A Qualitative Research of the Causes of Iranian Female Students Immigration to Developed Countries

Sareh Nazari[1] & Fariba Seyedan[1]

[1] Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Al-Zahra University, Tehran, Iran

Correspondence: Sareh Nazari, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Al-Zahra University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: sarehnazari36@yahoo.com

Abstract

According to the latest data from United Nations population Fund-UNFPA-in 2015, 244 million people, or 3.3 per cent of the world's population lived outside their country of origin. A number of these migrants are skilled and educated women. This movement usually occurs from developing to developed countries in the world like the US, the UK, Germany, England and so on, to achieve new opportunities and a better life. Iran is a developing country, which is suffering from this serious issue. The aim of this study is to identify the causes of Iranian female students' immigration to developed countries from the perspective of female students of Al-Zahra University. The present qualitative study included 20 master and doctoral female students who were completing their degree programs at this University, through purposive sampling. Data was collected via in-depth, semi structured interviews which were audio-recorded and analyzed by Content analysis method. The main themes and sub-themes were "Economic" (including Unemployment, Low income, Inconsistency between field of education and jobs, Gender discrimination in employment and payments delays), "Educational" (Lack of proper facilities in university, professors' lack of knowledge, lack of public respect for well-educated people in society, and Women's restrictions in selecting certain academic disciplines), "Socio-political" (Limitation of individual freedom, political pressure, Lack of freedom of speech) and "Personal and Familial" Issues (marriage and parental related factors). The findings present a deeper understanding of the main causes of female migration and why these educated women are less likely to return to Iran.

Keywords: Iran, female students, immigration, developed countries

1. Introduction

People often think of migration as a recent phenomenon. However, migration has been a feature of human existence for centuries. Humans have always migrated in groups and as individuals to seek freedom from war and conflict, to escape hunger and poverty, to find new opportunities (Anitha & Pearson, 2013). One type of migration is international migration, i.e. crossing the borders of a country. International migration is a global phenomenon that is growing in scope, complexity and impact.

The migration of women has always been an important component of international migration. In recent years the term "Feminization of migration" has become commonly used. Before the 1970s and the 1980s, researchers had not noticeably observed female migrants. For the first time, in the early 1970s, the phrase "male and their families" which was the code for "male migrants and their wives and children" revealed the number of female international migrants (Boyd & Grieco, 2003). In fact in the past, women often migrated officially as dependent family members of other migrants, while more women are now migrating independently in search of new opportunities and a better life.

One of these new opportunities for women migrants is educational opportunities. The number of female students enrolled in tertiary education is increasing in all parts of the world. Female students look forward to cross-border education, first and foremost, as a means to securing better career opportunities. Degrees received in major host countries are perceived as academically superior to those in their home countries, and the cultural experience and acquisition of a foreign language serve to enhance students' skills and competitiveness. These students may also choose to study in a country where income levels are higher than those of their home country in hopes of remaining, and gaining an advantage for employment from having studied in that country (Varghese, 2008).

The term "brain drain" appears to have gained wide usage in the late 1960s when growth in the migration of skilled and qualified people from developing to developed countries accelerated. Half of these educated and skilled people are women. Most of these women hope to gain more experience and knowledge by studying in developed countries which have remarkable gender equality. When significant numbers of female educated citizens leave the country, that country stands to lose its critical human capital, that in the long term, will reduce the GDP growth of the country (Lowell, 2001). Some scientists suggest that in addition to this issue, developing countries are suffering from another problem. Many of the educated women who used to work as professor, engineers, and managers due to the lack of opportunities in their countries are compelled to take on jobs like cleaning hotel rooms, garages, etc. This phenomenon has been described no more as "brain drain" but as "brain waste" (Martin, 2003).

In this study, we focused on the perspective of Iranian female students about the causes of immigration to developed countries. For this reason, we sampled 20 masters and doctoral female students who were completing their degree programs at Al-Zahra University. Because of increasing the feminization of international migration and the vulnerability of female migrants to discrimination, this study concentrated on female students' migration.

1.1 Definition of Brain Drain

According to Oxford Advanced Learners dictionary brain drain is "the movement of highly skilled and qualified people to a country where they can work in better conditions and earn money". Cambridge Online Dictionary defines "When large numbers of educated and very skilled people leave their own country to live and work in another one where pay and conditions are better". Brain–drain can also be named as "human capital flight" because it refers to the emigration of the intelligent and the well-educated for better conditions.

1.2 A Background on Brain Drain in Iran

The term brain-drain was introduced by observing the emigration of various technologists, doctors, and scientists, from various developing countries to more developed nations like the US, the UK, Germany, England, etc. Now the phenomenon of brain drain has a conversed effect for a country in which people are getting migrated to and brain-drain of a nation becomes brain-gain for that particular destination country (Raveesh, 2013). Usually all developing countries like Iran are suffering from brain drain and developed countries like USA are having brain gain from this phenomenon.

Brain drain has been a negative socioeconomic phenomenon in Iran for decades. It causes the loss of valuable human resources and constrains the country's economic development. According to the states of Iran's minister of Science, Research and Technology, Reza Fraji Dana, "Every year, about 150,000 highly talented people emigrate from Iran, equaling an annual loss of $150 billion to the economy. Actually, Iran has the highest brain drain rate in the world. An estimated 25% of all Iranians with post-secondary education now live in "developed" countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).The fact is that Iran has experienced one of the highest levels of brain drain over the past decades.

In 1979, the main reason for leaving Iran was to secure a higher educational degree. However, the fact is that in post-revolutionary (Note 1) decades a growing number of such students never returned to the country. Later, the Iran-Iraq war became the main reason for a large wave of emigration. In the late 1990s, under President Mohammad Khatami, the trend reversed and the country witnessed a significant wave of Iranians returning to Iran. The Khatami administration also managed to attract a number of business families and students. Albeit, the trend reversed after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fear of a US attack on Iran. After that, the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 compelled many citizens to migrate. The main destinations were North America, Europe and Dubai. Finally the events of 2009 (Note 2) put an end to the government's hope to lure a significant number of the Iranian diaspora back to the country. In fact, the post-election government clampdown intensified the desire of many educated Iranians to leave the country.

In the past few years, companies in Iran have faced brain drain as a problem. There is no doubt that the election of Hassan Rouhani has generated a positive mood among the Iranian diaspora, but some practical issues such as technological infrastructure (that is, the Internet), health care, air pollution, traffic patterns and lack of safety in transportation deter many Iranians from thinking about returning to their homeland (Khajehpour, 2014).

2. Research Methodology

This research was a qualitative study that explored the views of the students of Al-Zahra University in Tehran. It focused on the main reasons of studying and living abroad. The reason for selecting this university was since the research focused on female students and this university is exclusively for girls; thus, it helped us to freely select a sample with variations in terms of age, socio-economic status, and academic backgrounds.

2.1 Participants Characteristics

Inclusion criteria included masters and doctoral degree holders who wanted to immigrate to developed countries to study and live. The subjects included 10 masters students and 10 doctoral students; the researchers selected the sample from different majors such as Management, History, Psychology, Accounting, Biology, Computer Science, Religious Studies, Philosophy, Economics, English language and literature, Chemistry, Sports Biology, Mathematics, Sociology, Physical Science, Painting, and Women's Studies. All of these female students were under 35 years old and had applied for permanent residency of a foreign country and most of them did not want to return to Iran. The destinations of these Iranian female students were Northern, Southern and Western Europe, North America and Asia- pacific regions.

Table 1. Participants characteristics

Name	Degree	Major	Age	Marital Status	Destination
Akram	MA*	Management	24	Single	France
Bahar	PhD*	History	34	Single	Spain
Elham	MA	Psychology	26	Single	U.S.A
Fatemeh	PhD	Accounting	29	Married	Finland
Leila	PhD	Biology	32	Married	Germany
Mitra	MA	Computer Science	29	Single	Denmark
Mahsa	MA	Religious Studies	25	Married	U.S.A
Maryam	MA	Philosophy	31	Single	Canada
Mina	PhD	Phycology	34	Married	Australia
Negar	PhD	Economics	30	Single	Norway
Niki	MA	English language and literature	27	Married	England
Nazanin	PhD	Chemistry	27	Single	Sweden
Parisa	PhD	Science Education	26	Single	England
Robab	MA	Sports Biology	26	Single	Australia
Roya	PhD	Industrial Engineering	31	Married	Sweden
Sahar	PhD	Mathematics	28	Single	U.S.A
Shahrzad	PhD	Sociology	35	Single	Netherland
Sara	MA	Physical Science	24	Single	Germany
Yasaman	MA	Painting	27	Single	Italy
Zahra	MA	Women's Studies	29	Married	Canada

Note: * Master (MA) and Doctoral (PhD) Degree

2.2 Data Collection

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, and one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. Participants were asked about their intentions to migrate from Iran to a developed country. The starting questions were "Why are you going abroad?" Follow-up questions were also used to clarify the participant's reasons. Students were interviewed in a safe and private place by the corresponding author. Before conducting the study, a talk with students about the objective of the study was done and their informed oral consent was obtained. The confidentiality of their answers and comments were assured. They had the right to withdraw from the study at any time during or after the interview and could ask the researchers to return their audio-taped interviews. Each interview on average lasted from 20 to 30 minutes on average. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

2.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data. Content analysis of the interviews was done at the

same time as the first interview began. All the interviews were read several times, and the main titles, themes and subthemes were identified. From these transcripts, 23 codes were identified, including four main themes of economic, educational, socio-political, and personal and familial issues, and 14 related subthemes. Credibility, dependability, and confirmation of ability were also examined. The main themes and sub-themes are shown in Table 2, as follows:

Table 2. Main themes and sub-themes which were extracted from interviews

Main Themes	Sub-themes
1. Economic Issues	Unemployment,
	Low income,
	Inconsistent between field of education and jobs,
	Gender discrimination in employment and
	Payments delays.
2. Educational Issues	Lack of proper facilities in university,
	Professors' lack of knowledge,
	Lack of public respect for well-educated people,
	Women's restrictions in selecting certain academic disciplines.
3. Socio-Political Issues	Limitation of individual freedom,
	Political pressure,
	Lack of freedom of speech.
4. Personal and Familial Issues	Marriage,
	Parents' related factors.

3. Findings

This section is dedicated to the findings and results of the interviews' data. The four main themes and 14 sub-themes emerging from this study are:

3.1 Economic Issues

In the present globalized world, migration of people from one country to another for employment has become a common phenomenon (Saif Ahmad, 2014). The primary motive for migrants, recorded by the census as well as the NSS, is an important indicator of how mobility is influenced by conditions of the labour market (Srivastava & Sasikumar, 2003). Most migrants, who change the place of residence, move for employment reasons rather than business motives.

In this study, most female students complained about the economic issues in Iran. These economic factors were "Unemployment, Low income, Inconsistency between field of education and jobs, Gender discrimination in employment and Payments delays". For example, one student stated her concern about jobs in her field of expertise:

"I am a master student majoring in philosophy, but nowhere could I find a job related to my field even as a simple high school teacher; anywhere I go to work they ask what the use of philosophy is. I had to make a living; I became secretary of an advertising company and I do irrelevant work to my education." (Maryam, Philosophy)

Some of these students believed that women are more likely to be unemployed than men and female unemployment remains an issue of concern. Another participant emphasized on gender gap at work. She noticed that:

"I tried to find a job, where the high priority was given to men and not intended to work with women, I had to choose another job. My new job is a sales assistant at a chain store. It doesn't make a living." (Negar, Economics)

Other students told us that some progress has been made in reducing these gender gaps, but improvements are

trivial and there is a huge gap between women and men in employment and labour force participation rate. The gender gap in employment and job quality means that Iranian women are not supported by their government. This is one of the important concerns which was also mentioned by some female students.

Most participants hoped to move to a developed country which has a remarkable equality rate at work. In fact, these educated women are looking for higher paying jobs, a better quality of life, and a superior economic outlook.

3.2. Educational Issues

In addition to economic difficulties, a number of other interviewed students mentioned "lack of proper facilities in university, professors' lack of knowledge, lack of public respect for well-educated people in society, and women's restrictions in selecting certain academic disciplines".

A 25-year-old female student for masters in accounting talked about the incompetent universities in Iran:

"I was an undergraduate student in another city and now I study for Masters in Tehran, beside my family. In fact, in return of being far from family and friends I could not have things that I wanted from graduate university, and a huge difference existed between my expectations from the university with its reality. Unfortunately there were few things I achieved. This happened in the master's level as well, but this time I'm with my family and friends." (Mahsa, Religious Studies)

Another student objected to the way professors teach and work with students, she said:

"Professors are not strict in the University. It is true that the student must be consistent but the seriousness of the instructor is vital. Now it is common that an instructor with Masters' degree has gone overseas and got a degree from a foreign but not well-known university, and has the job of instruction in university. Many professors do not have much education and do not care. In essay writing, we are expected to do all the paper and write their names without receiving the least help. We have a shortage of good and compassionate instructors." (Bahar, History)

Participants were not satisfied by Iranian Universities and their facilities. Interviewees claimed that studying in developed countries is a very exciting, unique and useful experience. Studying in a high ranking university enables students to work with top-notch researchers in the world. Students told us about some advantages that these universities have, such as modernized educational systems to allow superior training.

3.3 Socio-Political Issues

The role of social and political issues in the migration cannot be overlooked. Most of the female students complained about "Limitation of individual freedom, Political pressure, and Lack of freedom of speech" in the political atmosphere.

Sahar complained about the lack of freedom of speech in and outside university in general gatherings:

"We did not have freedom of thought and expression." (Sahar, Mathematics)

Female participants believed that everyone has the right to have freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference. The right to have freedom of thought, conscience and religion are some essential human rights which Iranian female students feel the lack of them. They assumed this issue will be solved with migration. As an example, hijab is a strong obligation that bothers some women who do not like it. However, hijab is known as a private and personal choice in most countries in the world. Moreover, some of those participants were dissatisfied with many social problems and anomalies in the city. One of the students said:

"I'm tired of street tensions. How long do we want to fight in the streets and curse each other? I'm really tired of the low culture of urbanism, of its heavy traffic. When will we learn that trash must be in the trash bin and not on the pavement?" (Fatemeh, Accounting)

Most of these female students were frustrated by the environmental tensions and stress. They thought that people of other countries are much calmer. Female students' mental images of developed countries and their democratic process originated from their experiences of traveling overseas.

3.4 Personal and Familial Issues

A tiny fraction of participants explained that they had no plan to migrate until they faced a specific situation. For instance, Sara told about her father's job:

"My father is a reporter and my mother is dead. There are only me and my brother who is married and lives in

another city. I take care of my father. He is going to Germany to work and I have to go with him" (Sara, Physical Science)

Shahrzad talked about her mother, who had been living for years in the Netherlands:

"My father and mother divorced a long time ago. I lived with my father, but now I've decided to go abroad to my mother and study there." (Shahrzad, Sociology*)*

Unfortunately, participants did not point out the disadvantages of migration to a foreign country and they just had a dramatic rose colored view of living abroad. We can say that immigration is not just a physical journey but also an emotional one and the immigration process can be stressful and difficult to navigate. Therefore, migration is not always so positive. The results of this phenomenon can be drastic, leading to discrimination and disempowerment, in contrast to students' imagination.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Over the past few decades, migration – both international and internal – has increased dramatically. International migration to industrialized countries is important; evidence from UNICEF indicates that around 40 per cent of migrants leave a developing country to go to a developed country.

In this study we discussed that the proportion of foreign-born people in rich countries has tripled since 1960, and the emigration of highly skilled people from poor countries has been accelerated. The term "brain drain" refers to the international transfer of human capital resources, and it applies mainly to the migration of highly educated individuals from developing to developed countries (Docquier, 2014). Sociologists believe that migration can be beneficial for migrants and economically beneficial for both countries of origin and host countries; albeit, with present economic and trading structures, it is the rich and powerful countries that benefit the most. Some of these advantages for powerful countries are: absorbing new ideas, and a rise in skilled people and human resources.

Iran is one of the major nations in the world which is suffering from brain drain seriously at the present. There are various causes for this phenomenon in Iran. These causes can be categorized into "Push Factors" and "Pull Factors". The Push Factors are negative characteristics of Iran such as "unemployment, political instability, absence of research facilities, employment discrimination, economic underdevelopment, lack of freedom, and poor working conditions". Pull factors are the positive characteristics of the developed countries like "higher paying jobs and a better quality of life, superior economic outlook, the amount of foreign training, relatively stable political environment, a modernized educational system to allow superior training, intellectual freedom, and rich cultures ". In this research we focused on the views of the students of Al-Zahra University in Tehran about the main reasons of studying and living abroad. These female students were seeking new educational, social and political opportunities. Many of them had planned to migrate independently without their family. Independent female migrant students are significantly affected by the absence of protection and support from their families, and by the challenges of their new situation after migration.

Iranian female students are affected by migration, but the understanding of its effects is highly limited. Data collection, monitoring and research are needed to a better understanding of how migration affects the society, families and female students in this country; to conduct policies to reduce impacts, and to enable families and female students to make informed and correct decisions about the movement.

Finally, from the authors' perspective, the government should find a solution for this problem. Otherwise, we may see more and more young women in the process of brain drain and face this massive national loss.

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Notes

Note 1. The Iranian Revolution refers to the events involving the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was supported by the United States and its eventual replacement with a national republic under the Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, supported by various lefties, Islamic organizations and Iranian students' movement.

Note 2. Protest against the 2009 Iranian presidential election results (a disputed victory by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad) and in support of opposite candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi occurred in major cities nationwide from 2009 into 2010. The protest was titled as Iranian Green movement.

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