



Reflections on Education and Employment: Relevance to Sustainability

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Abstract

This essay deems education and employment as the two separate but interrelated spheres of socioeconomic life which have consistently been the subject of observation and analysis in the fields of education, sociology, anthropology and development. The focus is on how education relates to employment, women's status, and more recently on the sustainability of development. Recently, critical observations were made of education, charging it with a) irrelevance to the real world (the ivory tower image), b) rigid institutionalization of fields as 'silos' (non-integration across fields), and c) overemphasis on the 'teaching' aspect with disregard for the 'learning' component. From this standpoint it is purported that education failed to meet contemporary needs and should be subjected to a total transformation. The author contends that much of such critique tends to be ideological rather than empirically grounded. This issue will be addressed by bringing in some empirical observations from actual studies to perhaps reach some insights on education that can guide us into thinking about contemporary conditions.

Today education is considered a key element of sustainability in development but needs fresh approaches that are not merely polemical. Some insights can be derived from systematic studies. Systematic studies are not constrained by date. Conclusions can be invoked for fresh understanding. Changing conditions do not alter patterns discerned at a particular period.

1. Comparative Data

Two particular studies which I have published in the 1980s on education and employment can be of such value. One focused on the Arabian country of Bahrain, which was at the time the most prosperous of Arabian countries with a small local population and with the most innovative development projects, and the other on Egypt, the largest Arab country in terms of influence and in population size, which was at the time having a relatively poor economy. The challenges differed in the two cases; Bahrain prior to the depletion of its fossil fuel resource and Egypt with no such wealth producing resource, and a comparison between patterns of education and employment in both cases provides a useful comparative terrain to test the role of society and culture in two situations at different economic phases. Significantly however, both societies shared the Arab-Islamic cultural tradition. In concluding remarks I will bring into the discussion my observations on the Arabian country of Qatar which had replaced Bahrain as the most prosperous country, which similarly had a small local population not exceeding 800,000 people, but which experimented with ambitious projects of sustainability,

showing some successes and some failures. Both Bahrain and Qatar had rich natural resources but relied heavily in the past on hired, imported labor, rather than on their own population to carry out their development.

Egypt, on the other hand, had and still does have a large and youthful population which enables it to carry out national and local projects of development with self-sufficiency. Its constraints were purely economic. Until recently, Egypt relied on tourism as primary economic resource but new discoveries in this decade, of gas and new initiatives in wind and solar energy, moved it out of this dependency on tourism to leading innovation in supplying green energy and on the road to prosperity.

The observations on education and employment are based on statistical figures from the period since the 1952 Revolution which overthrew Egyptian Royalty and British Occupation. Today, the picture is different. The Revolution of 2011-2013 overthrew corrupt leadership in an Egypt that was bankrupt in economy, security and morality (El Guindi 2020; El Guindi 2018). In a dramatic change with a revolutionary paradigm characterized by tight solidarity between the people, the army and the security forces, Egypt has prevailed in the issue of internal security, external existential threats and moved forward on the road to a sustainable future for its 110 million people. It is now mired in water security issues. While this article is focused on what we can learn from systematic patterns in education and employment, it also invokes societal and cultural dimensions within a comparative, cross-cultural perspective that will be shown to be valuable for meeting sustainability challenges.

2. Women's Status

The 1960s and 70s were decades in which there was much concern about the role of education and employment in determining women's status. The United Nations had proclaimed 1975 as "International Women's Year." So it was fitting for studies in the fields of education, sociology, political science, anthropology, and economics singly or collaboratively to address the issue. An enlightening classic study by a demographer contributed immensely to the understanding of the status of women as it related to education and employment by including two relatively ignored factors, the comparative factor and the domain of social structure. In 1971 Youssef published her analysis of sets of data on education and employment in Egypt (1974 [1976 Greenwood Press Reprint]), contributing new insights to an otherwise largely provincial, western focused discussion on the subject (for more on this subject see Youssef 1971; 1972; 1974).

I built on Youssef's findings and undertook a limited comparative study. I analyzed data on the Arabian Gulf country of Bahrain (El Guindi 1985), a country with low population, advanced development at the time, and much affluence, and data from Egypt (El Guindi 1983; El Guindi 1986), a country which prior to and leading to President Mubarak's era was struggling between a high population, slow development, corruption, and relative poverty. The focus of the comparison was women's status, situating it within the emergent movement of 'veiling' by women in the 1970s (El Guindi 1984; El Guindi 2003 [1999]; El Guindi 2016).

3. Affluent Bahrain

Critical to understanding patterns of education and employment are a number of factors. First, data we have used for analysis cover men and women. This comparative element was critical for our understanding of women's status. Second, the data were longitudinal, thus providing historical depth. Third, the factors of society and culture were deployed in providing interpretation to some evident patterns. In the case of Bahrain, the analysis of the data and the evident patterns showed that there were no serious obstacles at the societal and cultural level to women's participation in education at all levels. "Once granted access to education at any level and any specialization ... women's response is consistently positive" (El Guindi 1985, 87). Equally important is the behavioral pattern among men in which they provided full support for women's educational attainment at all levels. Women continue to participate in education, up to the highest levels, without apparent impediment from cultural attitudes or men sharing their society.

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Another important find is that in the case of women, it was found that education and employment are parallel achievements (Khuri 1980). Significantly, it was shown that increasing educational attainment raised women's labor force participation, but not men's. This was in a situation of affluence which made it possible for women to enjoy the benefits of their cultural tradition which granted Arab women a position of high status enabling them to choose not to join the labor force (El Guindi 2003 [1999]).*

4. Economically Challenged Egypt of the 1970s and 1980s

Egypt shares with Bahrain a long Arab-Islamic cultural tradition. The point of cultural support for high status for women is re-affirmed when we look at comparative patterns of education and employment in Egypt which was a developing (poor) country in the 1970s and 1980s, mired in wars of defense with Israel and the West due to issues of liberation from colonial control of Egyptian resources such as the Suez Canal. It was a situation in which the society could not afford the luxury of cultural tradition. What the data on patterns of education and employment in Egypt showed is very revealing about society and culture. The data support the view that among the affluent classes of society, women were protected from public employment for wages. It was considered beneath her special status as a woman to engage in paid work. So the question was not, as in the United States, inequity of pay to women who perform equal work as men, but rather women who do not 'need' to work are allowed to acquire education to the point of qualifying only for 'top' positions in the world of employment, in which case there would be no objection at the cultural level against their employment. The data support this observation. Also significant is the pattern that, after removing constraints on access to education women tend to go into 'difficult' fields and men do not shy away from going into the arts and humanities. There was no gender difference.

* It is interesting for perspective to note at this juncture that when British and American women moved into the labor force it was during WWII only to replace the absence of men in the factories, not by free application and competition. Prior to that women were considered an extension of husbands economically and had no independent economic identity

The education system in Egypt at the time considered the professional fields of medicine, engineering, dentistry, pharmacy, and veterinary medicine to be the most needed for national development and the most difficult to attain, since the national scores for admission to these majors were extremely high.

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On the basis of my study, university enrollment data by sex in Egypt shows that “the percentage increase from 1960/1961 in medicine-pharmacy-dentistry was 748 percent for females and 448 percent for males; in engineering, 1,420 percent for females and 270 percent for males.... All in all, by 1979/1980, the population census shows men increasing at a rate of 3 percent and women at 4 percent at the university in general” (El Guindi 1986: 235). The fact that women chose challenging professional fields is of high significance, particularly in comparison with patterns of higher education in the United States, where women tended to choose ‘soft’ fields. And even after the feminist movement of the 70s in the United States, women were more interested in Gender Study than engineering or medicine. And it is in such comparative situations that the cultural factor must be invoked for an increased understanding.

5. Remarks on the Relevance of Education and Employment to Contemporary Issues of Sustainability

Clearly, globalization is a force that has accelerated the tendency to homogenize the human world. In fact, the human world is not homogeneous, nor are its problems. There are diverse peoples, many cultural traditions, different languages imposing different perceptions and ways of communicating, and various ways of life. In addition, development proceeds at different points and moves at different paces. Populations differ in size and demographic character. Neither homogeneity nor linearity should be assumed. Qatar today is the Bahrain of yesterday. It continues to bask in prosperity while its native population is very small.

To function in today’s global world, the Arabian Gulf country of Qatar is served in almost everything, from labor to sports to national defense, and even in providing spectatorship in sports events, by a large paid, mostly Asian, migrant population in a relationship of patronage with their Qatari employers and with no prospects for citizenship. While aspects of this structure are now being reconsidered, no major change has taken place yet. I like to bring in Qatar as a good case study for many issues of concern. In my capacity as one who has been in the position leading sustainability reform of the social sciences at the Egyptian national university and as one who has taught classes to men and women at Qatar University and the world over, I encountered the problem of over-technologizing. Students had the latest laptops and mobiles and classrooms had high-tech equipment for viewing slides. They

relied heavily on PowerPoint presentations. It became evident that many students simply transferred their ability to memorize to their PowerPoint presentations. Also evident that, in most cases, students demonstrated little or no comprehension of what they presented. There was a robotization in the process. They were being evaluated based on memorized PowerPoint delivery rather than learning.

In order to bring learning into the picture, I had to take a drastic measure. I requested from the Dean to remove the high-tech equipment from the classroom and install a regular chalk board. It was quite a challenge to find chalk for the chalkboard in Qatar. I insisted. Students were not allowed to use laptops, to bring mobiles to the classroom, or present class materials in PowerPoint format. They were to make their presentations using chalk to write on a chalkboard. The results were phenomenal. This switch forced students to 'think', to 'comprehend', and to creatively engage. Other changes are beyond the scope of this article but were equally introduced to meet a challenge that was caused by a rapid dependence on technology which worked against sustainability in education. This is also an example showing the importance of combining teaching and learning to achieve "education". I do not support the popular approach in some circles today that teachers should not teach but must instead learn from students what they need to learn. It must be stressed that teachers should acquire the expertise to teach students to learn. They must accept the challenge today and re-invent themselves to accommodate big changes in modes and content of learning without relinquishing their role as teachers.

For education to be sustainable reform must take into consideration conclusions from systematic studies, must respect different cultural traditions, must not be bound by linear approaches, and integrate learning with teaching while respecting expertise. Innovation and flexibility in teaching are what should be stressed.

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