

Women's Empowerment Through Higher Education as a Key Factor in Sustainable Development

Ahmed A. Alhazmi*

Faculty of Education, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia.

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Abstract: This study presents a comprehensive framework that elucidates the pivotal role of higher education in empowering women, particularly in the Arab context, and its subsequent contribution to sustainable development. The framework is built on four dimensions: economic productivity, health and well-being, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability. Each dimension is underpinned by their respective theoretical perspectives: feminist theory, social capital theory, and the capability approach. Through a meticulous review of existing literature, we illustrate the transformative potential of women's empowerment through higher education in promoting sustainable development. We argue that understanding and applying this framework can inform more effective policies and practices that are specifically tailored to the Arab context, thus contributing to the broader global agenda of sustainable development.

Keywords: women's empowerment, higher education, sustainable development, gender equality, poverty reduction, health and well-being, environmental sustainability.

1 Introduction

The significance of higher education as a catalyst for women's empowerment has gained global recognition. The Arab region, characterized by its unique sociocultural nuances and economic conditions, presents a context in which the empowering influence of higher education on women plays a critical role in fostering sustainable development (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). The focus of this study is to answer the research question: "How can women's empowerment through higher education contribute to sustainable development across dimensions of economic productivity, health and well-being, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability in the Arab context?" We aimed to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework to elucidate this relationship, offering insights that could influence policy and practice.

Higher education has emerged as a potent instrument for social change and economic progress, making significant contributions to the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). For women, especially those in the Arab world, higher education serves as a pathway to challenging traditional gender norms and enhancing their socioeconomic standing. It is a means of empowering women to break free from societal constraints and actively participate in and contribute to the broader sustainable development process (World Bank, 2017).

This study is founded on the pillars of feminist theory, social capital theory, and the capability approach. Feminist theory offers an understanding of how higher education can bolster women's economic productivity, challenge entrenched gender norms, and foster gender equality (Scott, 2014). The social capital theory illuminates how higher education can improve women's health and well-being by creating beneficial social networks and resources (Bourdieu, 2018; Bourdieu & Richardson, 1986). The capability approach, as proposed by Sen (2000), provides a valuable perspective on how higher education can fuel poverty reduction efforts by enabling women to develop capabilities that enhance their quality of life.

Given the distinct socio-cultural dynamics and economic challenges in the Arab world, the role of higher education in empowering women and promoting sustainable development is of paramount importance. Despite significant progress in women's access to education, their participation in the workforce remains substantially lower than that of men (World Bank, 2017). This highlights the urgency for policies and interventions to leverage the empowering potential of higher education for sustainable development.

The objective of this study is to contribute to the discussion on women's empowerment and sustainable development in the Arab context by proposing a theoretical framework that effectively links higher education, women's empowerment, and sustainable development. We contend that this framework offers critical insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, leading to the formulation of more effective strategies for women's empowerment and sustainable development.

*Corresponding author e-mail: ahalhazmi@jazanu.edu.sa

This study presents an in-depth, theoretically grounded, and contextually relevant exploration of the role of higher education in empowering Arab women and its implications for sustainable development. Focusing on the Arab context adds a critical dimension to the global conversation on women's empowerment and sustainable development, underscoring the transformative potential of education in empowering women and promoting sustainable development in a region marked by unique sociocultural and economic characteristics.

2. Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are grounded in three pivotal theories: feminist theory, social capital theory, and the capability approach. Each theory offers unique and complementary insights into the process of women's empowerment through higher education, particularly in the Arab context, and how this empowerment contributes to sustainable development. Together, these theories form a robust theoretical framework that answers our research question and achieves the aims of this study. It facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how women's empowerment through higher education contributes to sustainable development in the Arab context.

2.1 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is pivotal in framing our understanding of women's empowerment through higher education, particularly in the Arab context. It provides the theoretical underpinning of the first dimension of our framework: economic productivity. Feminist theory allows us to explore how higher education can empower Arab women to challenge societal norms, enhance economic productivity, and contribute to sustainable development.

Historically, feminist theory has been instrumental in questioning gender norms and advocating women's rights and equality. It is grounded in the belief that gender is a social construct and societal norms and institutions often reinforce gender disparities (Butler, 2007). It posits that these disparities can be challenged and dismantled to create more equitable societies. In the context of higher education, feminist theory provides a lens through which we can understand how education can be a tool for women's empowerment, enabling them to question and challenge established norms.

In the Arab context, where traditional norms and values often delineate strict roles for women, feminist theory plays a significant role. It helps us understand the barriers Arab women face and the potential for higher education to empower them. Despite progress over the years, Arab women's participation in the labor market remains minimal compared to global averages, and gender disparity remains prevalent (Iqbal, 2018). This disparity extends to decision-making roles, in which Arab women's representation remains disproportionately low (UN Women, 2015).

Higher education can serve as a potent tool for overcoming these disparities. According to feminist theory, education can provide women with the knowledge and skills required to challenge patriarchal norms and demand their rights (Freire, 1970). This can empower them to participate more actively in the economy, enhance their productivity, and contribute to sustainable development.

In this light, our research question has deeper significance. By focusing on the Arab context, we aim to understand the unique barriers and opportunities faced by Arab women. We use feminist theory to uncover how higher education can empower Arab women to challenge societal norms, enhance their economic productivity, and ultimately contribute to sustainable development. In summary, feminist theory is crucial to our theoretical framework. It guides us in understanding the role of higher education in empowering women, particularly in the Arab context.

2.2 Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory forms a critical part of our proposed framework, particularly with regard to understanding the role of higher education in women's health and wellbeing. When applied in the context of the Arab world, this theory enables us to delve into the social implications of women's empowerment through higher education and its contribution to sustainable development.

Social capital theory proposes that social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness have value and can be seen as forms of capital (Putnam, 2000). Social capital can enhance an individual's ability to secure benefits through membership of social networks or other social structures. This is a resource that individuals can draw on to achieve their objectives, including improving their well-being.

In higher education, social capital is accumulated by building relationships with peers, educators, and other individuals within the educational system. These relationships can provide emotional support, access to information and resources, and opportunities for collaboration, which, in turn, can enhance students' well-being and opportunities for success (Coleman, 1988).

The concept of social capital is particularly relevant in the Arab context, where societal and familial ties play significant roles. Although Arab societies are known for their strong family bonds and community ties, women often face restrictions in their social mobility and access to opportunities because of patriarchal norms (Iqbal, 2018; World Bank, 2017). Higher education can serve as a platform for Arab women to build and expand their social networks, providing them with resources and support to enhance their well-being and contribute to their empowerment.

This understanding feeds into our research question. In the context of health and well-being, we explore how higher education could provide Arab women with the social capital necessary to enhance their well-being, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

Our study aims to develop a theoretical framework that illuminates the role of higher education in empowering women and contributing to sustainable development in the Arab context. Social capital theory plays an essential role in this framework, helping us understand how relationships and networks formed through higher education can enhance women's well-being and empowerment. In conclusion, social capital theory offers a valuable perspective on how higher education can contribute to women's empowerment and sustainable development.

2.3 Capability Approach

The capability approach, first developed by Sen (2000), forms an integral part of our theoretical framework and guides our understanding of the role of higher education in poverty reduction, particularly in the Arab context. This approach allowed us to delve deeper into how women's empowerment through higher education contributes to sustainable development.

The capability approach posits that individuals' well-being and quality of life depend on their capabilities – their freedom to do and be valued (Sen, 2000). These capabilities are facilitated by a range of factors including economic resources, social conditions, health, and education. Education is seen as a key determinant of individual capabilities, providing people with the knowledge and skills to enhance their well-being and quality of life.

In the context of higher education, the capability approach provides a lens to understand how education can enhance women's capabilities, empowering them to break free from poverty, enhance their quality of life, and contribute to sustainable development. Higher education provides women with knowledge, skills, and opportunities to pursue their goals and aspirations, thereby enhancing their capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000).

The capability approach carries added significance when applied to the Arab context, where sociocultural norms often limit women's opportunities and capabilities. Despite advances in women's access to education, Arab women often face barriers to their full participation in society and the economy, which limit their capabilities (Iqbal, 2018). Higher education can serve as a powerful tool for enhancing Arab women's capabilities, enabling them to overcome these barriers and contribute to sustainable development.

This understanding is pivotal in answering our research questions. In the context of poverty reduction, we use the capability approach to explore how higher education can enhance Arab women's capabilities, thereby contributing to poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Our study aims to develop a theoretical framework that highlights the role of higher education in empowering women and contributing to sustainable development in the Arab context. The capability approach plays a crucial role in this framework by helping us understand how higher education can enhance women's capabilities and contribute to poverty reduction.

In summary, the capability approach provides a valuable perspective on how higher education can enhance women's capabilities and contribute to poverty reduction and sustainable development. Offering insights into the role of education in enhancing capabilities helps us answer our research question and achieve the aims of this study in the Arab context.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Higher Education: Key to Empowerment

Substantial evidence supports the transformative role of higher education in promoting women's empowerment, specifically in developing countries. Traditionally, women have encountered numerous challenges in accessing higher education, often because of societal discrimination and gender-specific roles in male-dominated societies (Batool et al., 2013; Khokhar, 2018). Consequently, women's opportunities for higher education are often fewer than those of men, with sociocultural and economic values creating significant obstacles (Marie, 2003; Yousuf, 2019). This discrepancy is manifested in various sociocultural impediments, including patriarchal culture, poverty, fear of sexual harassment, and lack of governmental facilitation (Joseph, 2015; Khan et al., 2015; Leach, 2013; Mehmood et al., 2018).

Despite these challenges, studies have affirmed that higher education can considerably improve the status of women in families and communities (Nawaz et al., 2017). Higher education has been associated with an increased awareness of rights, better decision-making, and gender equality, particularly at the family level. This boosts women's self-esteem and participation in the decision-making processes.

Furthermore, higher education increases women's income levels, and subsequently, their independence, confidence, and societal participation (Al-deen, 2019). It also enhances their status within the family and society by promoting their participation in economic activities, political choices, and overall societal development (Jayaweera, 1997). Studies from various global perspectives substantiate the transformative potential of higher education.

Borgohain (2021) asserted that higher education is instrumental in nurturing women's empowerment, offering a pathway for women to discover and fully utilize their potential. Higher education offers comprehensive personal development and an avenue for economic independence (Borgohain, 2021).

Patel (2020) emphasized that women's empowerment through education is a vital tool for achieving gender equality, a principle enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Given that women comprise approximately 48.2% of the Indian population, higher education is crucial for the socioeconomic development of the nation (Patel, 2020).

Naz et al. (2020) concurs, reiterating the significant relationship between higher education and women's empowerment and its subsequent socioeconomic ramifications. Similarly, Packianathan et al. (2016) highlight higher education as essential to improving the quality of women's lives, furthering their empowerment.

Agency, as Stromquist (2015) points out, is pivotal to women's empowerment and education. The knowledge acquired through education serves as a significant empowerment tool for women.

Turning to the Arabian Peninsula, Alsharari (2021) demonstrated that high-quality academic and educational services positively impact female students' satisfaction and education, raising the educational standards for Saudi women. Similarly, Sim (2020) found that Emirati women possess strong aspirations for higher education, particularly towards earning doctoral degrees.

However, exploring this transformative role in various sociocultural contexts remains an open research avenue. Despite these advancements, women still face discrimination at societal and institutional levels. Their struggle for fundamental rights is ongoing (Dilli et al., 2019). These challenges are an area of interest for the research community and offer an opportunity to highlight the role of higher education in mitigating these issues (Friedman, 2004).

The relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development has been acknowledged in numerous studies (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [ESCAP], 2016; Le Blanc, 2015). Empowering women is recognized as an important factor in advancing socioeconomic development, reducing poverty, and driving sustainability (Benería, et al., 2015; ESCAP, 2016).

As defined by the Brundtland Commission, sustainable development refers to the ability to meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Brundtland, 1987). One of the key components of sustainable development is social equity, which emphasizes that the benefits of development should be distributed equally across various demographics (Le Blanc, 2015). According to this definition, the empowerment of women, who constitute half the population, worldwide, is critical for achieving sustainable development.

Economic productivity is one of the main areas in which the relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable development is evident. Women's higher education can enhance their skills and knowledge, increase their productivity, and, consequently, contribute to economic growth. This claim is supported by various studies such as Kabeer (2016), who found that women's higher education significantly increases their earnings and contributes to economic growth.

Additionally, women's higher education contributes to improving social welfare, reducing poverty, and promoting environmental sustainability (Benería et al., 2015). Women with higher education are more likely to engage in behaviors that promote environmental sustainability and support policies that favor environmental conservation (ESCAP, 2016).

Moreover, women's empowerment contributes to enhanced well-being at both the individual and societal levels, which is a key pillar of sustainable development. According to Benería et al. (2015), women's empowerment through higher education can lead to improved health outcomes for women and their families. Women with higher education are more likely to make informed health-related decisions, thereby improving their well-being and that of their families (Benería et al., 2015).

In conclusion, the interconnection between women's empowerment and sustainable development is well-established in the literature. Women's empowerment, facilitated by higher education, contributes to sustainable development through

increased economic productivity, improved wellbeing, reduced poverty, and enhanced environmental sustainability. Thus, investing in women's higher education is of paramount importance for achieving sustainable development.

3.2 Women's Empowerment and Enhanced Economic Productivity through Higher Education

Women's education, particularly at higher levels, significantly affects their economic productivity. This impact is directly felt in areas such as employment opportunities, income levels, and general societal prosperity. Becker's (1964) human capital theory stresses that education is a critical investment that enhances an individual's skills and knowledge, thereby amplifying their productivity. When applied to women, higher education can open doors to a broader range of job prospects, often accompanied by improved remuneration and working conditions (Goldin et al., 2006).

Extensive empirical evidence underlines the positive correlation between women's higher education, employment rates, and income levels. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2017) indicated that women with higher education are more likely to participate in the labor market. A study by The World Bank (2011) also discovered a positive association between women's education and their earnings, with each additional year of schooling increasing women's earnings by approximately 10-20%.

The profound effect of women's education on economic productivity is particularly pronounced in developing countries. Psacharopoulos and Patrinos' (2004) research on the global impact of education on earnings shows that the returns on education for women in developing regions often surpass those for men. This implies that investing women's education can result in high productivity.

However, the benefits of women's education transcend those of individual productivity and earnings. Educated women are more likely to engage in the formal labor market, leading to more extensive economic growth. Esteve-Volart (2004) argues that gender inequality in education significantly obstructs economic development. In contrast, countries with reduced gender inequality in education have experienced accelerated economic growth (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009).

Furthermore, women's economic empowerment through higher education also promotes societal prosperity. Higher incomes not only enhance their living standards but also benefit their families and communities. As women are often more likely than men to allocate a larger portion of their income to family welfare, the economic empowerment of women often results in improved health and educational outcomes for children. This leads to future productivity and sustainable development (Duflo, 2003).

In conclusion, women's empowerment through higher education can elevate economic productivity at both individual and societal levels. In addition to improving women's employment prospects and earnings, higher education can stimulate broader economic growth and societal prosperity. This emphasizes the crucial role of women's empowerment in the path toward sustainable development.

3.3 Women's Empowerment and Enhancement of Health and Well-being through Higher Education

The link between women's education, healthcare access, and health outcomes has been extensively documented in scholarly literature. Education equips women with the knowledge and skills that permit them to make decisions conducive to their family's health. Additionally, education frequently corresponds to higher socioeconomic status, which subsequently facilitates better access to healthcare services (Grossman, 2006).

Higher education has a positive influence on women's health knowledge and healthcare-seeking behaviors. Numerous studies illustrate that educated women are more likely to comprehend health-related information, adopt preventative health measures, and utilize healthcare services when required (Baker et al., 2011). For instance, educated women are more likely to access antenatal and postnatal services, thereby improving their maternal and child health outcomes (Cleland & van Ginneken, 1988).

Empirical evidence also implies that women's higher education can guide informed decision-making regarding their reproductive health. Higher education equips women with an improved understanding of family planning, leading to lower fertility rates and enhanced child health (Martin, 1995). In a study conducted by Caldwell (1986), it was inferred that education, particularly female education, significantly influenced children's health status.

Improvements in women's health and well-being have broad societal implications. Healthy women are better positioned to engage in social, economic, and political activities that boost their societal productivity and development (World Health Organization, 2009). Furthermore, women often play a pivotal role in managing the health of their families. Consequently, educated women can contribute significantly to the overall health and well-being of their families and communities (Wagstaff & Claeson, 2004).

In cultural contexts such as Saudi Arabia, where societal and cultural norms traditionally confine women's roles, higher education equips women with the knowledge and confidence to seek health services and make informed health decisions. Such empowerment can result in healthier families and communities, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

Higher education serves as a potent instrument for women's empowerment, fostering improved health and well-being among women and their families. This underscores its pivotal role as a key component in the attainment of sustainable development.

3.4 Women's Empowerment and Poverty Reduction through Higher Education

The impact of women's education on poverty reduction and social mobility has been a significant focus of developmental research. Women's education is not only a basic human right but also a catalyst for poverty alleviation and social mobility (Bloom et al., 2006). Education endows women with the skills and competencies required for labor market participation, thereby augmenting their income-earning capabilities and opportunities for upward social mobility. Moreover, educated women are likely to marry later and have fewer, healthier, and better-educated children, thereby interrupting the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Cleland, 2009; Summers, 1992).

Various empirical studies have demonstrated that higher education levels empower women to disrupt poverty cycles. For example, Duflo (2012) discovered that women's education in Indonesia significantly mitigated poverty by increasing women's labor market participation. Similarly, in a cross-national study, Schultz (2002) contended that enhancing educational attainment, especially among women, was significantly linked to poverty reduction.

The impact of poverty reduction extends beyond women and their families into broader societal structures. As education empowers women, their increased income and labor force participation contribute to economic growth and development (Klasen, 2002). Furthermore, women's education can contribute to a more equitable and just society by challenging traditional gender norms and advocating women's rights and status (Sen, 2000). In societies such as Saudi Arabia, where gender disparities remain prevalent, women's empowerment through higher education can function as a transformative force, challenging the status quo and fostering social justice and equality.

Therefore, women's education plays a crucial role in disrupting the intergenerational transmission of poverty, fostering social mobility, and contributing to societal equity. As women's empowerment through higher education increases, the emergence of a more equitable and just society is becoming increasingly likely.

3.5 Women's Empowerment and Enhanced Environmental Sustainability

Analyzing the relationship between women's education, environmental cognizance, and sustainability is increasingly important in combatting environmental degradation and climate change. Research has recognized a strong correlation between women's education and environmental responsibility (Buckingham-Hatfield, 2000). Educated women exhibit superior environmental knowledge and are more inclined to adopt sustainable practices, including reducing consumption, recycling, and supporting eco-friendly policies (Zelezny et al., 2000).

Higher education plays an instrumental role in cultivating environmentally responsible behavior. It presents a forum where women are exposed to environmental issues and equipped with the skills to tackle them. McCright (2010) found that women with higher levels of education displayed elevated levels of environmental concern compared with those with lower education levels. Consequently, women's higher education has emerged as a powerful tool for promoting environmental literacy and sustainability.

Moreover, the ramifications of women's empowerment through higher education are significant in fostering a more sustainable planet. As women become more educated, their influence within their families and communities expands, enabling them to initiate change and advocate sustainable practices (Deda & Rubian, 2004). Additionally, their augmented participation in decision-making, both domestically and publicly, permits them to sway policies towards more sustainable development (Dankelman, 2010).

Therefore, higher education functions as a crucial conduit for empowering women to become impactful agents of environmental change. By enhancing their environmental literacy and awareness, higher education prepares women to lead the transition towards a sustainable future.

4. Theoretical Framework: Women's Empowerment Through Higher Education

Drawing on feminist theory, social capital theory, and the capability approach, we establish a theoretical framework that captures the multidimensional impact of women's higher education on their empowerment. The framework considers the following dimensions.

Dimension 1. Economic Productivity (Feminist Theory)

Women's higher education significantly influences economic productivity by opening diverse employment opportunities and increasing their income potential (Becker, 1964; Goldin et al., 2006). Feminist Theory underscores the transformative role of education in challenging traditional gender roles, contributing to societal prosperity (Duflo, 2003; Esteve-Volart, 2004; ILO, 2017; Klasen, 2002; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004; World Bank, 2011).

Dimension 2. Health and Well-being (Social Capital Theory)

Higher education enhances women's health knowledge and healthcare-seeking behaviors, leading to improved health outcomes (Baker et al., 2011; Cleland & Van Ginneken, 1988; Grossman, 2006). Social capital theory situates these gains within a larger social network, emphasizing wider societal implications, particularly in the context of societal productivity and development (Caldwell, 1986; Martin, 1995; Wagstaff, 2004; World Health Organization, 2009).

Dimension 3. Poverty Reduction (Capability Approach)

Consistent with the capability approach, higher education equips women with the vital skills and competencies that foster poverty reduction and social mobility (Bloom et al., 2006; Cleland, 2009; Duflo, 2012; Summers, 1992). This dimension further underscores the role of education in breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and promoting social justice and equality (Klasen, 2002; Schultz, 2002; Sen, 2000).

Dimension 4. Environmental Sustainability (Integration of Feminist Theory and Capability Approach)

Understanding the relationship between women's education and environmental sustainability is essential for combating environmental degradation and climate change. Higher education promotes environmental responsibility and sustainable practices among women, which is consistent with the feminist theory and the capability approach (Aguilar, 2004; Buckingham-Hatfield, 2000; Dankelman, 2010; McCright, 2010; Zelezny et al., 2000).

5. Conclusion

This study has methodically delved into the transformative impact of women's higher education on societal development, guided by key theoretical frameworks such as feminist theory, social capital theory, and the capability approach. Our exploration centered on four significant dimensions—economic productivity, health and well-being, poverty reduction, and environmental sustainability—and their intersections with women's empowerment.

The first dimension, economic productivity, illuminates how higher education significantly enhances women's participation in the workforce and their earning potential, resonating with the principles of feminist theory. By equipping women with essential skills and competencies, higher education paves the way for a wider range of occupations, increased incomes, and improved societal prosperity.

In the health and well-being dimension, anchored in social capital theory, we found that education goes beyond economic impact, empowering women to make informed health-related decisions for themselves and their families. The role of education in facilitating better health outcomes, fostering healthcare-seeking behaviors, and subsequently improving overall societal productivity has become strikingly clear.

Our study further elucidated how higher education serves as a catalyst for poverty reduction, which is consistent with the capability approach. By expanding women's capabilities, especially labor market participation and social mobility, education disrupts the intergenerational transmission of poverty, promotes social mobility, and contributes to societal equity.

Finally, the environmental sustainability dimension highlights the significant correlation between women's education and environmental responsibility, reflecting the combined perspective of feminist theory and the capability approach. It reveals how higher education can equip women with knowledge and awareness, leading to environmentally responsible behaviors and sustainable practices.

This study underscores the critical role of women's higher education in fostering a more equitable and sustainable society. This has amplified the call for policies and initiatives that enhance women's access to quality higher education, emphasizing that the empowerment of women through education is instrumental in driving broad-based societal development, thereby contributing to a sustainable future.

6. References

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