the background with no voice (Cin,2017).

Students in private universities with more international setting had their social capabilities even expanded further. Being in a private university also a different transformative characteristic where education is more liberal, and culture is more open and westernized. Farida, a 31-year-old AUC graduate, stated

"Being a student in the American University in Cairo I had a different education and experience. The higher education is in itself a transformative experience and being in a university such as AUC was a major change in my life and personality in terms of the education quality, dealing with international students and professors, new cultures, open mindedness and encouraged me to pursue master's degree abroad later on."

The interaction with professors had a transformative effect, both socially and academically, on female students. Some professors were vital for the growth and empowerment of their female students. Lamis stated

"One of my female professors is the reason I succeeded in my bachelor's degree and had a positive higher education experience."

She made me believe in myself due to how strongly she believes in me. She is still my mentor till today.”

For Manar the whole experience was not positive, but it made her realize her true passion as she explains

“Due to my parents’ refusal to travel outside of my city, I was forced to join the literature faculty. I hated all aspect of the experience including the academic and social. I couldn’t connect with the material, professors, the system or even the premises. Everything was irrelevant and old. The good thing is that it pushed me to search for my passion somewhere else and not to accept the status quo and give up. I started to realize my passion for Cinematography and started looking for courses related to it. There was no opportunity to further study and work in this field in my city Damietta. So as soon as I finished my bachelor’s degree, I was more independent insisted to leave to Cairo to pursue my dream.”

Thus, the social capability was expanded by establishing relations with the opposite gender and engaging in social activities, in addition to the intellectual capability of developing self-confidence and discovering their own potential and what they value (Cin, 2017).

One of the educational processes that helped shape and affect all the aforementioned capabilities is the extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities were highlighted by almost 70% of interviewees for making the higher education experience truly transformative. It helped many to fit in and expand all different aspects of capabilities and build their agency. Rewan recounted her experience

“After joining medical school, I realized that it is not necessarily what I want to do for the rest of my life. Through extracurricular activities I got the chance to learn sign language and then travel to US for a year to work with deaf communities and advocacy. It was a life changing experience. My parents were against it at the

beginning particularly for being a woman. My peers and professors thought that I should focus on my studies and that anything beside the studies is a waste time especially for doctors. I was somehow bullied when I came back, because I was a cohort behind my colleagues.”

It gave them the chance to explore and know more about themselves and their passion especially that women prior to their higher education were not allowed to be engaged in activities outside school. It expanded women’s intellectual and social capability of developing self-confidence and self-respect, knowing and dealing with different lifestyles and different cultures within Egypt and internationally. Hadia stated

“I participated in the model UN activity, and it taught be a lot about international politics, presentation and negotiation skills, and a nig addition to my CV. It was hard to participate in these activities besides my architecture studied but it developed my time management skills.”

The overall experience was transformative and distinguished those women from other women in their communities with enabling capabilities, access to opportunities and elimination of constraints and gendered roles faced by others. Maha expressed

“University helped me to be myself if I didn’t go into university, I would have been a copy of other women in my village where I feel I don’t fully belong. I don’t want to stay at home waiting for marriage. It is not me. I made a choice there is no wrong choice here I want to have to freedom to choose and live the life I want.”

The same was expressed by Heba

“I grew and changed a lot and felt differentiated from the women who stayed in Sinai and did not pursue higher education. Our thinking, priorities and conversations are so different now”.

In summary, higher education provided women with the capability to have a voice and bargaining power in their future choices. Most importantly, they felt they have freedom and agency to choose a life that they valued and based on their own preferences away from traditions as university experience expanded their freedoms and independence including economic independence and capability. Thus, it was an empowering experience equipping them with different skills that had relevance in their lives (Unterhalter, 2019; Cin, 2017).

6.2 Higher Education as Gendered sites and spaces:

Although higher education is a transformative experience, traditional gender norms remain evident across several higher education spaces, including disciplines, academic settings, and engagement with tutors. Additionally, gender norms were also reflected in social interactions with peers and student groups. These relational spaces can be divided into experiences inside universities through interactions with peers and professors, and through family relations, commuting challenges, geographical location, and rurality outside the university. The focus here is not on contrasting individual participants' experiences, but on highlighting the shared patterns and contextual influences that affected women's capabilities for participation, safety, and self-development within higher education institutions.

The interviewees highlighted many of the challenges and discrimination they encountered during their higher education experience. However, almost all of them confirmed that these challenges helped them become stronger and further expand their capabilities while exercising their agency to overcome obstacles. Despite these gains, they were underrepresented in student bodies and did not receive equal opportunities, including participation in extracurricular activities. In some cases, they faced sexual harassment, further reinforcing the gendered nature of higher education spaces.

Higher education institutions are gendered sites, with the extent of gendered experiences varying based on geographical location. For instance, in Upper Egypt, gendered challenges are more pronounced and visible due to deeply

rooted patriarchal norms and cultural expectations. This context necessitates navigational agency, as women must actively strategize and negotiate their way through university as a gendered space, overcoming systemic barriers and social constraints to achieve their educational goals.

Despite the expansion of universities the commute remained a major conversion factor and challenge for many Egyptian women. The capability for mobility and spatial accessibility is not only vital on its own for women but is also instrumental for achieving other capabilities necessary for wellbeing (Vasudevan., 2019). Farida, 31-years-old, stated:

“I used to live away from the university and the road was rather deserted with no frequent transportation. It was not safe especially for women to stay late at university.”

The challenge was exacerbated for students in STEM and practical faculties where the study hours were longer. Amal, a student in medical school, highlighted this by saying

“My faculty required extended hours of study at university. So, it was normal so go from 7 am till 8 in the evening but this was not acceptable by my parents who were deeply affected by the neighbours or society comments. in the Egyptian society particularly some communities outside Cairo, it is not acceptable for females to return late from university.”

Lamis used to live two hours away from university therefore spent four hours commuting daily.

“The daily long commute hours caused back problems, stress and psychological pressure. I wanted to rent a place near the university but because I am a woman my family rejected the idea of living alone or even in the dorms. The case was not the same for my brother. My brother was allowed to drive a car instead of using public transportation or even lived for a short period in the dorms.

Ironically, we were both getting the same allowance despite that I had to pay for the transportation. It broke my heart that they saw me struggle due to the commute problem but didn't care while finding multiple solutions for my brother. This discrimination affected me negatively because it was across many aspects. I started overeating as a coping mechanism. I wanted to go to therapy, but my allowance was not enough. I started working during my studies for financial independence."

She was forced to get a side job to meet her expenses to generate her own income and to develop agency, enabling her to control her own life rather than form adaptive preferences or confirm to social expectations. These challenges made her discover new options, expand new capabilities and taking agency. The commute was a barrier to academic achievement and to participation in activities. Jihan, faculty of Mass Communication graduate, used to live in a different governorate from her university, she recounted:

"I was too naïve coming from a small village in a different governorate, and I had to take a train 2.5 hours each way daily which was a horrific experience, unsafe and frightening with no transportation if I finished university late. My parents told me no girls are allowed to spend the night outside their house which is a well know cultural belief. I missed many opportunities to join activities, interact with colleague and join any event after classes as I was forced to leave to catch the early train. After two years I was finally able to convince my parents to stay at the women dormitories. However, I still part of the university experience due to the commute. I am glad that currently due to the expansion there are several faculties of mass communication near me including in Suez and New Valley universities so that girls have more access."

Stereotyping and cultural gender norms that try to make women fit into traditionally acceptable *gender norms and roles* were a major form of inequitable challenges. Freedoms and agency for those experiencing disabling

gender norms and structures were impeded in universities and negatively affected women's experiences (Walker & Loots, 2017). Stereotyping the role of women is against the CA that restores the uniqueness of every individual with distinct values. Academically, discrimination existed particularly in STEM faculties. For example, in medical school, some specializations were strictly dominated by males. Similarly, in Engineering faculty, mechanical and construction department had only a modest percentage of female students. Rewan a medical school graduate from Alexandria University said

“By the final year we start choosing our specialty, there is a stereotype that some specialties are exclusive for male doctors such as orthopaedics and surgical where you will find almost no women at all. I tried to ask about the reason, but I was strongly discouraged from pursuing these field as women can get married and have kids and it will be hard to take leaves or always be on call. This perception was reinforced by the professors and senior doctors who preferred to teach males in this fields and choose them as their assistant as they believe teaching women might be a waste of time if they take leaves due to personal matters after that.”

Some professors, colleagues and even families give more importance to the studies and higher education experience of males rather than females, believing that it is more beneficial and valuable as women might end up not using the knowledge and be a stay-at-home housewife. Hadia, an engineering graduate states

“The first year, the foundational year, was the hardest especially in mechanical subjects. We were actually told directly by assistant professors and male colleagues that we don't have to attend the practical parts, or we can just watch since we won't specialize in mechanical engineering anyway. Thus, males used to get more opportunities for the practical sessions and attention for the professors. During the mechanical classes, the boys would automatically sit in the first three rows and we, girls, would find

ourselves sitting in the back. I was surprised that everyone including the professors found this acceptable.

Women are eager to optimize their higher education experience and seize all opportunities, so they were looking for opportunities to work on research papers or teaching assistance with professors. Unfortunately, some highlighted that they felt males are preferred for such opportunities. This does not come as a surprise because STEM subjects are male dominated globally. According to the OECD International Survey of Scientific Authors (2021), women are under-represented in research careers with only 30 percent of authors are women and this percentage decreases as we move to STEM related research reaching only 15 percent of corresponding authors in physics and astronomy. Lamis expressed her frustration by saying

“Many times, professors were looking for research assistants for papers to be published and they would automatically choose males with no specific reason. Perhaps again they feel males would be more committed and that women would not be able to work late at night or might have some house chores.”

Research indicates that women in academic sciences face systemic barriers that limit their time for laboratory work compared to men. For instance, studies highlight how caregiving responsibilities disproportionately reduce women’s research productivity, with mothers in STEM publishing fewer papers than fathers due to unequal domestic workloads (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2019) These disparities are reinforced by socio-cultural norms and structural inequities, including rigid work schedules and institutional expectations of long hours that disadvantage women (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020). Persistent gender gaps in scientific output further reflect these challenges, as women are often allocated more teaching or service roles that compete with research time (Huang et al., 2020). Lamis continued by highlighting that women had to put double the effort to prove themselves especially in STEM.

"I was related to a well-known researched and professor. I used to work very hard and be the top of my class. My success was always attributed to being related to that professor not because of my own effort. It affected my psychologically as if I was looking for validation for my own work. "

The academic discrimination was more evident in the practical parts of the studies. For example, Heba a teacher from Sinai stated

"The female practical teaching experience during their last year of university or right after university particularly working in the rural valleys near mountains areas with Bedouins was not acceptable for previous cohorts due to transportation, safety and conservatism. However, women in my cohort requested to be granted the opportunity to work there and to offer us transportation and they finally agreed. It was an important practical experience."

Heba used to travel far to attend university but currently with the opening of several universities in Sinai particularly King Salman university everything changed

"Before king Salman university opened, I had to travel for another university which hard on me to live for the first time independently away from my parents especially that I grew up in Sinai; a conservative closed society and not used to this new lifestyle. King Salman university changed the situation drastically allowing girls in Sinai to access higher education including girls from the Bedouins. I was encouraged to continue my post graduate studies due to this expansion."

There is a very high demand, particularly from women and girls, to access King Salman and Tour universities. Due to the socio-cultural factors, it was so hard for parents to allow for their girls to travel and stay alone. The expansion has helped change mentalities regarding women's higher education.

The gender discrimination was also rooted in social and extracurricular activities where leadership positions and some activities were dominated by males. Rewan joined a university club and tried to run for presidency, but it was not acceptable

“Male colleagues hinted that women are not allowed to run for leadership positions. I tried to ask about the reason, and I was told we have international exchange students visiting and they would need the leadership team to take them out and perhaps late at night for dinners and drinking which is not acceptable for a woman to do in our society. I felt that it is unfair of course as it is not related to my skills or abilities rather than again, the stereotyping and gender norms.”

Leadership positions inside the students' clubs, unions and activities were dominated by males. Women faced challenges to fully participate as they wish. Nora was trying to organize and participate in many activities, but she underwent discrimination

“When I reached a team leader role, I felt resistance from my male subordinates by delaying tasks or trying to prove I am wrong and highlight my mistakes on purpose just not to make me feel I have power over them. I was not accepted to advance further in leadership positions by both males and females due to gender norms. Whenever I tried to initiate activities, he was perceived as a careless student who is not focused on her studies. I tried to organize a trip for students once, but I was accused that my purpose is matchmaking for myself and my friends. I tried to join university wide activities instead rather than faculty to move away from these stereotypes.”

These experiences impeded their self-esteem, motivational levels and stereotypical perceptions. These capabilities are essential for achieving gender equality in higher education academically and form a gender-inclusive culture.

Any discrimination would directly impact on women's self-confidence and self-esteem. Motivational levels are affected as women have to work harder to overcome the barriers and to achieve the same equal ends that of men.

Capability analysis of educational equality highlights the challenges faced by women in educational achievements, due to sexist behaviour, sexual harassment, gender differences in expectations and encouragement, a men-dominated class atmosphere, etc. (Robeyns 2003). The stereotyping exacerbates depending on the field as discussed but also depending on the geographical location particularly in rural areas and away from the capital. The gender norms and conservatism drastically increase in Upper Egypt. Leila from Luxor recounted her experience.

"As most women in Luxor, I attended a gender segregated school. After that my parents preferred that I also join Azhar university (religious gender segregated university). Thus, I did not deal with male colleagues till after higher education. I had problems communicating with other men due to lack of interaction. I was very timid and shy. The educational segregation and conservative society negatively affected my voice and confidence."

Even when they try and exercise their agency to still pursue opportunities and face the societal challenges they face another obstacle. Amira continues to say

"During university I also had a major role to play helping my mother besides studying. My brothers didn't have the same house chores. The university was not really relevant or resourceful in terms of English language acquisition, so I used to try to use online resources, interacting with foreigners and etc. Many of the women in upper Egypt struggle to find external resources and some don't even have proper internet connection. I hope that women are given accessibility to self-improvement tools."

The stereotype threat term suggests that women in higher education who are cognizant of negative stereotypes about their gender may experience anxiety

and decreased performance in academic settings contributing to lower retention rates and achievement levels (Goff et al., 2008). Upper Egypt suffers from the lowest female enrolment rates not only due to having the poorest areas in the country but also due to being considered socially and culturally to be more conservative and protective toward women (Megahed, 2010). Rania from Upper Egypt said

“In upper Egypt there is no interaction between men and women, very conservative to the extent if the benches of females are full and there are only places in benches of males at a lecture, I would feel obliged to leave and not attend”

The stereotyping and gender norms are embedded in the Egyptian higher education system even at leadership positions leaving the female students with an unequal educational experience while they can see leadership positions disproportionately filled by men and within their universities, they have never seen a female president which is crucial to show young women that success can be theirs too. In Egypt, there has been only one-woman public university president appointed in 2009. In addition, 20% of full professors are females, even though 60% of those occupying entry level junior faculty positions are females (El-Badri 2013). This calls for updated policies to ensure inclusive recruitment and appointments process.

Social and cultural discrimination negatively affected the experience and psychology of women. In some conservative communities, women are not supposed to come home late or go out daily or interact with male colleagues. Thus, they would accuse women who pursue higher education as ones who “lost the path of honour”. Rania from Aswan said

“My extended family are not used to a woman leaving Aswan. The community used to say that I lost the path of honour and manners and that I became misbehaved girl.”

It was the same case of Maha who is originally from Nuba but went to a university in Cairo

“Sometimes I had to stay late due to assignments or classwork, but my family disapproved and told me that I am bringing shame to our family. Community members used to question if I am actually at university and even question the way I am dressed. I fought these perceptions as I believed in myself and in my dreams. Now I learned to stand up for myself I learned to create my own safety network and seek to support.”

Women developed the ability to challenge gender inequalities, including inequitable gender norms and the misrecognition of girls' abilities, which exists in their families, communities and education institutes. These forms of discrimination are barriers to achieving functionalities desired by women. Theoretically, they might have equal access to the necessary means to achieve the ends, but empirically they fall short in reaching the ends they have a reason to value (Kabeer, 1999).

Sexual harassment was a prevalent theme with many of the interviewees and had a significant effect on their higher education experience. Sexual harassment occurred inside the university from professors and peers or during the commute to and from the university.

Lamis encountered a sexual harassment incident with a well-known professor in her university

“A well-known professor started joking with me in an unacceptable way I considered it verbal harassment and tried to avoid him but one time I had to go to his office to inquire about an assignment and he tried touching me. I reported it to the university and told my peers. He claimed that I was a liar. Unfortunately, most people believed him, and case was closed because it was his word against mine”

Others suffered from sexual harassment commuting to universities or from male colleagues. Long commuting hours in public transportation increased the probability of sexual harassment. It is a prevailing problem in Egypt in general

were 99.3% of Egyptian women reported to have been harassed at least once in their lives (UN women, 2013). Public transportation, which is the main way of commuting for most Egyptians, is one of the hotspots of sexual harassment in Egypt. Sexual harassment negatively impacts women's capabilities, functioning and agency confined by gender-based restrictions. It changed their perception of their safety in public space, and restricts their movement and mobility, which consequently affects their right to education and work. It deprives women of a range of capabilities including leading lives free of violence, having emotional well-being, being physically mobile, seeking educational opportunities(Günseli et al, 2022). Around 10 percent of Egyptian women finds that harassment has a direct impact on their productivity including lack of concentration, failing to recall study material and a widespread sense of insecurity (Abdalla, 2016).

Jihan shared a shocking incident

"I was subject to sexual harassment on the train and the transportation at first, I was too naïve to understand what was happening but then the train experience became a series of horrific incidents of touching and grabbing certain body parts especially during the highly crowded moments of getting in and out of the train. I developed a phobia and till today I can't ride a train. I couldn't tell my parents as we come from conservative rural family where these topics are not to be discussed and was afraid that it would affect the continuation of my studies. I became very aware of such matters and the importance of safe space."

The sexual harassment was not only from professors or during the commute but from colleagues too. Maha stated

"I avoided being alone with male professors or colleagues. I experienced sexual harassment from older students I just screamed so he left. I regret that didn't file a complaint because I was young and scared but now, I am different I grew and have a voice. Later in university, I tried to be part of a group for SGBV supporting women in the university, but it didn't receive enough

support and still women were afraid to report their cases fearing of retaliation or from their reputation and families' reactions."

Maha used her agency to try to change the situation through community groups, but still structural gender norms prevailed. There is a need for stronger Gender-responsive policies and practices (Wattanaporn & Holtfreter, 2014). These unsafe environments, inside and around universities, reduce women's capabilities, particularly physical capability of living free from violence.

Thus, in the context of higher education, centring women is essential by prioritizing their needs, experiences, and perspectives in all aspects of the academic environment including gender responsive policies and practices, curriculum and pedagogy, support services, diversity, equity, and inclusion culture, and research and scholarship opportunities (Wattanaporn & Holtfreter, 2014). Equity for women in higher education helps break down gender barriers and promote gender equality, increases diversity by enriching the educational experience for everyone, promotes economic growth by providing better employment opportunities, and addresses systemic gender inequalities (Johnson, 2023). A capability-informed gender equality ought to transform social structures, confinements, and institutions to empower women to achieve their interests and aspirations (Cin et al, 2020).

In conclusion the higher education experience and its constraints or conversion factors had a significant effect on women's lives enabling the development of further capabilities and sufficient agency for the women to exercise what they value. Women had to work towards building their capabilities for self-confidence, believing in themselves, and expanding their agency. It prepared them for the journey post higher education becoming stronger, more resilient to face the next chapter.

6.3 Women's Navigational Agency in Higher Education Spaces

Navigating higher education as a woman in Egypt requires a dynamic interplay of resilience, negotiation, and adaptation in response to structural and cultural constraints. The experiences of women in this study reveal how they exercised navigational agency to challenge gendered expectations, access education, and carve out spaces for personal and professional growth. Their journeys illustrate the multifaceted ways in which women manoeuvre through, exit, reform, and create social practices within the educational system, as conceptualized by Claassen (2017).

One of the key manifestations of navigational agency in higher education is women's strategic negotiation of geographical mobility. Many participants faced resistance from their families when pursuing education away from home, highlighting the tension between aspirations and restrictive gender norms. Farida, for instance, described her struggle with mobility restrictions:

"It was a challenge if I needed to stay late for a project or assignment as my parents didn't agree, and I had to arrive and leave in daylight."

Despite these constraints, women like Farida navigated restrictive familial expectations by framing their choices within broader personal growth objectives, ultimately reinforcing their right to autonomous decision-making. However, entry into higher education was only the first step retention posed further challenges. Exit from higher education, whether due to personal, familial, or financial pressures, was a risk many women navigated. Amira, as the eldest daughter, had to balance multiple responsibilities, which at times jeopardized her ability to stay enrolled. Similarly, Rania, who took on maternal responsibilities after losing her mother, faced educational disruptions. These cases highlight how exit from higher education is not always an act of free choice but often a constrained decision shaped by gendered expectations.

Gender norms significantly shaped women's access to higher education and their ability to participate fully in academic life. Several participants recounted

experiences of stereotyping, particularly in male-dominated fields like STEM. Hadia, an engineer, explained her efforts to challenge the exclusion of women from practical work:

“I tried to change the exclusion of women from practical work, but many girls would simply give up due to the resistance to change. I joined architecture, as all girls are strongly discouraged—almost not allowed—to join construction or mechanical engineering. Site workers don’t deal with women engineers as they do with men. They don’t respect or take me seriously.”

By entering male-dominated fields, women like Hadia not only pursued their aspirations but also actively challenged gendered perceptions of professional suitability. Beyond individual perseverance, some women sought to reform societal norms and create new opportunities for themselves and others.

Another significant barrier was exclusion from leadership opportunities and extracurricular activities, where male dominance often created an unwelcoming environment for women. Several participants noted that even when women were allowed to engage, their voices were marginalized. The mention of forming alliances with other women and mentors highlights the importance of support networks in helping women navigate academic spaces. Amira, for instance, recounted the difficulty of asserting herself in student governance, where men were presumed to be natural leaders. However, she developed strategies to navigate these spaces, including forming alliances with other women and mentors who supported her participation. Her experience reflects how navigational agency extends beyond individual perseverance to include collective efforts to alter existing power dynamics within educational institutions.

Women in higher education frequently encountered conflicts that required negotiation, whether with families, communities, or institutional structures. Amal, a STEM graduate, emphasized the need for institutional support for women in male-dominated fields:

“Given the disadvantaged conditions for women studying STEM, I think it is necessary to ensure more research opportunities, access to laboratories, and science scholarships. I got a scholarship to study in the UK, which gave me the opportunity to advance my studies and career. I wish similar ones existed in Egypt. Now, due to my higher education and postgraduate studies, I have a voice, and I speak at national and international events and conferences.”

Amal’s experience illustrates how women strategically navigate academic and career choices, balancing family expectations while asserting their educational and professional goals. Her journey underscores how women negotiate between different spaces balancing the structured expectations of home life with the more open and academically challenging environments of universities, both locally and abroad. Conflict resolution in this context is not merely about individual perseverance but also about advocating for systemic change that supports women’s ambitions.

Sexual harassment emerged as a critical challenge, affecting women’s sense of safety and freedom within higher education. Many participants reported experiencing or witnessing harassment, which significantly influenced their daily navigation of campus spaces. Some women avoided disclosing harassment to their families, fearing that it would lead to restrictions on their education or force them to withdraw from university altogether. However, some women engaged in reformatory navigational agency by advocating for institutional change, such as pressing for stricter policies against harassment and forming student-led initiatives to raise awareness. Silence or selective disclosure became a coping strategy for some women, allowing them to maintain their access to higher education while silently enduring the emotional toll of balancing contrasting cultural expectations between home and university life. This demonstrates how conflict resolution extends beyond individual agency to broader institutional reform efforts.

Women’s navigational agency also manifested in their creation of new spaces for themselves within higher education. Educational institutions, through their

systems, professors, and peers, often reproduce social gender barriers. As in the study by Tourne et al. (2024), educational institutes often impose subtle barriers to entry and exit, limiting students' freedom to shape their educational paths. This dynamic is further complicated for women, particularly in conservative settings, where educational decisions are often influenced by family and community values. While women may aspire to enter specific fields of study or achieve certain academic milestones, the practical realities of navigating through patriarchal expectations and limited educational opportunities can constrain these ambitions.

Through the lens of navigational agency, the educational journeys of these Egyptian women illustrate how they not only participate in education but actively navigate social practices to create opportunities, resolve conflicts, reform limiting structures, and achieve their aspirations. Navigational agency, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for understanding how women in Egypt negotiate the complex terrain of family, societal expectations, and educational aspirations, ultimately allowing them to transcend barriers and redefine their paths in higher education.

By understanding these complex processes, policymakers and educators can better support women's higher education journeys, ensuring that they not only access education but also fully exercise their capabilities within and beyond academic institutions. Having examined the systemic barriers women face in balancing education and familial roles, the next chapter turns to their pathways to employment where disparities persist despite educational gains, necessitating a closer analysis of labour market dynamics and gendered constraints.

7. Pathways To Employment

The expansion of higher education enrolments leads to changes in the supply side of the labour market, providing a highly educated workforce to the economy. The construction of a local university has positive longer-term implications for labour market outcomes, particularly strong for women (Elsayed & Shirshikova, 2023). Thus, policy agendas in higher education reshape the labour market. Nevertheless, the expansion of higher education does not necessarily lead to greater equality in the labour market. In Egypt, with a population of more than 110 million and an estimated labour force of 26 million, women represent only 15 percent, and the women's participation in the labour force has been decreasing (CAPMAS, 2021). Accordingly, although Egyptian women are getting more opportunities to attend higher education with increased educational attainment and decrease in the gender gap in education, this progress is not reflected on the job market or into favourable employment conditions for women as expected. Research shows that the expansion and enhancement of female education has reflected an increase in female labour force participation in the developed world, unlike women in developing countries who were unable to follow this trajectory (El Assiouty, 2022). This paradox is worth highlighting and studying because if the large gains in educational attainment among women have not been matched with gains in the workplace, then the whole country is at great loss. While the unemployment rate in Egypt is higher than the world average for both males and females, the increase in female unemployment in Egypt is significant in comparison to national male averages and world averages for females (Nazier, 2019). Studies have attempted to tackle the reasons behind this paradox. From the supply side, factors including fertility, marriage, and wages were identified (Zeitoun, 2018). From the demand side, factors include the decline of public-sector hiring, which is preferred by women (Barsoum, 2016), an unaccommodating private sector that is unable to absorb the increasing number of educated women or meet their expectations (Barsoum, 2010; Assaad & El Hamidi, 2009) and lack of part time employment opportunities (El Ashmawy, 2016). Nonetheless, there is a deep need to hear from the women themselves, in their own voices, to

document the challenges educated women face as they venture into the labour market.

Despite this paradox, education still has a powerful influence on women's labour market pathways in Egypt; higher female education levels result in greater presence in the work force and higher competitiveness. Women are found to benefit more than men from higher education in terms of improving their labour market outcomes which reduces the gender gap in the labour market (Abdel Mowla, 2009). In this chapter I will examine three main themes that emerged during the interviews; firstly, stereotyping and gender norms in the labour market; secondly, the gender pay gap and glass ceiling and finally, the navigational agency mobilised and utilised by women to overcome obstacles and pursue what they value. Rather than comparing participants' employment outcomes, this chapter examines what their narratives reveal about the broader enablers and constraints that affect women's ability to convert educational attainment into meaningful work and agency in the labour market.

7.1 Stereotyping and gender norms in the labour market

Social norms are a crucial driver of various gender outcomes, including differential economic participation. Social norms together with challenging labour market conditions discourage women from investing in human capital or participating in the labour force (El Assiouty, 2022). The socialization hypothesis argues that individuals are socialized into gender roles and expectations from a very young age. Thus, in some societies women are socialized to prioritize housework, caretaking, and nurturing roles, which creates extra pressure and difficulties to balance academic, work and personal responsibilities (Grusec & Hastings, 2014; Stockard, 2006).

Three interrelated aspects are discussed in the section; firstly, the difficulties some women face to find a job and accessing the labour market; secondly, the "neighbourhood pressure" effect focusing on the judgment women face by their

community, employers and end up internalising, finally, how women are devalued in the workplace.

7.1.1 Joining the labour market and finding a job

The point of insertion to the labour market is the point of highest unemployment in Egypt (Assaad, 2010). Most of the interviewees admitted that higher education improved their job-searching skills, identifying opportunities, and having better communication skills during interviews, thus securing decent jobs more easily than their counterparts who didn't pursue higher education. However, many challenges still exist. One of the reasons for the job scarcity is the mismatch between their studies and the needs of the job market as women in Egypt are more likely to graduate from higher education specialisations that are theoretical, align with gender norms and have little relevance to the needs of the labour market (Krafft et al., 2019). The problem often lies in finding a suitable job, especially since non-public sector work conditions often fail to accommodate the responsibilities of women. Sherin highlighted by saying

"I tried to hide the fact that I am married during the job interview. I knew that private companies prefer single females fearing that married women will need to abide by the working hours and leaves to accommodate their family needs."

Due to limited options, women lose their bargaining power and find themselves accepting whatever is offered in terms of salary and position out of desperation.

"When I first started working it was difficult to find a job that suited me, and I know it is a very competitive market particularly for females. I was inexperienced and naïve. I accepted whatever the employer offered fearing of being unemployed"

We cannot homogenize the case for all of Egypt. For females in other governorates outside greater Cairo, the job opportunities diminish, the "neighbourhood pressure" intensifies, the restrictions on females increase and

the list of “prohibited” fields expands. In Upper Egypt, which is considered the most culturally conservative region of the country, young women’s mobility, education attainment, economic opportunity, access to friends and participation in the public sphere are significantly limited (Baldwin, 2011; Sieverding & Elbadawy, 2016). Amira from Upper Egypt recounted

“Work opportunities for females in Upper Egypt are very limited. It took me a long time to find a suitable job that I also like, and it was in the tourism sector so I could also improve my English language. My family was very discouraging as they thought it was against cultural norms to be dealing with foreigners, and it is a male dominated sector. I was ashamed even by my friends. My uncle was able to convince them that he will take care of me as he works in the same sector. I was still suffering from societal pressure to either finding an online job, become a teacher, or get married. I applied for my master’s and I am very proud that I got a scholarship program in the UK.”

Amira’s story not only highlights the societal pressures women face but also underscores their resilience and the ways they exercise their navigational agency to pursue educational and professional opportunities despite these challenges.

From the lens of the CA, the ability to access decent employment opportunities is a key functioning that women seek to achieve. According to Robeyns (2003), mobility has a central value as a capability because it directly influences the achievement of other functionings, such as paid work, education, and political empowerment. For many women in rural areas, the lack of access to transportation and the cultural restrictions on mobility limit their ability to engage fully with the labour market, effectively constraining their agency (Solotaroff et al., 2017).

Furthermore, the limitations imposed by social norms, particularly in conservative regions like Upper Egypt, highlight how conversion factors, such as cultural expectations and family obligations, impact women's ability to transform their

educational achievements into labour market success. As Sen (1999) emphasized, capabilities are not just about having access to resources but also about the freedom to convert those resources into valued functionings. Thus, education often serves as both an enabler and a constraint. On the one hand, higher education expands their capabilities by enhancing their skills, knowledge, and confidence. On the other hand, the socio-economic and cultural environment may limit their ability to convert these educational gains into meaningful employment.

To overcome these barriers, some women seek employment in the public sector, which offers more favourable working conditions, including maternity leave and flexible hours, compared to the private sector. The public sector, therefore, acts as a conversion factor that enables women to participate in the labour market without sacrificing their family responsibilities (Barsoum, 2017). However, the public sector is also limited in its capacity to absorb the growing number of women entering the labour market, which adds to the precariousness of female employment in Egypt.

7.1.2 Community, family and internalisation of gender norms and pressure

After entering the labour market, women often encounter various forms of discrimination. A growing body of research has examined the “neighbourhood effect” or “social pressure,” focusing on how local social characteristics and perceptions shape individual behaviour (Dietz, 2002; Young & Montazer, 2018). In such contexts, women frequently struggle to exercise agency, illustrating how environmental norms and structural factors influence their capacity to act. These dynamics demonstrate that community-level social characteristics significantly shape women’s behaviour and ability to assume agency (Erman & Türkyilmaz, 2008; Auchynnikava et al., 2024). They strive to hold onto their agency to improve their lives despite the effect of the community, family and even the internalisation of these perceptions.

In Egypt, the general perception is that women are wives and mothers first and then work comes second so they start carrying out their household duties after their workday unlike men (Al Sharq Al Awsat, 2014). I will start with the testimonials of single women, then wives and mothers. Leila, a single engineer, stated

“My family always stressed that my priority should not be work but to get married and have kids. Work and career should always come second. Actually, they discourage me from investing too much time at work fearing it will hinder me from getting married. Despite being successful in my career, my family, and society make me feel that my success is incomplete and insignificant without marriage and kids.”

Social and cultural stereotypes are conversion factors limiting the expansion of capabilities in the form of reduced self-confidence and ambition (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Even if educational achievements encourage women's participation in the labour market, the cultural norms particularly the embedded patriarchy may explain women's low participation rate in the labour force. The society greatly limits single women choices by controlling where they go, when they go out, and with who they interact to protect her reputation. Gender norms related to women's reputations and family honour limit their freedoms. Rania, who is originally from Upper Egypt, stated

“Due to limited opportunities in my home city, I decided to pursue career opportunities in Cairo. My family wanted me to stay with my aunts in Cairo, but they were judgmental and controlling. As a compromise, my parents agreed that I rent an apartment near my aunts so that they can tell the community that I don't live alone. Finding an apartment as a solo female was so hard. The doorman used to tell neighbours that I am married but my husband is traveling to “protect my reputation”. Females who live alone in Egypt suffer greatly in terms of safety, reputation, rumours, and perception.”

Females in conservative communities and societies are constantly subject to judgment and convictions. They must limit their basic choices and freedoms to satisfy people around them including their families and to fit a mould created by unjustified norms. Nora, a single working female voiced

“In my community in Upper Egypt, I am not a “marriage material” due to my work especially in the field of renewable energy. I was told my success and capabilities would make men “feel less of a man”. Also dealing with male colleagues at work is not acceptable in my community. The only men who accepted my work were greedy ones wanting my salary. Life become harder after my father died as my mother and I had to deal as women only in a masculine society. I feel that being strong intimidates them.”

Maha stated the exact same thing regarding women’s employment and careers being repellent for many Egyptian men who might be intimidated by the success and strength of women.

“I come from the conservative Nubian culture; I didn’t get married because men in my community don’t want to be involved with someone that are career oriented.”

Parents, husbands, and community might see education and employment as a tool for women to rebel against the cultural norms. Maha continues that one of the reasons the society don’t consider career oriented females as ‘marriage material’ is the obedience factor.

“Whenever I try to discuss or object, I am not as obedient as they wish, they blame themselves they “allowed” me to go to university and work.”

Wives and mothers in Egypt spend 22.4% of their day on unpaid domestic and care work while males spent only 2.4%. Accordingly, working females are overburdened with household chores, children care and even caring for their younger siblings and elderly parents (World Development Indicators, 2015).

Norms reproduce women's heavy domestic workload where girls mirror their mothers' responsibilities. Amira, 27 years-old from Upper Egypt, revealed

"My mother, main supporter, died from COVID followed by my uncle. I was the oldest female in the family with 3 younger siblings thus the culture dictates that I must play my mother's role. I had to refuse a job in Cairo to stay in Luxor and be at home most of the time and be responsible for the house chores like cooking, cleaning and taking care of my siblings and their studies. However, few years after, my siblings were older, and I felt I need to focus on my future career as an English language teacher. So, I applied for a scholarship and was able to convince my father to travel to do my masters."

Gender values and norms in patriarchal societies like Egypt dictate that a woman is the primary caregiver and the one responsible for unpaid housework, while men serve as the main breadwinners. A study showed that 45% of respondents think that Egyptian women are unable to balance between paid work and unpaid household and care work (Nazier, 2019). Research shows that being married and having children significantly decreases the probability of having paid employment for women, but has no effect on men (Gunewardena, 2015). In Egypt, marriage decreases the probability of working for women by 16 percent and of private wage work by 40 percent (Assaad, 2017). Women might see marriage as their ticket to be freed from their father's control, but it often is simply a transition into the control of another male figure, their husbands, decreasing their agency as a junior female among the women in the husband's extended family (Kabeer 2001). Sherin, a working mother, stated

"My husband told me if you want to work it is your choice however it shouldn't not affect your responsibility towards me, the house and the kids."

His choice of not being involved in childcare constrains her capabilities for leisure, work, education, and economic functioning. Thus, we find that women's labour

force participation rates are lowest in their prime working years which coincide with the time when women start marrying, giving birth, and raising children particularly in, geographical areas with strict gender norms and female seclusion (Kabeer, 2018). The social and gendered division of labour reproduces the feminization of childcare leading motherhood and childbearing to have a negative effect on women's ability to generate income, career prospects and financial security after retirement (Baxter, 2013). Amal, a working mother, says

"I am blamed and ashamed by my community who perceive me as a bad wife and mother. Because I work full time, they think that I don't care of my son. I take care of his studies, sports, and hobbies perhaps even more of some staying home mums. I try to keep a good work life and family balance, but the society is not giving me a break. I decided to neglect all these comments".

This unfair division of paid and unpaid work within their households is influenced by both social structures, and social and cultural norms (Robeyns, 2003). It has been argued that women endure higher levels of work-related stress because they are more often responsible for domestic work (Phipps & Burton, 2001). It causes working mothers to enjoy fewer leisure capabilities. The constraints on choice of capabilities should not be structured according to gender. In other words, the 'pay-offs' of the different choices in the capability set should not be gender-biased (Robeyns, 2007). Thus, actually women are not in a position to make real choices as per the CA. The choices of men constrain those of women (Giullari & Lewis, 2005). It is evident in the case of Heba, a teacher and mother from Sinai,

"I am always overburdened, feeling I am working multiple jobs especially when I was working as a teacher in the valleys outside the city as I must start the commute since 4 am and return not before 4pm. After this long day, I return and must cook, clean the house and do house chores. After I gave birth, this was impossible, so I requested to be moved to a school nearby. I took 4-month maternity and then had to enrol my son in childcare. Still things are

not easy as I am managing the house, errands, work, baby, and husband. I feel I am running in circles. My husband doesn't help at all especially that he works a second job in the evening to support the family."

Perhaps Heba did not face gendered discrimination from the employer as it is a female dominated field that fits the community gender stereotype. Others suffer from similar norms and social norms.

Policy changes are essential and have been mentioned by interviewees to negate the societal pressure. Policies include access to more affordable childcare services of an acceptable quality, more opportunities for family-friendly jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities for women. Also, providing parental leave policies, equal pay policies and policies are important. Farida suggested

"I wish firm in Egypt would implement incentives to hire women or at least be egalitarian in terms of hiring men and women. The government can bear some of the maternity leave cost to encourage firms. Paternity leaves will also make firms feel they're bearing the same cost for men as women."

Also, Heba stressed on the importance of publicly subsidized childcare as it greatly supported her.

"Luckily, south Sinai is one of the few governorates where the childcare is available for small fees starting 4 months and with good quality unlike all other governorates where most of the childcare are private and expensive or not of good quality. This was a major support factor for me to continue working."

For other childcare cost, time and availability was a real challenge. Sherin emphasized

"Nursery is so expensive costing around three quarters of my salary. Also, it was time consuming to drop off my son before work

and pick him up. Besides, I am always worried about him there because he was so young. I wish there was a nursery at work with discounted price.”

Sherin continues to explain that while many women might depend on family support for childcare, but it is not a sustainable solution

“I used to leave my child with my mum until he was 1 year old. It took a long time and effort as I had to drop him off at her place before work and then pick him up after work. Later, he joined a daycare which was about 40% from my salary. If you have multiple kids, then working won’t make sense as you will be spending all your salary on daycares”.

Policies should address the fact that most employers don’t offer any solution for the childcare challenge as it will cause further financial burden. Even maternity leave raises the cost of female labour and discourages employers from hiring or retaining female employees after marriage. When women return from maternity leave, employers assume she won’t be as committed and focused. Amal faced a shocking incident

“I was a top achiever in the team in a private company but when I got back from my maternity leave, and they asked me to resign due to downsizing and laying off many employees. Being a top achiever I should have been the first one to be considered to stay but because a new mother I was actually on the top of the list to let go.”

Amal’s experience highlights the pervasive discrimination against working mothers, where being a new mother overshadowed her professional achievements and led to her unjust dismissal.

Thus, women’s access to higher education and employment in Egypt is still heavily constrained by societal norms, gender roles, and a lack of institutional support. Policy changes, such as affordable childcare, equitable hiring practices, and workplace flexibility, are essential to ensuring that women can fully exercise

their capabilities and pursue meaningful careers without being hindered by traditional expectations or family responsibilities.

7.1.3 Feminization and masculinization of labour market

Moreover, the gender norms not only dictate women regarding marriage, division of work, and childcare but also it interferes with the freedom to choose the field of work and type of employers. Markets reflect societies gender norms and are as cultural as any other aspect of social life with values being central part of their constitution and functioning (Spillman 2012). The segregation of fields based on gender is a true challenge for women. Women in Egypt face many restrictions working in certain fields particularly STEM related jobs or jobs that require travel, extended working hours and much interaction with males. Again, this is strongly related to the gender norms and roles, marriage, and reputation of the women. Some laws in Egypt are still biased against women by having restrictions on women working in certain fields such as mining, construction, manufacturing, energy, water, agriculture, and transportation sectors that are believed to be dangerous, difficult, or harmful for women (Nazier, 2019). Obvious challenges exist might exist in engineering, science, and medicine fields as we have discussed in the previous chapter. However, here we tap into different fields and experiences that are missing from literature and thus women's challenges in these fields are often omitted.

Manar's story is a manifestation of the effect of gendered perceptions of employers and masculinization of fields. Manar who works in the field of cinematography stated that female who works in this field in Egypt are stereotyped and ashamed.

"I work in Cinematography as assistant director, and it is my true passion to produce and direct my own work in the future. Unfortunately, the community perceive me as doing something against the cultural norms and the female who work in this field are not "Well behaved" or "have a bad reputation. This is due to my extended working hours at night and interaction with males and

actors. Society thinks that all people in this fields and drug addicts and alcoholic and have sexual relations or favors.”

Manar is not only facing discrimination from the society but within the field itself she is suffering from another fight

“Producers and directors don’t prefer to hire females fearing that they would ask for different working hours. Also, I am veiled which is a huge barrier in this field. I was not accepted several times because of my veil. Moreover, I was discriminated against also because I’m petite so they would me feel that my physical powers and efforts won’t be the same as a male. Why can’t they assess my skills and work only!”

Due to this perception, many directors refused to teach her and prefer to invest their time with male colleagues. They believe they would be more accommodating to the late and extended working hours and will not be distracted or take leaves in case of marriage and childcare.

“A male colleague and I were working as assistants’ director for a movie. My colleague was not as committed, so I was doing most of the work and exerted much more time and effort. After, I was shocked to know that the director chose him for his next movie and didn’t ask me. I called the director to ask for an explanation and he explicitly said the reason is that I am a female and I live in a different governorate.”

Restrictions on women’s physical mobility make them less attractive as potential employees. Likewise, women who possess the needed qualifications for a job, but need their husbands’ or father’s consent to work, are deemed less reliable, even if more qualified than male colleagues (Boudet, Petesch & Turk 2013). Despite all these challenges, Manar is still fighting to pursue her dream. She thinks that exercising her agency helps her discover herself and expand her capabilities.

“I know that it is a tough career especially for a woman. It has no stable income, no long-term contracts as it is project based, no medical insurance and most importantly no room for filing complaints. However, I just can’t give up on my dream.”

The cultural norms and male dominated society embedded this superiority mentality in the mind of men and start to be internationalized in the mind of women too. A woman needs a “male” permission, a father or husband, to study or work. Sometimes to be “marriage material” they give up their rights and agency. If they choose to work, they are subject to demining comments or jokes from male colleagues such as “your place is at home not at work” or if they are single and want to leave early, they are told “you have nothing important to go to”. Amina who was forced by her parents to choose a university and faculty she did not want and then she married a man who did not agree that she works.

“I didn’t find many work opportunities except being a teacher which was not my passion. Soon after, I met my husband who wanted me to be a stay-at-home housewife, and I agreed. I believe this is the case for most of the Egyptian men unless they want their wives to contribute financially. Currently, my kids are older, and I am thinking of starting a home business in catering since I discovered that I love cooking.”

Women ought to be free to choose to stay home if this is what they truly value and freely chose and not imposed by anyone or forced into it.

7.1.4 Women being less valued in the workplace

As seen in the case of Manar, the “neighbourhood pressure” leads that women are less valued in the workplace. Women face inferior career opportunities due to gender norms and discrimination in the labour market. They are forced to be socialized into gender identities that make them accommodate the wishes and needs of their parents, husbands and society. While they work hard to mobilise their agency to play multiple roles to work towards achieving the things they value, society pressures them further, doubting they can multitask successfully,

and speculating that they must drop the ball by be negligent either towards their family or their work. Hoda, a mother working at a bank, recounted

“In the banking sector, women are perceived not as productive as men. I feel always had work extra time and exert extra effort just to prove otherwise. My male peers and supervisors’ stereotype that working mothers are distracted and not focused due to their kids and other responsibilities. They already drew a certain image in their mind, and I must walk the extra mile to change it.”

Similarly, it is preferable to have male journalists due to the working hours and travel and unplanned events which require great flexibility. Jihan described the situation for her as a female from sub-urban or rural area.

“It is a difficult field with a high nepotism. Coming from a village in Banha, a rural area, my parents were against my work in journalism. The community and neighbours always trying to make me feel ashamed about constantly travelling alone as a female for work and working at night. I didn’t get married till now as no male from my community accepts these work conditions. Unfortunately, there is no work opportunities in journalism in Banha, so I am forced to travel to Cairo.”

These narratives demonstrate how women’s contributions are devalued and their intellectual input often dismissed, negatively affecting the expansion of their capabilities. Women receive lower returns to experience compared to men, with mothers being particularly vulnerable due to childcare responsibilities and career interruptions. The undervaluation of women’s work is a key thread linking occupational segregation, discrimination, and the unequal distribution of family responsibilities major drivers of the gender pay gap (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2007). Rigid workplace structures and the lack of flexible, supportive policies push many mothers to reduce their labour market participation or exit entirely, thereby reinforcing the undervaluation of their contributions and compounding long-term inequalities (Ishizuka & Musick, 2021). This implicit bias results in women’s

talents and capabilities being underestimated, underutilized, and insufficiently mobilised in the workforce.

Employers already have this pre-existing idea that working mothers are not committed and will be a burden. Also, it is a way to hinder women's upward mobility by highlighting that they are not overachievers or not willing to go the extra mile for the sake of work due to their personal obligations. Sherin pointed out

"My work sometimes offers career development in the weekend or after working hours and when I refuse due to marriage and children's obligations, employers say well women ask for equality and you are getting equal pay and men employees are not refusing."

Women are always in the psychological struggle and guilt to achieve the work family balance. There is evidence of women's moral capabilities to perceive their children's needs and sacrifice their own interests in favour of others (Anchiz, 2010). They try to find favourable working conditions instead of leaving the labour market. Farida said

"Maternity leave is too short. Most private sector firms would want women to resign after they give birth. I actually had to resign after partially because of giving birth and also due to my husband getting a job opportunity abroad and I had to move with him. Per my contract, I couldn't work remotely. Currently, I do consultancy work from home. I had to change my type of contract to accommodate my children of course not favourably. My mother and my mother-in-law work and they are usually the ones who take care of their grandchildren. During COVID, working from home and having flexible working hours was a perfect arrangement."

Farida's experience illustrates how many women are forced to compromise their career progression and adapt to less favourable work arrangements in order to balance family responsibilities, often sacrificing long-term professional growth.

The lack of structural support for working mothers and the pervasive bias against them in the workplace severely limits their ability to thrive professionally, perpetuating gender inequalities and undermining the expansion of women's capabilities in the workforce.

7.2 Gender pay gap and glass ceiling

As discussed above, the gender norms segregate jobs, pushing women into a smaller, more overcrowded, lower paid and technologically stagnant segment (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2007). Differential pay and glass ceiling are worldwide phenomena. Women get lower returns for their labour compared with males and are limited to more constrained range of economic functioning (Kabeer, 2018). The glass ceiling describes the invisible obstacles to women's career development and impeding access to promotions (Moorosi, 2010). The gender wage or pay gap, the differences in wages between genders for comparable works, is significant in Egypt. Women are often forced into certain careers and jobs that hinder their voice, agency, and ability to bargain fairly, accepting whatever jobs and salaries offered, particularly with increasing responsibilities for household welfare and childcare (Kabeer 2008). Hoda said:

“One of the main challenges I face in the labour market is negotiating for a good salary because. I always feel I am underpaid. Females are always expected not to negotiate. Employers make me feel I should be grateful for whatever is being offered, and others dream to get this job.”

The ILO (2024) report shows that despite similar qualifications, women in Egypt consistently earn less than men due to discrimination, limited mobility, and occupational segregation, especially in the private sector,. The gap widens with age as caregiving responsibilities disrupt career progression, and women remain underrepresented in higher-paying roles. This is exacerbated by the fact that women are less likely to negotiate for a higher wage than men; thus, employers perceive that women signal a willingness to work for less. Even when women negotiate, they tend to obtain lower monetary returns from negotiation suggesting

that systemic biases, not individual negotiation behaviour, drive much of the disparity (Recalde & Vesterlund, 2023). They are expected to derive greater satisfaction from their work or to have lower expectations of rewards from work (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2007). Hadia recounted

“In my team at work, men get higher salaries than myself and other female colleagues. I asked the male supervisor for an explanation. He said that the male colleagues work harder, for extended hours, on weekends and show more flexibility. When we started objecting as we abide by the official working hours it is unfair to discriminate based on their willingness to stay after working hours. The supervisor said if we don’t agree with this policy we could leave and since it is a private company our contracts are not fixed anyway. He also questioned the reason we request salary increase as single females we don’t have responsibility and even if we are married our husbands are supporting financially.”

Expanding women’s agency and opportunities in terms of higher and fair salaries, job opportunities, hearing and channelling their voices, better accommodating working conditions and bargaining power in their existing jobs, is essential in building and growing their capabilities for waged work (Kabeer, 2018). Hoda further explains

“I am underpaid compared to my colleagues and my raises and promotions are delayed due to gender related matters such as maternity leaves or leaves for childcare or family matters. I communicated my frustration that I feel that I am punished for gendered related matters. However, there was no change especially that it is a private company. When I come back from my maternity leave, it was my appraisal time, and I was shocked that my manager decided to decrease my bonus by 20% despite being one of the top performers in the bank prior to my pregnancy. His argument was that I only worked three quarter of the year and the

rest I was on leave so how come he would equate my bonus with colleagues who worked the whole year.”

These gender work norms create organizational barriers in the form of “think manager think male” stereotype and discriminatory corporate policies that lower women self-confidence and intensify work-family conflict while negatively affecting women’s agency and aspiration for promotions and managerial positions (Taparia & Lenka, 2022). Women must overcome many conversion factors and obstacles to aspire for leadership roles or achieve upward mobility. Nora unfortunately experienced the following.

“I was doing a great job in my work for several years. A male was just hired within my team with less experience and knowledge. I am actually the one who trained him. I was shocked and surprised that after a short period he was promoted over me. I tried to question how come I was not considered for the promotion but I didn’t receive any logical answer so I submitted my resignation as I couldn’t work in such a biased environment and workplace.”

The problem arises when women internalise these obstacles, give up on what they value, lose their agency or doubt their capabilities. Farida added

“It is so hard to for women to reach a managerial position due to all these constraints. Women take leave for marriage or childcare and people forget about them or even find better replacement. I feel strained how can get a higher position and at the same time meet the society’s expectations of taking care of my family, the house, children myself. “

During COVID 19, the Egyptian government issued an extended working from home policy for mothers to support them as the schools were still closed. While this might seem favourable for women, employers used it as a reason for discrimination. Sherin works in the financial sector and says the following.

“Due to being a mother and working from home for a year unlike my male colleagues, I got the worst appraisal in the team. I tried to object but I was told we used to come every day and work hard while you were at home taking care of your kids. In addition, I had to take 1 year leave after I gave birth as I had no one else to take care of my child. Thus, I was not up for the normal promotion.”

Social perceptions often cast women as less competent than men in leadership positions, which obstructs their ambitions to advance, especially in the competitive private sector. Additionally, women grapple with challenges like the glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena, along with the delicate balance between motherhood and career demands, which curtail their progress in the workplace. The idea that women are inferior leaders compared to men should be questioned. Nora reported

“My male manager was not encouraging of my success and always tried to bring me down and made me feel it is not my place. I was chosen to travel to Spain on a mission to present a project. He tried to sabotage this opportunity. My name was not included in the list of potential people for promotion due to my young age and gender.”

While numbers might suggest progress in women’s leadership representation, qualitative studies that capture women’s voices reveal many unobserved barriers.

The challenges highlighted in these narratives underscore significant limitations on women’s capabilities within the labour market, particularly regarding equal opportunities, fair compensation, and career advancement. Women’s constrained agency, limited bargaining power, and structural barriers to promotion curtail their freedom to pursue meaningful work and aspirations. These issues also prevent women from converting their education, skills, and experience into equitable career outcomes (Robeyns, 2003). Women’s economic participation should be viewed through the capabilities they are allowed to

develop, rather than merely focusing on job participation statistics (OECD, 2019). By applying CA, we can better understand how structural and societal factors constrain women's choices and opportunities, and how addressing these constraints can foster genuine equality. Thus, policy interventions should not only aim at formal equality but also dismantle the conversion factors that inhibit women's capabilities and freedoms, ultimately enabling them to fully realize their professional and personal goals (Kabeer, 2018).

7.3 Agency

Some students draw on their navigational capital to overcome challenges and navigate the transition beyond university, demonstrating agency within structurally constrained contexts (Walker, McLean, Mathebula, & Mukwambo, 2022). Social pressures, alongside the opportunity costs of housework and childcare, constrain women's capacity to manage the trade-offs between marital well-being and personal autonomy (Abeyasekera & Amarasuriya, 2010). Women are often directed or forced toward "acceptable" fields or work arrangements that are less rewarding but more suitable to their childcare and domestic responsibilities. The question remains: is this a "choice" or a "constraint" (Kabeer, 2008). Sen (1990) notes that women's interests are often overlooked due to the internalization of social norms that limit their choices or because their well-being is aligned with that of their families and children. Employment opportunities that enhance women's agency can broaden their range of choices, reinforcing their ability to act on these choices. However, informal, flexible, and entrepreneurial jobs, while potentially fostering higher aspirations and greater control over assets, may limit women's agency if they provide insufficient protection, income, or skill development. Women continue to experience constraints on their agency, disproportionately concentrated in low-paying jobs with fewer rights and benefits (World Bank, 2022).

Many of the women interviewed navigate through these social pressures and gendered responsibilities to secure their place in the labour market. Navigational agency plays a key role in shaping Egyptian women's pathways to employment. There are four main factors involved in becoming a navigational agent: the ability

to exit or enter spaces, resolve conflicts, re-form or create opportunities, and participate freely and autonomously in social life without manipulation or interference (Claassen, 2017). This agency manifests in women's ability to handle complex, changing situations in innovative and transformative ways.

The ability to enter or exit spaces whether related to employment or personal relationships forms a critical aspect of navigational agency. Egyptian women, faced with restrictive gender norms, are often prevented from entering certain professional fields. Yet, economic independence remains a key factor in securing autonomy. Ola highlights the necessity of having a source of income to make decisions free from pressure:

"Nothing is guaranteed! What if I don't want to continue in a marriage if I don't have a source of income? I've seen friends who, after being divorced, were left with no financial resources and unable to even hire a lawyer to claim their rights from their ex-husbands. Without income, I would feel inferior in my marriage, weak. I want to feel equal, respected, and free to make my own decisions."

Ola's concerns highlight a critical strategy women adopt, securing financial independence as a safeguard against vulnerability in marriage. Many women recognize that having a stable income allows them to challenge traditional dependency structures, giving them the power to make decisions about their personal and professional lives. By prioritizing employment, women are actively negotiating their autonomy within both the household and society. The ability to exit oppressive or unequal situations is crucial, making access to employment a fundamental part of navigational agency.

Navigating conflicts is another essential component of navigational agency, particularly when women face societal resistance to their participation in the workforce. Financial independence has become more crucial, especially in the

current economic climate in Egypt. Jihan explains the growing acceptance of women working outside the home due to economic pressures:

"Financial independence is crucial, especially nowadays with Egypt's inflation and tightened economic measures. Even men who once preferred their wives to stay home now encourage them to work because they can't sustain the household and kids alone."

While economic necessity has made women's work more acceptable, this shift does not equate to full gender equality. Many women navigate this by negotiating work arrangements that allow them to fulfil both roles seeking jobs with flexible hours or working from home, though these often come with lower pay and fewer protections. Navigating between the workspace and the family or home space involves negotiation and conflict resolution, as traditional gender roles and expectations are deeply ingrained.

In navigating structural limitations, many women have reformed traditional roles by pursuing entrepreneurship. However, women who attempt to break into male-dominated fields face substantial challenges. Amal, a 29-year-old entrepreneur in the waste management sector, discusses her struggles:

"It was very challenging to start my business, particularly in waste management. Many Egyptian men still can't accept the idea of working under female leadership, and even if they do, they are resistant. People didn't believe in me and thought I would fail because it's hard for a female to succeed as an entrepreneur in this field."

Amal's experience reflects the broader struggle women face when challenging traditional gender roles in the workplace space. To navigate this resistance, women in male-dominated workspaces often employ strategies such as building

strong networks, proving their competence through perseverance, and seeking mentorship from those who have broken similar barriers. The ability to create new opportunities and re-form traditional sectors is a manifestation of their navigational agency. However, without institutional support, these efforts remain highly individualistic and exhausting.

Lastly, the ability to participate freely and autonomously in social and economic life is the cornerstone of women's navigational agency. In Egypt, while women have gained access to education, employment opportunities lag behind. Amira's testimony sheds light on this frustration:

"Even though there is an expansion of faculties and higher education facilities in Aswan, it isn't accompanied by the creation of job opportunities. This mismatch doesn't make sense. Job opportunities for females in Upper Egypt are extremely limited, creating a dilemma. We're forced to fight norms, family, and society just to travel for job hunting."

Amira's story underscores how navigating economic and social spaces requires constant negotiation. Women seeking employment in regions with fewer opportunities must make difficult choices either challenging family and social expectations to travel for work or settling for underemployment in their local communities. Some rely on support networks to advocate for their mobility, while others seek remote work as a compromise. However, these strategies remain constrained by the structural limitations of the labour market. Without an enabling ecosystem, women are forced to fight multiple battles simultaneously, challenging not only societal norms but also systemic economic barriers.

In conclusion, navigational agency allows women to confront the complexities of gendered expectations and employment barriers in Egypt. As women secure financial independence, they begin to exercise greater autonomy in both their professional and personal lives. Yet, the task of navigation remains deeply

influenced by societal and structural constraints. Women adopt multiple strategies securing financial independence, negotiating flexible work arrangements, proving competence in male-dominated fields, and leveraging social networks to manoeuvre within these limitations. However, without institutional support, these strategies remain individualistic rather than systemic solutions. While many women have demonstrated resilience through entrepreneurship and activism, structural reforms are essential to ensure their ability to participate fully in the labour market. Enabling opportunities and eliminating systemic obstacles can support women's aspirations and allow them to accumulate assets and capabilities, fostering genuine agency and well-being. While this study foregrounds women's agency and their capacity to navigate structural constraints, it also recognises that both their successes and challenges were shaped by intersecting factors beyond gender alone shaping participants' accounts of their experience. Women's experiences are therefore understood not merely as products of individual agency, but as emerging from the dynamic interaction between personal capabilities and broader social, cultural, and economic structures.

8. Conclusion

This study presents an original research project situated within feminist and education literature, linking higher education, the labour market, women's lives, and gender studies. It employs Sen's Capability Approach to examine women's lives from a human development perspective in the Egyptian context, addressing the need for literature to expand beyond mere numbers. The capabilities framework helps us understand the freedoms available to women, why they value these freedoms in creating a good life with well-being and agency, and how these valued freedoms evolve from schooling to adulthood for women in Egypt. It examines different forms of gender inequality and the capabilities women value, aiming to foster a more supportive society. Certain practices exclude women from employment and education, undermining their aspirations and limiting their motivation, and lead to submissive identities.

Thus, this research critically examines the experiences of Egyptian women throughout their higher education journey, from access to integration into the labour market, during a period of rapid expansion of higher education in Egypt. It has explored the intersection of gender equality, education, and employment, shedding light on the ways in which social norms, economic conditions, and institutional structures shape women's capabilities and agency (Kabeer, 2008; Claassen, 2017). The findings highlight that while higher education is instrumental in broadening opportunities, its transformative potential is often constrained by deeply entrenched gender norms, labour market structures, and socio-political factors (Ahmed & Hyndman-Rizk, 2020).

8.1 Addressing the Research Questions

In response to the primary research question—how social norms, educational opportunities, and labour market dynamics shape the capabilities and agency of Egyptian women—the study reveals that while access to higher education has expanded, it does not automatically translate into equal opportunities in the labour market. Women navigate multiple barriers, including societal expectations regarding marriage and caregiving, which influence their career trajectories

(Abeyasekera & Amarasuriya, 2010). Moreover, institutionalized gender segregation within higher education and employment sectors reinforces traditional gender roles, limiting women's ability to fully exercise their agency (Barone & Assirelli, 2020).

The analysis of social, economic, and geographic conversion factors demonstrates that family support, financial constraints, and community relations play a critical role in shaping women's access to higher education. Women from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds often face additional obstacles, requiring greater resilience and navigational agency to pursue higher education (Mkwanzani, 2020). However, even for those who succeed, their professional aspirations remain subject to structural constraints in the workforce. For instance, while statistics may suggest minimal gender disparities in access to secondary and university education across Egypt, women from rural and poor backgrounds still face significant geographic barriers. In conservative communities, parents often permit their daughters to pursue higher education only if they remain within the same city, reinforcing gendered restrictions on mobility. These limitations highlight how socio-cultural norms, in addition to economic constraints, act as conversion factors that shape women's educational opportunities.

This research highlights the nuanced ways in which navigational agency operates, women must continually assess, adapt, and negotiate within social and economic structures to access education and employment while also challenging dominant gender norms (Tourne et al., 2024). The restrictive nature of Egypt's secondary education system, which prioritizes grades and rigid curricular structures over student choice and engagement, further influences women's access to higher education. Challenges such as private tutoring, low classroom attendance, and a lack of interactive learning limit students' preparedness for university. These structural factors shape not only educational access but also students' agency in determining their academic and career paths.

The study also finds that while higher education can expand women's capabilities and sense of agency, the extent of this transformation is mediated by gender

norms and discrimination. Women who enter male-dominated fields, such as STEM, encounter resistance and stereotyping, often requiring them to develop strategies to assert their place in these spaces (Claassen, 2018). Higher education institutions themselves do not always provide a gender-sensitive environment, reinforcing barriers rather than dismantling them. The paradox of increasing educational opportunities without corresponding structural labour market reforms is evident, while women may attain degrees, they often remain excluded from meaningful workforce participation due to restrictive gendered labour policies and expectations (Bonvin & Laruffa, 2020).

Moreover, the higher education experience for Egyptian women is shaped by both internal university dynamics and external influences, such as family expectations, commuting challenges, and regional disparities. Gender norms persist within higher education spaces, influencing academic and social interactions. Issues such as stereotyping, gendered behavioural expectations, and academic discrimination, particularly in STEM faculties further complicate women's university journeys. These challenges highlight the need for gender-sensitive policies within higher education institutions to create more equitable learning environments (Ahmed & Hyndman-Rizk, 2020).

Regarding labour market participation, gender norms and economic conditions continue to impose limitations on women's career choices. The persistent gendered division of labour, alongside limited childcare support and rigid workplace expectations, restricts women's opportunities for economic independence and professional growth (World Bank, 2023). Even after successfully navigating higher education, many women encounter significant employment barriers, including gender pay gaps, glass ceilings, and occupational segregation. Societal pressures also continue to shape women's professional aspirations "neighbourhood pressure" and internalized gender norms often devalue women's professional contributions, making it more difficult for them to secure and retain jobs (Auchynnikava et al., 2024). Additionally, gender norms influence women's choice of work fields and employers, further constraining their career trajectories.

Nonetheless, the research highlights instances where women exercise navigational agency, challenging social expectations and creating alternative pathways to economic participation. Some do so by seeking employment in fields with more flexible conditions, while others pursue entrepreneurship or advocacy roles to reshape workplace cultures. These findings emphasize that while education provides a crucial foundation, true transformation requires a shift in both institutional policies and societal perceptions (Walker, 2020).

Ultimately, the expansion of higher education in Egypt has increased the number of highly educated women, but this progress has not translated into better job market outcomes or favourable employment conditions. This paradox highlights a significant challenge: while educational attainment has improved, gendered labour market structures continue to limit women's opportunities. Addressing these disparities requires systemic changes, including gender-sensitive workplace policies, increased childcare support, and legal protections against workplace discrimination (World Bank, 2023). Recognizing women as independent economic agents and acknowledging how gendered biases constrain their agency is essential for improving their labour market outcomes and securing their financial independence.

This study underscores that Egyptian women continue to face gender-based discrimination at universities and workplaces, experiencing inequality in access to valued fields, managerial positions, and educational opportunities. In conservative areas such as Upper Egypt, these challenges are even more pronounced, with social norms imposing additional restrictions on women's autonomy (Barsoum, 2019). This research provides an in-depth analysis of the lives of the women interviewed, revealing cultural, economic, political, environmental, and contextual factors that impede their access to valued capabilities and full agency, as well as how they navigate and overcome these challenges.

Education and educational spaces have the potential to both reinforce and challenge inequalities. The experiences of the women discussed in this research demonstrate how higher education is closely linked with women's empowerment

and agency, expanding their capabilities and opportunities for meaningful lives (Kabeer 1999; Alkire 2002; Unterhalter 2007). Higher education enabled them to make strategic life choices, take control of their lives, gain self-determination, and access employment opportunities. It acted as a transformative space, helping them discover their potential, develop social skills, achieve economic independence, challenge gender norms, and gain agency in personal and societal roles.

However, the study also shows that inequalities and gendered practices in homes, communities, and societies lead to neighbourhood pressures that limit women's physical, social, and intellectual capabilities. From a capability perspective, women's educational experiences are shaped by gendered norms, behavioural codes, and roles that do not fully promote gender equality or provide equal opportunities (Unterhalter, 2003).

To promote gender equality in higher education and the labour market, it is crucial to eliminate gender biases in pedagogical practices and address systemic discrimination in universities. Gender-sensitive training for faculty, administrators, and policymakers is necessary to create more inclusive educational spaces. Additionally, improving legal protections, workplace policies, and support systems such as childcare provisions can help address gendered constraints on women's workforce participation (OECD, 2023).

There remains a lack of efforts to expand women's choices, opportunities, and autonomy, which are essential for their development. Despite potential improvements from restructuring socio-economic and political systems, many women in developing countries still face limited resources and opportunities, with marginalized groups remaining excluded from developing their capabilities (Saleeby 2014). While this study focuses on Egyptian women, their experiences reflect broader global issues. Women worldwide encounter similar constraints and unrealized capabilities due to discriminatory practices, norms, and inadequate legislation. The Egyptian context mirrors issues across the Arab world. These inequalities often remain marginalized in public policy and civil society but can be addressed through the political will of governments and

intergovernmental agencies to enhance women's opportunities and civic engagement.

8.2 Contributions to the Literature

This research makes a threefold contribution to the existing body of literature on higher education, gender, and capabilities. First, it addresses a critical knowledge gap by providing empirical evidence on how Egyptian women experience and navigate higher education and employment within a capabilities framework (Sen, 1990). While existing studies focus on access to education (Unterhalter & Aikman, 2008; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Tikly & Barrett, 2011; McCowan, 2013), this research extends the discussion to examine how social and structural barriers impact the extent to which women can translate educational attainment into meaningful labour market participation and agency. The findings advance understanding by demonstrating that educational expansion in Egypt does not automatically lead to enhanced capabilities; rather, women's real opportunities are mediated by social norms, institutional structures, and unequal labour market conditions.

Furthermore, while much of the existing literature relies on quantitative analyses of gender disparities in education and employment, fewer studies adopt a qualitative, narrative-based approach to explore the lived experiences of women as they navigate these transitions (Assaad & Barsoum, 2007, Barsoum, 2019, Said & ElHamidi, 2008). This study fills this gap by centring women's voices and tracing their educational and employment journeys over time, offering a deeper understanding of the intersection between individual aspirations and structural constraints. This approach shifts the focus from abstract measures of equality to women's subjective experiences, revealing how agency, aspiration, and constraint are negotiated in everyday life. By foregrounding Egyptian women's narratives, this research highlights the importance of hearing their perspectives in discussions on education and labour market participation, rather than relying solely on statistical representations that may overlook the complexity of their experiences.

Second, the study situates Egypt within both a national and regional context, offering insights that extend beyond the country's borders to the broader Arab region and other developing countries. Given the shared socio-cultural and economic challenges that women face in higher education and the labour market across the Global South, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gendered educational and employment trajectories in contexts undergoing rapid educational expansion (Ahmed & Hyndman-Rizk, 2020). While research on gender and higher education in the Arab world exists, there remains a gap in understanding how national policies, socio-cultural expectations, and local labour market dynamics uniquely shape Egyptian women's experiences. This study addresses this gap by analysing how women in Egypt navigate these challenges in ways that may differ from or align with regional trends, offering insights that are crucial for both academic research and policy interventions. It deepens regional understanding by linking policy discourses to lived experiences

Third, this research enhances theoretical discussions on navigational agency by illustrating how women manoeuvre between social constraints and opportunities, particularly in an evolving higher education landscape. It demonstrates that agency is not merely about making choices but about negotiating pathways within a constrained environment. By drawing on feminist and the CA, the study underscores the need for a more intersectional analysis of education and labour market participation (Claassen, 2017). The concept of navigational agency helps explain why access alone is insufficient and why a more comprehensive approach that considers structural, cultural, and institutional barriers is necessary. Existing studies often examine either women's aspirations or the structural constraints they face, but fewer explicitly analyse how women negotiate between the two. This research contributes to this gap by showing how aspirations interact with social norms, economic conditions, and institutional policies to shape women's actual opportunities and decision-making processes. The findings expand theoretical understanding by operationalising the concept of navigational agency within the Egyptian context, enriching the conceptual application of agency within the CA.

Finally, while the CA has been widely applied in gender and education studies, this research builds on studies within the Egyptian context (Assaad, 2010; Assaad & ElHamidi, 2009; Atallah & Hesham, 2024; Barsoum, 2019) and contributes to the very few but growing body of literature that applies the CA to understand gendered higher educational and labour market experiences in Egypt (Friedrich et al., 2021; Abdeen, 2021; Kabeer, 2015). This study contributes to this empirical gap by offering research grounded in the CA, demonstrating its relevance for understanding how women navigate systemic inequalities and pursue their valued functionings in higher education and the labour market.

8.3 Policy Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study underscore the importance of policies that go beyond expanding access to higher education and instead focus on dismantling structural barriers that limit women's capabilities. As Egypt continues to expand its higher education system most notably with the planned establishment of 10 new civil universities by 2026, bringing the total number of private universities to 30 there is a critical opportunity to integrate gender-sensitive policies within this expansion (Handbook on Equal Opportunities in the Egyptian Higher Education System, 2023).

To take these findings forward, policy efforts should prioritize creating more inclusive higher education environments that actively challenge gender norms. This includes initiatives such as mentorship programs for women in male-dominated fields, institutional support for students balancing family responsibilities, and policies that ensure safer campuses free from gender-based discrimination and harassment. Sexual harassment remains a significant constraint to women's freedom and capabilities in both universities and workplaces. Despite amendments to the Egyptian Penal Code in 2014 and 2021, many survivors do not report harassment due to fear, embarrassment, and a lack of confidence in the legal system. The government must enforce laws promptly, train police and judiciary, and establish an accessible and confidential reporting process. NGOs and social groups combating sexual harassment especially in education institutions, transportation, and workplaces should receive more

support, and specialized reporting centres with trained female officers should be established (Abdelaal, 2021).

Additionally, universities should implement targeted outreach programs in rural and marginalized communities to address disparities in access. While the expansion of higher education has allowed more rural women to access education without the need to relocate, employment opportunities remain scarce in these areas. Creating diverse job opportunities with suitable working conditions in rural and Upper Egypt is essential to match the increased supply of educated women. Currently, only 13% of rural women are in the workforce, and nearly half believe employers prefer hiring men (Girgis, 2019). The expansion of higher education must be accompanied by policies that increase employment opportunities for women in these regions.

Strengthening scholarship opportunities for women from disadvantaged backgrounds is essential to addressing economic conversion factors that limit access to higher education (Mkwananzi, 2020). Even though higher education in Egypt is quasi-free, financial constraints remain a barrier. Increasing financial aid, interest-free loans, and needs-based grants can improve access for women. Outreach interventions should go beyond general information, incorporating personalized counselling and proactive engagement with students. Early financial aid, combined with targeted outreach activities, has shown promising results in increasing enrolment and completion rates for disadvantaged students (World Bank, 2019).

In addition, labour market reforms are needed to facilitate women's transition from education to employment. This includes expanding childcare provisions, implementing workplace flexibility policies, and addressing gender biases in recruitment and promotion (Kabeer, 2008). Although Article 96 of the Labor Law mandates childcare facilities for workplaces with 100 or more female employees, the shortage of quality, affordable childcare remains a barrier. Expanding access to childcare would not only ease women's caregiving burdens but also create employment opportunities in the care economy, a sector with strong female participation (Assiouty, 2022). Employers should also be encouraged to develop

gender-equitable policies that support career progression for women, particularly in STEM and leadership roles. The private sector plays a crucial role in improving women's labour market participation. Egypt has taken steps to remove legal barriers to women's employment, including lifting restrictions on night shifts and previously prohibited sectors. However, more must be done to ensure gender-equitable workplaces. Policies should prioritize increasing women's representation in leadership roles, including within higher education institutions. Introducing quotas for women in managerial positions can enhance their presence in decision-making bodies.

Collaboration between higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers is essential to ensure that educational attainment translates into real opportunities for women in the workforce. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns should be launched to challenge societal perceptions about women's roles in education and work. Changing attitudes toward women's labour force participation requires a broader cultural shift, supported by media, civil society, and policy interventions. Additionally, NGOs and international organizations should play a more active role in advocating for gender-sensitive labour policies, workplace protections, and initiatives aimed at supporting women's career development (Bonvin & Laruffa, 2020).

To ensure long-term progress, the government should enforce anti-discrimination laws in hiring and promotion, mandate transparency in wage structures, and implement stronger legal protections against workplace harassment. Despite legal guarantees of equal pay for equal work, gender-based discrimination persists in the private sector, contributing to a noticeable wage gap. Strengthening the enforcement of equal pay laws and introducing paternity leave could help reduce employer bias against hiring women due to maternity leave concerns. Encouraging gender-sensitive curricula in schools and universities can also help shift societal norms early on, creating a more equitable labour market in the future.

Extracurricular activities (ECAs) have played a crucial role in expanding women's agency by fostering self-identity, social networks, and career pathways.

Universities and schools should revise policies to promote women's leadership in ECAs and increase participation, particularly in STEM-related activities. Research indicates that STEM ECAs empower women by equipping them with knowledge and skills and increasing their engagement in the field (Assi & Abdulbaqi, 2022). ECAs can also serve as platforms to raise awareness about expanding women's capabilities in physical, social, economic, and academic domains.

Finally, future research should examine the role of digital transformation in shaping women's educational and employment opportunities. The increasing reliance on remote work and digital skills may provide new avenues for women to participate in the labour market while navigating societal constraints. Social protection programs such as "Takaful and Karama" provide conditional cash transfers to encourage school attendance, yet higher dropout rates among female students due to early marriage remain a challenge. Increasing cash incentives for secondary education and offering additional financial support to families whose daughters pursue higher education could help address this issue (SIS, 2022).

Longitudinal studies tracking women's educational and career trajectories will be crucial in evaluating whether policy interventions effectively enhance women's capabilities and agency. Expanding women's agency and economic opportunities through higher wages, better working conditions, and stronger bargaining power is essential for their long-term inclusion in the labour market. While Egypt has allocated resources to expanding education, investment in creating economic opportunities for women remains insufficient. Sustainable development requires a shift from viewing gender equality as an economic tool to recognizing it as a fundamental right that expands women's real freedoms (Sen, 1999).

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Appendix One

Participant information sheet

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am a researcher/PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about:

Gender equality and women's empowerment in period of rapid expansion of higher education in Egypt: A holistic view of women experiences/journey from access to higher education till integration into the labour market.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?

This study aims to identify, consider, and critically question the women's experiences across their different stage of higher education journey from access till integration in the labour market particularly during a period of rapid expansion of higher education in Egypt and its relation to gender equality and women's empowerment.

Why have I been invited?

I have approached you because I am interested in understanding the experiences of women across their different stage of higher education journey from access till integration in the labour market. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

If you decided to take part, this would involve the following: participating in semi-structured interviews. You will have the freedom and flexibility to set the flow and agendas for the conversations permitting unexpected topics to emerge.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

Taking part in this study will allow you to share your experiences about higher education experience in integration in labour market. Your insights will contribute to our understanding and yield insights and granular focus into women's experiences and potential impact on their lives and the society as a whole

Do I have to take part?

No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part. You will be asked to invest approximately 60 minutes of your time for an interview.

Will my data be identifiable?

After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study will have access to the ideas you share with me. If you request, I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?

I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles). I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

How my data will be stored

Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself

Doaa Abonaem: d.abonaem@lancaster.ac.uk

My supervisor: Dr. Melis Cin: m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Dr. Jo Warin; j.warin@lancaster.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix Two

Consent Form

Project Title: Gender equality and women's empowerment in period of rapid expansion of higher education in Egypt: A holistic view of women experiences/journey from access to higher education till integration into the labour market

Name of Researchers: Doaa Abonaem

Email: d.abonaem@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 2 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the study my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	☐
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interviews or focus groups will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent _____ **Date**
_____ Day/month/year

**One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at
Lancaster University**

Appendix Three

Interview Questions Guide

1) How old are you? (ideally all participants should be from 25-32 to except for university professors)

☐ Under 18

☐ 18-24

☐ 25-34

☐ 35-44

☐ 45-54

☐ 55-64

☐ Above 64

2) What is your gender? (Target: females only)

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Other

What is your Nationality? (Should be Egyptians)

3) What is your highest level of education? (should be at least university graduate)

☐ Middle school

☐ High school

☐ College

☐ Graduate

☐ Post-graduate

☐ Doctorate

☐ Other

Which university did you attend?-----

4) Year of establishment of the university? -----

5) Year of graduation:

6) What is your marital status?

☐ Single, never married

☐ Married

☐ Widowed

☐ Divorced

☐ separated

7) Do you have children?

Yes

No

If yes how many? -----

8) Are you currently work or have worked in the past?

☐ Currently working

☐ Worked in the past but stopped

-
- ☐ Never worked

9) What industry do you work in?

- ☐ Agriculture, forestry, and fishing
- ☐ Energy
- ☐ Information technology/software
- ☐ Transportation
- ☐ Entertainment
- ☐ publishing/journalism
- ☐ Real estate
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Sports
- ☐ Other

What is your current designation?

- ☒ Below manager
- ☐ Manager or equivalent
- ☐ Snr. Manager or equivalent
- ☐ Director or equivalent
- ☐ Snr. Director or equivalent
- ☐ CXO

What is your total household income per year?

-
- ☐ Less than \$19,999
 - ☐ \$20,000 to \$59,999
 - ☐ \$60,000 to \$99,999
 - ☐ \$100,000 to \$139,999
 - ☐ \$140,000 to \$159,999
 - ☐ \$160,000 to \$199,999
 - ☐ Above \$200,000

Interview questions:

Pre: Access

- 1) What factors encouraged you to go to university? (pathways to higher education)
- 2) What challenges did you face to be able to access higher education as a female?
- 3) How did you choose which university to apply to and which faculty in particular
- 4) How did the expansion affect your access

During: Experience

- 1) What are the main challenges that faced you as a female as you were studying at university?
- 2) What policies are taking place or do you recommend to take place that support women during their higher education studies particularly in light of the current higher education expansion in Egypt?
- 3) What is it like to be a female university in Egypt relationship with peer and teachers social experience
- 4) During your studies what was your plans and aspirations
- 5) How transformative higher education in your life

Post: Employment

- 1) If you are employed, what are the challenges you face as a working female? If you are unemployed, what are the factors leading to this decision? Probing question about childcare, glass ceiling,...)
- 2) Do you believe there is enough support and public investment and human capital focus on women access to higher education and their employability? Why? How can this be addressed
- 3) As a women, what are your main positive experiences in labour market that you can highlight?
- 4) As a women, what are your main negative experiences in labour market that you can highlight?
- 5) Why do you want to enter, re-enter or stay in the labour market?
- 6) What are the main issues that women face in upward mobility?
- 7) Are women working in fields and positions that utilize their skills, higher education and training? If no, what are the reasons? If no, what are some solutions that could be practiced? COVID
- 8) What do you consider the main reasons for low rates of female employment compared to their high rates in accessing higher education?
- 9) Support mechanism among women

Appendix four

Participants information

Name	Age	Field of study/work	Marital Status	Employment status	Location
Amira	27	Tourism and languages	Single	Employed	Upper Egypt (Aswan)
Maha	29	Social sciences	Single	Employed	Upper Egypt (Nuba)
Farida	31	Economics	Married	Part time	Cairo
Dalia	27	Business	Married	No	Cairo
Hadia	30	Architecture	Single	Employed	Giza (Greater Cairo)
Nadia	29	Social sciences	Single	No	Upper Egypt
Sahar	26	Medicine	Married	no	Alexandria
Heba	32	Teaching	Married	Employed	Sinai
Amal	29	Science	Married	Self-Employed	Giza (Greater Cairo)
Ola	30	Science	Married	No	Ismailia

					(Suez and Delta Area)
Amina	25	Literature	Married	No	Damietta (Northern Egypt)
Leila	26	Engineering	Single	Employed	Luxor (Upper Egypt)
Hoda	25	Finance	Married	Employed	Cairo
Dina	28	Medicine	Single	Employed	Sharkeya
Rania	24	Arts	Single	Employed	Aswan (Upper Egypt)
Nora	30	Engineering	Single	Employed	Tanta (Northern Egypt)
Jihan	29	Journalism	Single	Employed	Benha (Northern Egypt)
Lamis	23	STEM	Single	Employed	Cairo
Manar	27	cinematography	Single	Employed	Damietta
Sherin	31	banking	married	Employed	Giza

Table 1: Information about the participants
