



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Refugee Women's Access to Higher Education in The Egyptian Context

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: May 20, 2024	<p>This paper aims to identify the gendered obstacles and opportunities for Sudanese and South Sudanese refugee women to access higher Education in Egypt. It applies the Social-Ecological Model (SEM), which assumes that the environment has four primary levels. This phenomenological qualitative study reviews the literature on refugee studies in Egypt and other contexts and semi-structured in-depth interviews with refugee women. The researcher considers the participants' individual experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. The author collected primary data using an anonymous sample of 34 female students in Cairo public faculties. Sampling consists of a convenient non-probability sampling technique. This technique has been selected as a good fit for this qualitative study, considering the geographical proximity and willingness of the respondents to participate. The study highlights the personal safety issues, financial constraints, and academic barriers as obstacles faced by refugee women hindering their access to higher Education in Egypt. Different individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors affect refugee women's educational needs. The crucial role of INGOs in supporting these women and ensuring their access to higher education in Egypt cannot be overstated. There is a need for more detailed knowledge of the gendered barriers to Education. Accordingly, this study fills this knowledge gap and explores the role of INGOs in supporting refugee women and ensuring their access to higher Education in Egypt. The paper serves as a source for future studies and relevant interventions.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

By May 2022, more than 100 million individuals were forced to flee their homes worldwide because of various reasons, encompassing conflict, violence, and human rights violations (UNHCR, UNHCR, 2022). Low and middle-income countries host seventy-five percent of the persons seeking international protection, while the Least Developed Countries host 20% of the asylum seekers globally (UNHCR, 2023). In Egypt, the influx of asylum seekers increased following the Arab Spring and the conflicts in the region (Paik et al., 2023). In March 2023, the number of refugees and asylum seekers with UNHCR Egypt was 291,578, including 59,896 Sudanese and 25,071 South Sudanese individuals (UNHCR, 2023). However, the number of individuals seeking international protection climbed in Egypt after the Sudanese crisis in April 2023. Egypt ranks second in the list of newly arrived asylum-seekers among Sudan's neighboring countries after Chad (UNHCR, 2023).

An expanded body of literature on refugees has increased in the past few years, offering valuable insights for researchers and policymakers to understand refugees' needs and educational ones; however, they mainly focus on access to primary and secondary education (Streitwieser et al., 2019). In addition, academic contributions tackling refugee access to higher education have addressed certain refugee groups, such as women who witnessed forced migration in resettlement contexts (Burke et al., 2023) or assessing refugee needs in the global north (Perales et al., 2022). Refugee women are more likely to face challenges in accessing services and higher education than men (Asire, 2023). Some studies addressed the support provided to refugee women in the field of education using the socio-ecological framework. Various elements have impacted refugee women's educational access, such as their level of education, medical status, personal coping mechanisms, and interpersonal relationships with family and peers played a significant role (Hunt et al., 2023). On a broader scope, the public views of refugee students also impact their access to education at the meso-level, and socio-economic and administrative obstacles impact their access to higher education at the macro levels (Hunt et al., 2023).

Given the above-highlighted situation, the topic of refugee women's access to higher education has a noteworthy contribution at both the theoretical and the practical levels. Theoretically, the topic adds to the literature on refugee women's education in Egypt and the Arab world. It explores how different gendered risk factors impede refugee women's access to higher education. This study helps researchers and policymakers to have a deeper understanding of the ongoing challenges and concerns that face refugee women and reframe their policies accordingly. The topic is of interest to practitioners and scholars in the fields of gender, refugee studies, and education. Practically, the topic has several positive implications for refugee women, their communities, and the Egyptian hosting community and society. By understanding these gendered components, refugee communities will gain socio-economic benefits by having more skilled and highly educated women in their communities (UNESCO IIEP & UNHCR, 2022). On the other hand, in Egyptian society, this will lead to a more inclusive and equitable society in the long run.

Following the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, many international organizations adopted a gender mainstreaming approach to migration studies (Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019). Despite the worldwide attention to gendered refugee studies, fewer contributions are made to countries of the global south (Wellman, 2023) and the available opportunities for local integration with host communities (Arar, 2023). Access to education for adolescent girls in Egypt is a research gap, and further studies are needed in this area (Lunge, 2022).

The research gap is evident in the need for more detailed qualitative information on the barriers and opportunities for refugee women to access higher education in Egypt. Qualitative studies are essential to better understanding personal experiences from a gendered perspective and adopt gendered-responsive programs and strategies accordingly, whether by INGOs, policymakers, or other key stakeholders (Mwita, 2022).

The problem statement in this study is that refugee women face different gendered risk factors that impede their access to higher education in Egypt, such as personal safety issues, financial constraints, and academic barriers. Mitigating these gendered challenges and investing in protective measures is essential to ensuring equal access to quality education. INGOs are crucial in influencing other elements of the social-ecological model to support refugee women's educational empowerment.

The study has a solid practical relevance considering the global refugee and regional crises in Sudan and neighboring countries. These conflicts led to an enormous increase in the number of asylum seekers in Egypt and, accordingly, a rise in the demand for services such as higher education in

contrast to the limited opportunities and funding. The findings of this paper add to the literature on gender, women empowerment, and refugee studies in the Middle East and North Africa.

This paper aims to understand gender impact and dynamics in access to higher education concerning Sudanese and South Sudanese women in Egypt using the Social-Ecological Model (SEM). The Social-Ecological theory assumes that the environment has four primary layers or groups: the microsystems or individuals, mesosystems or relationships, exosystems or communities, and macrosystems or societies. The first step in this research is the desk review of literature on higher education systems in Egypt refugee women's access to higher education and the role of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in empowering refugee women and ensuring their access to higher education. The second step in the research is the in-depth interviews with an anonymous convenience sample of 34 female Sudanese and South Sudanese students enrolled in public faculties in Cairo. The study incorporates qualitative analysis to analyze the collected data.

The study highlights safety issues on the street, limited financial resources, and academic barriers as risk factors. Furthermore, the study identifies protection factors that contribute to refugee women's access to higher education, which encompasses individual resilience, family support, and the role of international organizations. The paper proposes recommendations to improve access to higher education for refugee women at different individuals, interpersonal, communities, and societal levels. Even though refugees and migrants fall under two different international legal frameworks (Norman, 2024), the study uses the term refugee to refer to women on the move, regardless of their legal status.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background Of Study

Globally, the *number* of individuals seeking international protection has increased in the past decade (Metcalf-Hough, 2022). In Egypt, following the instability resulting from the Arab Spring and other regional conflicts, the influx of asylum seekers from neighboring countries increased tremendously (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). Egypt hosts one of the largest urban refugee populations globally; refugees primarily reside in greater Cairo (Jones, 2024). For years, Sudan has encountered conflicts that have led to the outflow of refugees; as of September 2015, neighboring South Sudan had received over 250,000 refugees from the region (Asylum Research Centre (ARC), 2018). Many Sudanese flee to in Egypt, Sudanese asylum seekers settle in urban settings facing longstanding poverty because of their limited financial resources, which have tremendously increased in the wake of the erupted clashes on 15th April 2023 (Miranda, 2018). The Sudanese community in Egypt has three groups: the children of the old community who have been living in Egypt since the monarchy and who exceed 40 thousand families and have permanent residence rights, then the migrants who came after 1995, the economic migrants group and finally the category of refugees and asylum seekers registered at the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (Egypt & Africa, Egyptian-Sudanese Relations).

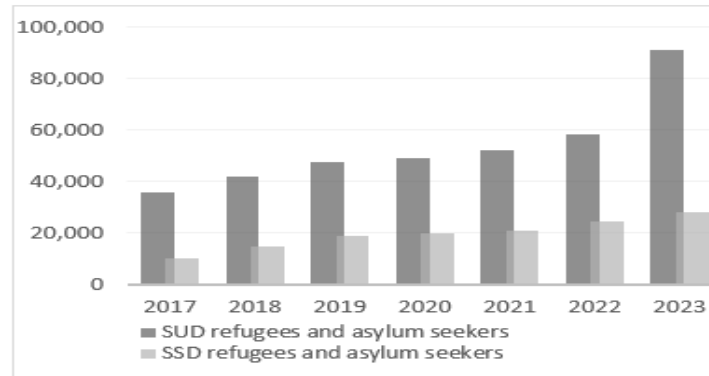


Figure 1. Trends of SUD and SSD refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt (2017-2023), External_Monthly_Statistical_Report_July_2023.pdf, UNHCR - Refugee Statistics

The total number of Sudanese registered in Egypt as per UNHCR in the 2020 report was 49 253; 24% of them are female between the ages of 18-59, and of the total number, 25% are women, and 19% are girls (UNHCR, Sudanese refugees in Egypt, 2020). After the re-eruption of conflict and violence in South Sudan in December 2013, the number of new asylum seekers arriving in Egypt in the following years increased. The research notes that after the outbreak of the crisis in Sudan in April 2023, the number of new Sudanese arrivals who have entered Egypt from Sudan has exceeded 250,000 individuals as of June 2023 (UNHCR, UNHCR EGYPT SUDAN EMERGENCY RESPONSE UPDATE, 2023).

Most scholarly work on universities in the first half of the twentieth century focused on historical or philosophical aspects of higher education, with little attention to sociological and economic analysis (Scott, 2010).

Access to higher education is defined as how various stakeholders ensure all potential students, particularly refugee women in this context, have equal opportunities in higher education institutions (Kohtamäki & Kaila, 2019). Access to higher education is part of the collective multilevel phenomenon of women empowerment (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). This process takes place on three distinct dimensions: personal empowerment, relational empowerment, and societal empowerment (Marloes A. et al., 2017). This empowerment model borrows the social-ecological model's assumption that people live in different environments that may influence their behavior (Marloes et al., 2017), and living in different environments may influence people's behavior.

Literature on relationships and hypotheses

Refugee women's access to higher education in Egypt and other contexts:

Refugee students witness a state of 'super-disadvantage'; they are more likely to witness challenges in accessing education than other disadvantaged students in host countries (UNESCO IIEP & UNHCR, 2022). In general, refugee students might not be able to access higher education because of the hostility in educational systems or the surrounding environment, or due to the refugee's ongoing movement, the financial burdens, the changing migration policies, and finally, the lack of educational eligibility and qualifications (Détourbe & Boswell, 2023). In addition, academic problems, social isolation, and cultural adaptation can impede access to higher education (Ali et al., 2023).

Though some social obstacles such as lack of qualifications, detainment period, language barrier, and the high of higher education can impede refugees from applying for higher education, refugee women in developing and developed countries may also encounter challenges in their access to higher education due to sexual assault and financial instability (Rizzolatti, 2023). The difficulties refugee

women face in accessing education in host countries may happen because of social, economic, and cultural drivers influenced by their circumstances pre- and post-migration (Hunt et al., 2023). For example, in Sudanese society, the risk factors to access education were more significant for girls than for boys due to cultural norms, gender values, and stereotypes reproduced by families and schools (Hunt et al., 2023). Refugee women can also face information problems because of gendered sociocultural barriers, which lead to not getting the services in the host country (Kainat, 2022).

Few researchers have tackled young female refugees' obstacles to higher education within displacement settings (Fincham, 2022). At the same time, most of the studies addressing refugees' educational needs focus on refugee students in camps, especially Syrian camps in Turkey and Greece (Demir et al., 2024). A policy paper examines refugees' access to higher education in six host countries, including Egypt. It came up with 15 recommendations to ensure refugee students' access to higher education, such as ensuring refugee students' access to higher education in national higher education policy, availability of information, offering coaching programs to women students, fee exemption to refugee students, and organizing support networks (UNESCO IIEP & UNHCR, 2022). A study on African refugees' access to higher education in Egypt examined the main obstacles that prevent refugee students from getting tertiary education (Younes & Karkouti, 2023) and concluded that several economic, social, cultural, and emotional drivers increase refugee students' sense of hopelessness and inability to make choices in their education.

The role of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in empowering refugee women and ensuring their access to higher education

Women's empowerment is a complicated and multi-layered process impacted by Education and has gendered implications (Gaweł, 2024). International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) act as critical societal actors, providing goods and services in areas not covered by state agencies (Hengevoss, 2023). INGOs were established even before the evolution of the United Nations to provide humanitarian aid for the victims of World War I and II, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Save the Children-UK in 1919, PLAN International, Oxfam, and CARE and their numbers substantially increased in the 1960s and 1970s (Elkorashy, 2023). The number of INGOs funded by the US Agency for International Development had elevated from 18 organizations in 1970 to 195 in 2000 (Balidemaj & Balidemaj, 2022). INGOs play a crucial role in improving education because they fund governments directly or other civil society organizations, involving CBOs and NGOs, that work to enhance access to education for unprivileged groups (Mosia & Lepphoto, 2023). In many underdeveloped countries, national or international NGOs have engaged in either small or large-scale initiatives to achieve the sustainable development goals of ending poverty, gender equality, and empowering women socio-economically (Marcel & Toumba, 2023). On the other hand, INGOs are perceived by some members of refugee communities as taking advantage of the refugee communities' work to achieve specific objectives and tasks (El-Abed et al., 2023).

In Lebanon, the United Nations agencies and international and local NGOs offering educational services were criticized for not having international and national funding, coordination between them, and cooperation with the local authority (Lunge, 2022). INGOs in other countries like Turkey adopt strategic communication to advocate for Syrian refugee causes with the national authorities (Özdora Akşak & Dimitrova, 2022). In Egypt, INGOs are vital in promoting refugees' economic and social capacities (Elkorashy, 2023). INGOs expanded work in parallel with the influxes of refugees through emergency programs that can have a regional impact (Sadek, 2024). Based on a study conducted on the effects of Covid-19 on refugee adolescent girls' education in a transit country, taking Egypt as a case study, the author suggested strengthening the role of NGOs whether national or international, to better support refugee girls in accessing education by providing them with unlimited work licence (Lunge, 2022).

Based on the literature review, the proposed hypothesis is that refugee women's access to higher education in Egypt is influenced by different factors and elements related to the individual, interpersonal relationships, communities, and society. These factors interact and can act as limitations or means of support, leading to refugee women's social, economic, and educational empowerment. INGOs play a significant role in refugee women's empowerment as they can strongly impact the other elements of the model.

Present Theoretical Framework Model

This study adopts the Social-Ecological Model. Ecological Systems theory came after introducing the "General Systems" theory, which addressed systems' interaction and was mainly applied to scientific concepts (Crawford, 2020). As per Bronfenbrenner, there is a dynamic reciprocal relationship between individuals' development and their environment (ElZaatari & Maalouf, 2022). In his analysis of ecological systems, Bronfenbrenner proposed the ecological transitions within the microsystem where individuals can change from one state to another because of life changes such as getting promoted (Crawford, 2020). The ecological theory of development is also called the "Ecological Systems Theory" and the "Bioecological Systems Theory" (Özdoğan, 2011). The Russian American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner introduced this theory and categorized the levels of environment impacting human development into four layers: the microsystem, or the first layer of personal experiences; the mesosystem, or the layer of interactions between different elements of the microsystem; the exosystem, and then the macrosystem which includes the cultural norms and values prevailing, and added to them the chronosystem which represents the time (Backonja et al., 2014). Bronfenbrenner theory stresses the interdependency and interaction between people and their environments and assumes that more encouraging environments lead to enhanced developmental results (Haleemunnissa et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of the quality and context of the environment; it is a framework for understanding human development and education (Härkönen, 2001). Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory is an extensive framework for understanding human development, incorporating social, cultural, economic, and political elements that shape an individual's growth. A traditional social-ecological model has four levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, community and environmental resources, and organizational resources (Fleury & Lee, 2006). In this study, the levels are named the individual, relationships, community, and society (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2022). The social-ecological model is a tool to understand and prevent violence against women and to empower them by identifying the gendered risk and protective factors at each layer of the SEM (Heise, July 1998). At the same time, ensuring access to education is critical for women and girls to reduce gender inequalities, end their poverty, and achieve economic inclusion (UNHCR). Higher education is essential for youth (Borg, 2020) to access all education levels and ensure a sufficient livelihood (UNHCR, 2022). Several factors interplay and impact the quality of education (Qinyun Liu, 2017). Bronfenbrenner theory has been applied in the field of education to ensure effective learning environments that emphasize classroom experience and give due attention to the role of families, communities, societies, and the broader culture in influencing and shaping education and the students' beliefs (Bailey et al., 2021). Accordingly, this study sheds light on the gendered risk and protective factors that Sudanese and South Sudanese women face in accessing higher education in Egypt based on the Social-Ecological Model (SEM). The study stresses the role of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) in extending educational support to refugee women, ensuring the other protective factors and limiting risk factors of the SEM. At the same time, it figures out the existing research gap on the gendered limitations and possibilities for refugee women to access higher education in Egypt.

The study reviews the literature on refugee women's access to higher education and the role of ingos in supporting them in accessing these services. This qualitative research contains 34 in-depth interviews with

Sudanese and south Sudanese students in Egypt's public faculties. The qualitative research aims to get more detailed information on the challenges that Sudanese and south Sudanese female students face when accessing their universities in Egypt and the coping and supporting mechanisms they use to overcome these challenges. The paper summarized the main topics from discussions with the key respondents.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Despite the research on refugee women's experiences in hosting countries like Egypt, the research on refugee women's access to higher education is limited (Asire, 2023). The literature on refugee education usually focuses on their needs in primary and secondary education (Schutte et al., 2023). This study reveals several challenges that hinder refugee women's lives in countries of asylum and subsequently impede their access to higher education; however, individual resilience and supportive relationships play essential roles in overcoming such challenges and ensuring educational retention. The research on civil society organizations usually refers to non-governmental organizations or women-led organizations, but not INGOs specifically.

In the literature review, the researcher relied on a thematic analysis of literature on Egypt's higher education systems, refugee women's access to educational and other related services, and the role of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in empowering refugee women and ensuring their access to higher education. The applied methodology focused on a scoping review to understand the influence of gender on refugees' access to higher education in Egypt. This methodology aims to compile the known knowledge in the study area.

The author started by defining the critical research questions. This research answers the following questions: (1) What are the main challenges facing Sudanese and South Sudanese women in accessing higher education in Egypt? (2) How do Sudanese and South Sudanese women find the services provided by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to them? (3) What are the recommendations for better access to higher education?

Accordingly, to answer these questions, the researcher relied on qualitative research methodology based on collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to gain an in-depth understanding of refugee women's experiences in accessing higher education in Egypt and their perception of the role of INGOs in supporting them. Then, the author searched the literature and international organizations' reports published on the research topic using the relevant keywords. The researcher, in this regard, searched academic databases such as the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB), including Scopus-indexed articles, and Google Scholar, in addition to the websites and reports of International Organizations such as UNHCR, UNESCO, and UN Women to select the most relevant sources. The researcher also visited the Ministry of Education and Higher Education website and related websites in Sudan and South Sudan. After that, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the gathered information, combining them into two main themes: one on the primary services provided to refugee women and the other on the role of INGOs in their support. Recommendations have been drafted based on the interviews and literature reviews (Grant & Booth, 2009).

The qualitative research methodology is the case study of Sudanese and South Sudanese female students in Egypt. The paper also applied phenomenology methodology to understand how refugee women access higher education in Egypt and the gendered risk and protective factors based on their narrations and personal experiences. In the theoretical approach to phenomenology, the researcher considers the individual's experiences, perceptions, and behaviors and is most interested in the 'lived experience' (Williams, February 2021). In this research, "refugee women" refers to "refugees,"

"asylum seekers," and migrant women who left their countries and crossed the borders into another one (Amnesty International).

An example of the used literature that adopted research methodology is the study of (Hunt et al., 2023) titled "Refugees' gendered experiences of education in Europe since 2015: A scoping review". Whereas the study "Stakeholders' Interventions in Addressing Financial Constraints Restricting Women Refugee's Access to Higher Education: The Case of Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, Uganda" adopted the qualitative research approach and conducted semi-structured in-depth with refugee women (Asire, 2023). The study of (Ghobrial et al., 2023) included semi-structured interviews conducted in person in Cairo.

The ultimate purpose of using the qualitative phenomenological research methodology is to investigate the potential elements and components of a social phenomenon about which little has been known, relying on understanding people's views (Khan, 2014). This study is about refugee women's access to higher education in Egypt. Therefore, it aims to explore the lived experiences of refugee women and know their stories based on a contextual understanding of the current educational institutions, policies, and influential stakeholders. Using a qualitative phenomenological research methodology in the study gives space for refugee women to express themselves and vocalize their educational needs, which could have strong, substantial practical implications. Accordingly, using this qualitative approach is the best fit for the study.

The sample is chosen based on the researcher's convenience (Acharya et al., 2023). This technique is called convenient sampling, accidental sampling, or Haphazard sampling, one type of non-probability sampling method (Etikan et al., 2016). Considering the sensitivity of being a refugee in another country, the researcher selected easily approachable participants who were willing to participate.

The primary data was collected based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of 34 Sudanese and South Sudanese female students enrolled in public universities in Cairo. The researcher conducted the in-depth interviews in April 2023. The researcher used a notebook and a pen to type the participant's responses on the spot. After the interviews, the researcher analyzed the compiled data using Excel and Atlas. Ti software. Some interviews were in Arabic, and some were in English based on the interviewee's preferences. Concerning ethical considerations (Eppich, 2019), the sample is anonymous per the participant's requests. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent while preserving anonymity and confidentiality (Arifin, 2018). Before every interview, the researcher made some introductions, explained the purpose of the interview and the study, and the time needed to complete the interview. The researcher confirmed that the information shared would be dealt with confidentiality and respect and for the purposes of the study only. The researcher asked participants about their informed consent and whether they agreed to proceed with the interview. Accordingly, the participants provided verbal consent to the researcher to proceed with the interview and for data sharing.

The data analysis process was conducted directly after the interviews. Information was transcribed and analyzed by adding numbers to each participant. Arabic interviews were translated into English, and similar information was combined.

RESULTS

The data was collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs) with a diverse group of 34 women: 23 South Sudanese and 11 Sudanese female students between 18 and 28 enrolled at public faculties in Cairo. This rich diversity, reflected in the language of the interviews, with some conducted in Arabic and others in English, based on the preferences of the interviewees, underscores the breadth of our

research. The interviews, which took place in person in the Giza governorate on the 5th, 11th, and 13th of April 2023, provided a rich and varied set of responses. The key informants were asked about their ages, nationalities, occupations, if applicable, the current level of education, the name of their faculty, the challenges they face in Egypt, including challenges at work or in accessing education, the coping mechanisms they rely on to handle such challenges if they have a UNHCR card or not, and the type of support received from INGOs. The researcher obtained Verbal consent before the interviews started. The interviews were conducted anonymously without sharing identifying information like names or UNHCR card numbers.

Of the key informants, 14 mentioned that they are registered with UNHCR, while the rest did not register because they were unwilling to register or because they arrived in Egypt in less than a year. The selection of the informants involved non-probability sampling and non-random selection (Shona McCombes, 2023). The selected vital informants are all Sudanese and South Sudanese women living in Cairo, Egypt.

The textual data collected from the interviews was rigorously analyzed using the qualitative method of data analysis. The data collection involved categorizing the interviewees' comments, thoughts, and experiences regarding the gendered risk and protective factors into groups, as detailed in the following section. To ensure the robustness of the analysis, the research utilized Excel software and ATLAS.ti software for qualitative data analysis, facilitating the building of links between different concepts. The paper's focus on higher education as a tool for women's empowerment and the role of international non-governmental organizations working in partnership with UNHCR Egypt was guided by the factors of the social-ecological model, which were used to assess the gendered risk factors and coping mechanisms the female students resort to overcome daily challenges to get their education.

DISCUSSION

Gendered Risk Factors

Gendered factors play an essential role in shaping refugee students' access to higher education; by using the social-ecological framework, the researchers can allocate the risk factors and assess their gendered implication on access to education and beyond (Hunt et al., 2023). Female refugee students face social, economic, psychological, and procedural challenges (Younes & Karkouti, 2023). This interpretation is close to what was mentioned by key informants in the interviews. Of the 34 key informants, 17 mentioned that they do not face any challenges in Egypt. At the same time, 17 stated that they face the following challenges:

- bullying, harassment, and beating incidents on the street
- challenges and difficulties in learning
- financial barriers represented in high tuition fees schools and limited financial resources
- language barriers and issues related to work

Refugee women, such as street harassment and violence incidents, uniquely feel some of these challenges.

Safety Issues in the Street

Regarding the challenges that women face in Egypt, 16 quotations were stated by the key informants referring to bullying, /sexual assault, and physical assault incidents on the streets or public areas when approaching their universities as one of the main challenges they face in Egypt.

Financial Capability

Limited financial capabilities can hinder access to primary and higher education; the high school fees and the lack of money are some causes of not sending refugee children to schools (The New Humanitarian (TNH), 2014). As per the International Students Bureau, international students are to pay the tuition and the enrolment fees in sterling or its equivalent in Euro or American dollars (International Students Bureau, n.d.). However, the Sudanese community pays only 10% of the fees for university education for international students (Egypt & Africa, Egyptian-Sudanese Relations). Limited financial capacities and depletion of resources also lead to an increase in the psychological challenges that refugee students face in Egypt (Ghobrial et al., 2023).

"The main challenge I face is the lack of money to cover my basic needs; it is also difficult to transfer the money to me from my home country to Egypt." 5.1.3 Lack of Access to Basic Education

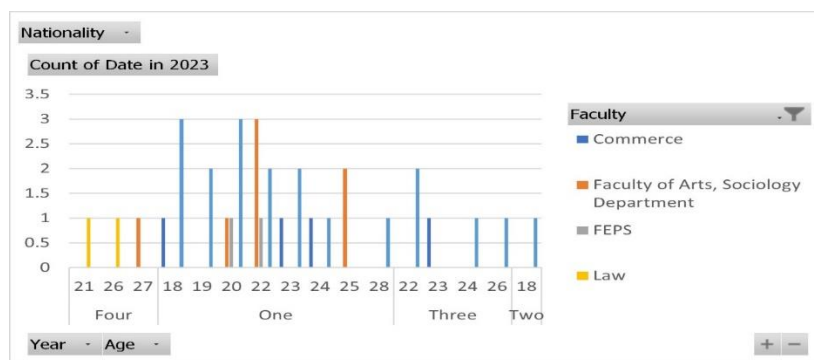


Figure 2. The number of interviewed students per age, faculty, and educational year.

Regarding primary education, Egypt has the most extensive school system in the Middle East, with more than 25 million students, impressive enrolment rates, and gender parity at all levels. Since Nasser's era, the public education system has expanded, making it accessible to many Egyptians (Abdou, 2023). There are four types of schools in Egypt: public schools, experimental language schools, private schools, and international schools. Lack of valid documentation is one of the challenges that refugee women face in Egypt (Ayoub & Tewfik, 2021). The lack of information on the birth certificate issuance process and the lengthy process of issuing residency cards makes matters more difficult for refugee families (Sharafeldin, 2020). Of 28,132 Sudanese, 88% were in schools, and of 4,168 South Sudanese, 60% were enrolled at schools in Egypt (United Nations Egypt, 2022). Lack of access to education can be attributed to several reasons, which are mainly the high cost of education, followed by the lack of valid documentation, then racism and bullying, and other reasons (United Nations Egypt, 2022). Considering the new Sudanese inflows in the wake of the April 2023 crisis, Egypt's demand for primary and higher education has increased. UNHCR and the Egyptian Ministry of Education had a mission to Aswan to assess the needed support to accommodate incoming students (UNHCR, UNHCR EGYPT SUDAN EMERGENCY RESPONSE UPDATE, 2023).

Academic barriers

Some students face challenges in passing all subjects, especially first-year students, due to differences in teaching methods, learning content, and lesson designs (Nell-Müller et al., 2021). The difference in curriculum, competition against nationals, not taking subjects seriously, the opposing viewpoints shared by some older students on the learning environment in Egypt (Nell-Müller et al., 2021), and lack of academic preparation (Long, 2014). Of the 34 key informants, six students mentioned facing learning challenges in their faculties, and five stated they failed some subjects.

Limited Work Opportunities

Many women migrated from Sudan to Egypt and registered at UNHCR, seeking resettlement in a third country (Edward, 2007). They work as domestic cleaners or workers in the informal labor market to earn their living and support their families; however, some of them have been at risk of racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and abuse in public spaces, workplaces, or on the streets (Edward, 2007). Of the 34 key informants, 13 mentioned that they work, and five stated challenges related to work, whether based on personal experience or based on hearing (hearsay).

Gendered Protection Factors

It is difficult to identify the core causes of the stated challenges or the coping mechanisms to deal with and overcome them. One level of the ecological model is challenging to discuss and separate from other circles; however, some factors make one factor more dominant than others when dealing with certain issues.

Microsystem

The Microsystem or the individual factors refer to the biological and personal circumstances that implant more violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The level of education is a determinant of one's unique characteristics that impact one's interactions with the other layers of the social-ecological model and is also an outcome (UNFPA, n.d.). Women rely mainly on themselves to resolve their challenges in Egypt when accessing higher education. Twenty-six key informants referred to individual factors. One of the ways to adapt to unexpected challenges is to keep silent," which was mentioned 13 times, especially in minor incidents where 11 mentioned that they approached their families for support. Four disclosed that they would seek the support of the hosting communities. Of the 34 key informants, 25 are in the first year, where 14 of them are at the Faculty of Science, six are at the Faculty of Arts, three are at the Faculty of Commerce, and two are at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science. One is in year two, five are in year three, and three are enrolled in year four, while 19 are at the Faculty of Science, seven at the Faculty of Arts, Four at the Faculty of Commerce, two at the Faculty of Law and two at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science. The reactions of key informants varied according to the reported challenges. For bullying and gender-based violence (GBV) issues, some participants would rely on their individual factors and personal experience and traits in their reactions to such problems. Some mentioned avoidance and ignorance as tools to handle incidents of bullying, verbal harassment, or even sexual or physical assaults on the street. Some mentioned that they would shout or insult the perpetrators who touched or insulted them. The students who face a language barrier focus more on learning Egyptian slang. For those who failed some subjects, they focus on studying these subjects. The students approach their peers from the same community to help them.

Mesosystem

Different participants confirmed that when facing such incidents on the street, there is no time to approach family or peers, as the incident usually happens quickly, and the perpetrator is usually unknown. They would seek family, peers, or other supporters in cases of major GBV incidents.

Exosystem

Refugee Community

The refugee community has its impact on reshaping refugees' lives and building up their collective resilience after their experiences of trauma or violence. Refugee communities would share this support, especially among people with the same backgrounds and origins (Pulvirenti, 2011). As mentioned by the participants, their communities play an influential role in disseminating the word about the services provided by international organizations or about education, especially for newcomers to Egypt. However, the refugee community can also be a source of threat that impedes their peers from accessing education; an example of this is the gangs targeting youth from refugee communities in different locations in greater Cairo (Ensor, 2014).

Hosting Community

The students can approach hosting community members, whether Egyptian students or their professors, during office hours to ask them to repeat the lectures, especially in cases of non-Arabic speakers. Though in the mentioned bullying and harassment incidents, the perpetrators were Egyptians, some key informants disclosed they would seek the help of the hosting community when encountering major GBV incidents. Despite encountering repeated harassment on the street, they felt safe and respected on the university's premises.

International Non- Governmental Organizations (INGOs)

Civil society organizations play a crucial role in the communities they serve; as per a study on refugees in Germany, refugees with university degrees find higher-paying positions in areas characterized by higher civic engagement (Barreto et al., 2022).

In Egypt, during the recent decade, UN agencies have worked with INGOs, NGOs, faith-led organizations, and community-based organizations (CBOs) to implement their activities (Sadek, 2024). INGOs have been the most flexible players regarding funding (Sadek, 2024).

Of the 34 key informants, 17 disclosed that they need to learn what the services provided by international organizations are in Egypt. While 14 of the 34 are registered with UNHCR Egypt and have yellow or blue cards. Many refugee families register with UNHCR for primary education to receive documentation and a legal residency. After their registration, refugees' families would approach UNHCR implementing partners for education, mainly Catholic Relief Services (CRS), to receive the needed assistance and services. UNHCR disburses the education cash grants, while CRS interviews the refugees' applicants and provides all their follow-up support (UNHCR Global Cash Operations, 2020). Of the 34 key informants, 18 mentioned that they did not hear of CRS and do not know what services they provide, and 16 out of 18 do not have UNHCR documents.

Meanwhile, 16 of the 34 mentioned that they are aware of CRS and that it provides education grants to refugee children. Of the 16, three mentioned that CRS assists their siblings to receive the standard

education grant for primary education. Only one mentioned that she used it to receive the standard education grant for primary education as a student. One disclosed that she receives the preschool education grant for her daughter. Of the 14 students registered with UNHCR, 12 mentioned that they knew CRS services. For higher education, seven of the 16 key informants stated that they applied for higher education scholarships (DAFI) and were rejected. In addition, one student mentioned that she will apply for DAFI in the new academic year. Only one of the 16 students expressed that she is a DAFI scholar; she got accepted into the scholarship for the academic year 2022/2023.

“International organizations work with UN agencies to advocate for migrant and refugee rights in Egypt. However, they might not have all the tools to achieve this target. Public universities are many and located in diverse governorates; thus, we cannot have a focal point in every university” (anonymous, 2022). For the protection and GBV-reported incidents, few interviewees mentioned approaching international organizations specifically in severe cases.

Macrosystem

Higher Education System in Egypt

Per the 1959 Constitution, higher education is a right for all Egyptians. Therefore, the number of public universities has increased tremendously during the following decades, from 4 universities in the 1950s to 24 public universities in 2017 (Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, n.d.). Higher institutes serve undergraduates and have more specialized programs than universities. In addition to public universities in Egypt, Al-Azhar University provides valuable opportunities for higher education graduates of Al-Azhar secondary schools (Karakus, 2020). As per a study conducted to explore the effects of large-scale universities during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, it was noted that the construction of a new university increased the likelihood of women getting higher education degrees as well as had positive impacts on the labor market and marriage outcomes (Elsayed & Shirshikova, 2023).

The demand for higher education increased in Egypt upon launching schemes that guaranteed jobs in the public sector for all university graduates. However, this decision was reversed in the 1980s (Said, 2017). Achieving Sustainable Development goals, including enhancing the quality of education and achieving gender equality, is part of Egypt's Vision 2030 (United National Egypt, n.d.).

The Egyptian higher education system is one of the most extensive systems in the region; it has expanded over the years to meet the increasing demand (Buckner, 2013). Despite the low percentage of international students enrolment rate in higher education in Egypt, which is two percent of the total number of students in the academic year 2021/2022, the enrolment rate of foreigners in tertiary education in the country has increased annually, except for the year 2017/2018 (Statista, 2023). The number of international students who applied for the first year in universities in Egypt in the academic year 2021/2022 was 25701, while 79.7 % of them were accepted, and 2702 students from African countries received scholarships to complete their higher education in Egypt (State et al. Education: A Significant Increase In The Number Of International Students To Study In Egypt, 2022). In Cairo, many Sudanese and South Sudanese nationals are approaching higher education, reflecting the cooperation between the countries (State et al., 2020). Egypt announced 300 fully funded scholarships for South Sudanese students (Libasi, 2022).

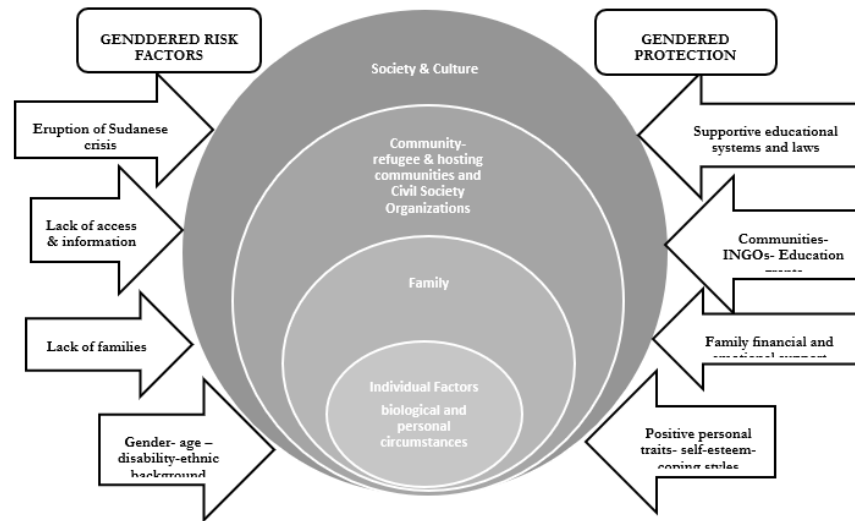


Figure 3: SUD and SSD women have access to the Egyptian Educational System as per the Ecological Model (UNICEF, unicef.org)

CONCLUSION

Access to education is one of the crucial tools for women to achieve socio-economic empowerment. Refugee women rely mainly on individual factors affecting their resilience and adaptability level. They resort to personal ways to solve their daily challenges: some of them work to cover their basic needs, including their tuition fees. They usually work in home-based informal jobs like babysitting and in-house cleaning. The presence of family and peers, as well as the positive engagement with the community, impact refugee women's inclusion and access to education. Peers' support is more recognized in educational challenges; they help one another translate the language and explain complex topics. Interviewed women usually refer to family members like parents, siblings, or extended family members when facing significant challenges, they cannot face independently. Some live on family remittances from their home country or family members who reside in Egypt, such as parents or elder siblings. Despite efforts from international agencies, the situation has become more complicated after the eruption of the Sudanese crisis in mid-April. Egypt is the leading destination for asylum seekers from Sudan and is expected to receive around 300,000 refugees in the coming months.

Refugee women did not refer to INGOs when they were asked about coping mechanisms when facing challenges in Egypt. However, when asked directly about these organizations and by naming them, they replied. Some women need more information on international and civil society organizations supporting women in Egypt. They resort to word of mouth, peers, and the community to seek advice. However, some newcomers and single women might not have strong connections with their communities in Egypt; they would not pursue engagement with their community out of their fears of exploitation or violence as a result of personal experiences and trauma. INGOs fill the gaps to ensure the social protection of women. Some INGOs work in partnership with refugee and host communities and with the affected population to raise their awareness and their capabilities and engagement in making decisions related to them. In Egypt, CRS supported refugee community schools, provided in-kind assistance, and delivered training and awareness-raising sessions to their teachers and administrators.

In conclusion, international organizations are recommended to empower refugee women in Egypt to offer more services to build upon women's individual and collective capabilities and qualifications and help them integrate into the hosting community. They should apply a flexible modality to providing learning opportunities and a flexible approach to education access for all children and youth in Egypt. To ensure safe access to higher education, international organizations should raise awareness among the hosting community about the rights of displaced persons, especially their most vulnerable groups.

The study's potential limitations are represented by qualitative research and phenomenological sampling that cannot be generalized to all refugee populations or even one of the two nationalities included in the research. Another limitation is the ongoing change in the refugee population demographic structure in Egypt because of the political instability in the region. An example of this is the outbreak of the Sudanese crisis that led to the influx of thousands of asylum seekers to Egypt. Therefore, future research is needed to provide comprehensive and updated reliable data that can help solve refugee problems in Egypt.

Recommendations

It is essential to ensure refugee women have access to and control over their economic resources; the more education they receive, the better their lives will be (Psacharopoulos, n.d.). Different opinions were stated by the key informants on the means of improvement, which are summarized in the following points:

Awareness Raising

Raising awareness of the different services provided to women in Egypt is essential. Despite the efforts of the Egyptian government (GOE) to support women in getting access to higher education, the interviewed women needed to recognize this in their narrations. GoE allows Sudanese, South Sudanese, Syrian, and Yemeni (students) to access public schools as nationals without any extra fees. The GoE made a residency waiver for six more months (Sudanese Students Association, n.d.). Awareness raising is crucial for secondary-stage students to know the type of universities, the curriculum taught, the modalities of teaching, especially in practical faculties, and the linkage between higher education and the aspired career path.

Ensuring Access to Basic Education

It is essential to attain education cash-based interventions linked to education, especially in cases of highly vulnerable families and unaccompanied and separated children (UNHCR Global Cash Operations, 2020). It is recommended that these activities be expanded to all displaced children and youth regardless of their legal status. UN agencies and INGOs support building public schools in areas with a high density of children. They need to deliver capacity-building training to teachers and students in public schools and focus on social cohesion and acceptance.

Offering Scholarships for Higher Education

There is only one annual scholarship for higher education for displaced youth in Egypt: DAFI. However, the DAFI Scholarship only covers the tuition fees for those registered with the UNHCR office and with active files. Thus, other migrants not registered with UNHCR or whose files are closed cannot apply for or benefit from DAFI. In addition, though Egypt is one of the largest DAFI hubs, and despite the increasing number of DAFI yearly, it still serves a limited number of youths with strict application criteria that only cover some of the refugee population applying for universities in Egypt. Therefore, UNHCR and INGOs can advocate for and appeal for funding higher education scholarships for women.

Providing Academic Support to Refugee Children and Youth

As explained, Sudanese and South Sudanese students could face academic barriers. To overcome those challenges, international organizations can deliver academic guidance, especially for first-year students who are still new to the system and can also be new in Egypt. CRS Egypt follows up monthly and provides counseling and case management services to higher education (male and female refugees and asylum seekers students); however, this service is limited only to students with valid UNHCR cards and (who are) accepted in DAFI scholarships (CRS, n.d.). Otherwise, CRS would only provide education advising if needed. One of the issues that also impact women's access to higher education is digital literacy (Wickens, 2020).

Economic Empowerment and Inclusion

International organizations can be more influential in impacting women's lives and achieving better access to higher education by providing them with financial assistance to cover their educational costs or basic needs; 15 key informants supported this opinion.

Vocational and Technical Training

Of the 34 key informants, seven mentioned that international organizations could support women in education by delivering courses or training; however, the participants mentioned different types of courses, such as handicrafts, cooking, catering, sewing, computers, vocational training, and Arabic and English language courses. The Arabic courses are helpful, especially for non-Arabic speakers.

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There is only one author for this article.

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