



African refugees' access to higher education: Voices from Egypt

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Abstract

Using Pierre Bourdieu's *capital framework* as a theoretical lens, this qualitative phenomenological case study explored the challenges that obstruct African refugee students' access to higher education in Egypt. Fifteen African refugee students (ten male and five female) in Egypt responded to semi-structured interview questions to express their views regarding the challenges that prevent them from attending public and private post-secondary institutions. The authors identified these challenges and classified them into three thematic categories: sociocultural, economic and psychological barriers. In addition to these barriers, the lack of relevant laws and policies governing refugee access to higher education in Egypt and the absence of support systems have exacerbated an already dire situation for refugee students. The authors conclude their article with a number of recommendations to enhance and facilitate the access of refugees to higher education in their host communities.

Keywords Higher education · African refugees · Egypt · University access · Refugee students

Résumé

L'accès des réfugiés africains à l'enseignement supérieur : témoignages d'Égypte – Passant par le prisme de la théorie du capital de Pierre Bourdieu, cette étude phénoménologique qualitative examine les difficultés empêchant les étudiants africains d'accéder à l'enseignement supérieur en Égypte. Quinze étudiants africains réfugiés en Égypte (dix hommes et cinq femmes) ont répondu à des questions dans le cadre d'une interview semi-structurée à l'occasion de laquelle ils ont exprimé leurs points de vue concernant les difficultés qui les empêchent de suivre des études dans des étab-

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lissements d'enseignement supérieur tant publics que privés. Les auteurs ont identifiés ces difficultés et les ont répertoriés en trois catégories thématiques : barrières socioculturelles, économiques et psychologiques. En plus de ces obstacles, l'absence de lois et politiques adaptées pour régir l'accès des réfugiés à l'enseignement supérieur en Égypte et l'absence de systèmes d'aide ont aggravé une situation déjà mauvaise pour les étudiants réfugiés. Les auteurs concluent l'article avec un ensemble de recommandations pour améliorer et faciliter l'accès des réfugiés à l'enseignement supérieur dans leurs communautés d'accueil.

ملخص

وصول اللاجئين الأفارقة إلى التعليم العالي: أصوات من مصر - باستخدام إطار "رأس المال" لبيرر بورديو كعدسة نظرية، استكشفت هذه الدراسة التحديات التي تعيق وصول الطلاب اللاجئين الأفارقة إلى التعليم العالي في مصر. أجاب خمسة عشر طالبًا من اللاجئين الأفارقة في مصر متمثلين في عشرة ذكور وخمس إناث على أسئلة المقابلة شبه المقتنة لإبداء آرائهم فيما يخص التحديات التي تمنعهم من الالتحاق بمؤسسات ما بعد الثانوية العامة. حدد الباحثون هذه التحديات وصنفوها إلى ثلاث فئات مواضيعية: حواجز ثقافية-اجتماعية واقتصادية ونفسية. بالإضافة إلى هذه العوائق، أدى الافتقار إلى القوانين والسياسات ذات الصلة التي تحكم وصول اللاجئين إلى التعليم العالي في مصر وغياب أنظمة الدعم إلى تفاقم الوضع المتردي للطلاب اللاجئين. يختتم الباحثون مقالهم بعدد من التوصيات لتعزيز وتسهيل وصول اللاجئين إلى التعليم العالي في المجتمعات المضيفة لهم.

Introduction

The world is currently witnessing an unprecedented, prolonged refugee crisis along with an accelerated refugee population increase. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2021), there has been a rise in the number of people who were forcibly displaced from 41.1 million in 2010 to 82.4 million in 2020, as a result of conflict, persecution, human rights violations, climate change and natural disasters. Over the past decade, the number of refugees has doubled, reaching 20.7 million in 2020, excluding the 5.7 million registered Palestinian refugees under the United Nations Relief and Works Agency mandate (ibid.).¹ However, this figure does not represent the actual number of refugees or asylum seekers; instead, it only reflects those registered with UNHCR.

Based on UNHCR estimates (UNHCR 2021), 86 per cent of forcibly displaced populations are hosted in developing countries. These countries are already under-resourced and characterised by exhausted education systems and weak political and economic institutions (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). Egypt, where this study was conducted, is currently hosting refugees from many other countries. This is due to its geographic location at the centre of the "Mediterranean route", which makes it an important destination for many refugees, mainly from Syria, the Horn of Africa, Sudan and South Sudan (EC 2021). According to UNHCR (2021), there are 265,393 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt – from Syria (133,856), Sudan (50,759), South Sudan (20,245), Eritrea

¹ This article was drafted before 7 October 2023.

(20,265), Ethiopia (15,532) and other countries (24,736) – the majority of whom live in urban areas. More than half of them are school-aged children and youth or young persons of post-secondary age.

In Egypt, refugees' access to services and opportunities is hindered by structural, sociocultural and personal factors (Molla 2020). Further, refugees are often marginalised and alienated within the local social, economic and policy contexts of their host countries. Due to the unresolved situation in their home countries, refugees often find themselves in a protracted situation where they have been in exile for many years (Hetaba et al. 2020). UNHCR defines a protracted situation as “one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for at least five consecutive years in a given host country” (UNHCR 2020, p. 24). Refugees are therefore “stuck” in a place where there are no opportunities for a better tomorrow.

Compounding an already dire situation, Egypt falls into the category of lower- to middle-income countries with a gross national income (GNI) per capita between USD 1,046 and USD 4,095 (World Bank 2021). Human Development Index (HDI) estimates show that countries in this income category face an annual financing gap of approximately USD 39 billion in the education sector (UNDP and MoPED 2021). Due to economic, political and social strains in the host country, refugees face major challenges in accessing services, meeting their basic needs and sustaining their lives (Grabska 2006; Karkouti et al. 2021). One of these challenges is limited access to higher education (UNHCR 2020). Finally, with regard to residency, Egypt's restrictive policy on granting asylum and refugee status creates structural barriers that prevent African refugees from pursuing higher education and accessing post-secondary institutions (Sadek 2016).

Given the factors highlighted above, a study that brings to light the challenges that obstruct African refugee students' access to higher education in Egypt seems both timely and important. The current study is also significant in that it adds to the literature on refugee education in Egypt and the Arab world. In this study, we explored the challenges that prevent refugee students from attaining post-secondary education and shed light on the barriers that obstruct their university completion. Our main objective was to understand the roots of the problem through giving voice to a disadvantaged population. Findings from this study could help administrators, policymakers, human rights activists and humanitarian aid agencies to formulate context-specific policies that expand educational opportunities for refugee students and make Egypt's educational system more inclusive and equitable. The main research question (RQ) guiding our study was:

RQ: What are African refugee students' perceptions of the factors that obstruct their access to higher education in Egypt?

To answer this research question, we asked study participants to respond to semi-structured interview questions regarding the barriers that prevent African refugee students from accessing higher education in Egypt. Below, we begin with an exploration of educational barriers in Egypt from the literature, followed by an outline of the current study. Our findings are then categorised by theme, and we

conclude with a discussion and recommendations to enhance and facilitate refugees' access to higher education in host communities.

Barriers undermining refugee education in Egypt: a literature review

Facilitating refugees' access to higher education brings about major benefits for individuals, their families and society (Ramsay and Baker 2019). Higher education can yield better financial outcomes; an undergraduate qualification allows economic mobility as it enables individuals to attain highly skilled jobs which offer better pay (Ma et al. 2016). Nevertheless, education has received little attention by humanitarian organisations; rather, efforts have focused on providing life-saving and emergency assistance such as healthcare, food and shelter (Dryden-Peterson 2012; Karkouti 2021).

Research suggests that forced migration disrupts and limits refugees' access to higher education opportunities (Schneider 2018). This is due in part to the fact that Egypt's public (government-funded) educational system is biased towards nationals² (Platzer 2018). According to UNHCR (2020), only three per cent of refugees have access to tertiary education, compared to 34 per cent of non-refugees globally. Such a huge gap indicates that refugees' access to higher education opportunities could be restricted by law and/or policy in Egypt. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the legal and policy landscape that regulates refugees in the country.

Restrictive legal and policy environment

Although Egypt signed and ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, also known as the Geneva Convention (UN 1951), it modified five provisions relating to personal status, rationing, access to education, public relief and assistance, and labour legislation and social security (Sadek 2016). Furthermore, Egypt's domestic laws and presidential decrees restrict refugees' access to higher education (Hetaba et al. 2020). To elaborate, under Egyptian law, while Presidential Decree No. 49 (issued in 1972) granted refugee students access to public education, they were required to pay fees (Hetaba et al. 2020). It was not until 1992 that another decree (No. 24) was issued, allowing Sudanese refugees to attend public primary education for free (Grabska 2006).

Sudanese refugee students are now also allowed to enrol in Egyptian universities with a discounted tuition rate of up to 90 per cent (Kamal 2019). Unlike their Sudanese counterparts, however, refugee students from other African countries cannot access higher education at a discounted rate. Although Egypt's laws regulating child education indicate that it should be granted to all children regardless of nationality, Decree No. 284 (issued in 2014) denied non-nationals – except for exemptions such as Syrians, Sudanese and Yemenis – access to public schools. This means that other

² “Nationals” are people who were born in Egypt and have at least one parent who is an Egyptian national by birth.

nationalities – such as Somalis, Eritreans, South Sudanese and Ethiopians – face major challenges in accessing public primary and secondary education, with enrolment only being possible in community or private schools (UNHCR 2020).

Regarding higher education, refugees are treated as foreigners and are subject to many procedures and regulations, similar to all international students seeking access to educational services in Egypt (Grabska 2006). These restrictive policies, which limit refugees' access to education, stem from the country's dire social and economic situation (Grabska 2020). Despite various initiatives by the Egyptian Government to promote inclusivity within the educational system, refugees' access to higher education remains problematic, as it is regulated primarily through decrees rather than laws or policies. Furthermore, tuition and ancillary fees for international students are based on their nationality and "majors" (degree programmes). This is partly due to the modifications of Article 22(1), Article 23 and Article 24 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948), which relate to access to primary education and labour legislation/social security, respectively. These modifications grant refugees fewer rights compared to Egyptians.

Absence of durable solutions

Among the factors complicating refugees' situations in host countries is the absence of durable solutions, which are defined as "any means by which the situation of refugees can be satisfactorily and permanently resolved to enable them to live normal lives" (UNHCR 2006, p. 8). UNHCR's mission revolves around three core durable solutions for refugees: (1) voluntary repatriation, which is considered the most desirable solution for refugees and the international community in the long run; (2) local integration; and (3) resettlement (UNHCR 2003). However, a significant number of refugees find themselves in a precarious situation where there is no prospect for any durable solution.

The first and most favourable solution for UNHCR is facilitating the voluntary repatriation of refugees to their country of origin. However, success depends on resolving the local situation in refugees' home countries (UNHCR 2003). According to UNHCR (2020), more than three million refugees were repatriated to their country in the last decade. However, in 2020, the total number of repatriated refugees was 21 per cent less than in 2019 (UNHCR 2021). These figures indicate that when conflicts persist without resolution, repatriation becomes an unattainable durable solution.

In terms of resettlement, this solution benefits only a small fraction of refugees worldwide, allowing only the most vulnerable individuals to be resettled in a third country where they are granted permanent residency. In 2019, it was estimated that only half of the global refugee population would have the opportunity for resettlement (UNHCR 2020). However, this percentage has since declined due to lowered quotas set by host countries, suspended flights and restricted border entry resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (UNHCR 2021). It is important to note that in 2020, the total number of refugees in need of resettlement was 1.4 million, but only 2.4 per cent of them were actually resettled. This significant gap between global

resettlement needs and available opportunities highlights the limited options for refugees (UNHCR 2021).

Local integration remains the most feasible option for the majority of refugees; however, in many countries this remains a significant challenge. The concept of local integration, defined in the Geneva Convention (UN 1951), refers to the naturalisation or assimilation of refugees within the host community. It encompasses the conditions that enable refugees and nationals to co-exist, including their participation in economic and social spheres (Hetaba et al. 2020). Unfortunately, in most cases, refugees have limited access to various resources and services because host countries consider their presence temporary and thus encourage their resettlement or repatriation (Grabska 2006). This indicates that under-resourced host countries are unprepared to fully integrate refugees into their communities.

Under Egyptian Law No. 154 (issued in 2004), foreigners – including children born to non-nationals in Egypt – are prohibited from acquiring citizenship and receiving benefits (Sadek 2016). However, given the protracted refugee situation and challenging economic and social conditions in Egypt, refugees are granted temporary residency until they are resettled in a third country or repatriated to their country of origin. Therefore, local integration as a durable solution is not applicable to refugees in Egypt. According to UNHCR (2020), the percentage of refugees who have been resettled is less than one per cent, while less than five per cent have been repatriated to their home countries.

Donors' reluctance to fund higher education programmes

Although UNHCR's (2019) strategy focuses on refugees' access to and the quality of education, the financial resources available for this purpose are limited. This is further exacerbated by donors' reluctance to fund scholarship programmes, as they primarily prioritise primary education (Karkouti 2022). This lack of investment is evident in the insufficient availability of scholarships for refugees to pursue higher education (Dryden-Peterson 2012). In Egypt, scholarship programmes for refugees are also limited. The American University in Cairo (AUC) and the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) offer scholarship opportunities for undergraduate students. With regard to graduate studies, the AUC Fellowships for Refugees and the DAAD Leadership for Africa programme offer limited opportunities that only accept a small number of students each year.

The current study

Conceptual framework

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) offered a framework that shows how multiple forms of *capital* reinforce the existing hierarchy in a society. The domination of one social class over the educational sector, at the expense of the working class, creates unequal access to education (Deer 2003). In Bourdieu's framework, economic, social and

cultural capital are resources that individuals can use to gain advantages in specific fields (Bourdieu 1986). To explore the factors that help African refugees access higher education in Egypt, we need to consider the types of capital available to them, which can either facilitate or complicate the enrolment process.

First, *economic capital*, as defined by Bourdieu, refers to tangible assets that can be converted “into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 24). Economic capital encompasses various material resources, such as financial assets, land or property ownership, which can be used to obtain and sustain improved life conditions. It also focuses on economic practices and materialistic gains that aim to maximise economic profit and interest.

Second, *cultural capital* exists in three different forms: (1) the “embodied state”, which refers to cultural dispositions of the mind and body, such as language proficiency, knowledge, aspirations and motivation; (2) the “objectified state”, which encompasses cultural objects like books or dictionaries; and (3) the “institutionalised state”, which includes educational and academic credentials (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital reinforces unequal access to education. For instance, in the institutionalised state, cultural capital creates a significant opportunity gap for refugees because their academic credentials often go unrecognised.

Finally, *social capital* exists in the form of social connections and mutual relationships or networks that are formed individually or collectively, either intentionally or unintentionally. These connections can provide benefits to a person in the short or long term due to their membership of a specific group (Bourdieu 1986). Therefore, social capital can result in material benefits (such as accessing services through relationships and connection) and symbolic benefits (from being associated with prestigious and esteemed groups). In this sense, social capital is an intangible asset that enables individuals to build and leverage relationships in order to attain what they may not be able to achieve independently (Coleman 1988).

Bourdieu's *capital framework* (Bourdieu 1986) is widely referenced and regarded as a foundational source in the field. It is a comprehensive model for understanding how multiple forms of capital affect everyday life (Power 1999), which is particularly relevant to the case of refugees in this study (e.g., Birtwell et al. 2020). The framework's broad and inclusive elements, combined with its successful implementation in various international contexts, strongly supported our decision to adopt it for our study. Below, we analyse the main findings of our study against the backdrop of Bourdieu's framework and in light of refugee students' views.

Methods

According to Amir Marvasti (2004), qualitative research provides a detailed explanation of a specific phenomenon, situation or human experience. To explore the challenges that obstruct African refugee students' access to higher education institutions in Egypt, we chose a qualitative phenomenological approach. Specifically, phenomenological research explores human experience from the subject's perspective; therefore, it adopts a descriptive method (Knaack 1984). Phenomenology is well-suited for understanding a specific problem from the perspectives of the people

involved and, consequently, is effective in collecting information related to the culture, values, behaviours, opinions or social experiences of a specific population or group (Mack et al. 2005).

Participants and setting

As the main researcher (the first author of this article), I used *purposive sampling* to recruit African refugee students living in Egypt. Specifically, the sample included fifteen individuals (five self-identified as female; ten as male) seeking enrolment in higher education institutions in Egypt. Participants were recruited from Catholic Relief Services (CRS),³ where refugee students apply for university scholarships at public and private universities.

The protocol for the semi-structured interviews was translated from English to Arabic to accommodate different language speakers. Sherry Ricchiardi (2018) argues that interviewing refugees and asylum seekers requires awareness of their situations and cultures. Based on my own fieldwork experience with refugees, I know that African refugee students may sometimes be hesitant to speak up. One strategy for conducting interviews with vulnerable participants is to use the self-disclosure technique, which means sharing one's own experience to help individuals build trust (Ereiqat 2019). Possible negative experiences or mistreatment, such as bullying and abuse, could have discouraged refugee students from participating in this study. Therefore, I clearly explained the purpose of the interview to eliminate any fear or suspicions.

To maintain confidentiality and protect privacy, study participants were given pseudonyms. Table 1 contains demographic information about the sample.

Procedures

Prior to research commencement, I obtained ethics approval from the American University in Cairo (approval number 2020-2021-071). I also obtained CRS's approval to access refugee students' contact information and invite them to participate in the study. Before conducting the interviews, participants were contacted to obtain their consent and approval. Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually and audio-recorded using a cell (mobile) phone sound recorder application. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, informed the participant of the purpose of the research and explained the interview procedure. The interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes and were conducted at a time that was mutually agreed upon.

³ For more information about this non-profit organisation, visit <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/where-we-work/egypt> [accessed 28 November 2023].

Table 1 Participants' characteristics

Name	Nationality	Gender	Degree programme sought	Interview language
Salma	Sudanese	female	Bachelor of Science	Arabic
Mona	Sudanese	female	Bachelor of Science	Arabic
Mira	Sudanese	female	Bachelor of Pharmacy	Arabic
Mohamad	Sudanese	male	Bachelor of Dental Science	Arabic
Omar	Sudanese	male	undeclared	Arabic
Salam	Sudanese	male	Bachelor of Pharmacy	Arabic
Adam	Sudanese	male	Bachelor of Economics	Arabic
Maya	Eritrean	female	Bachelor of Physiotherapy	Arabic
Abdulla	Eritrean	male	Bachelor of Pharmacy	Arabic
Rafik	Eritrean	male	Bachelor of Business	Arabic
Rana	South Sudanese	female	Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine	Arabic
Ali	South Sudanese	male	Bachelor of Economics	English
Jamal	Somalian	male	Bachelor of Political Science	Arabic
Ahmed	Somalian	male	Bachelor of Communication	Arabic
Samuel	Ethiopian	male	undeclared	Arabic

Data analysis

Li Ping Wong (2008) explains that the process of data analysis involves coding and categorising data, and identifying themes or patterns, in order to reduce the amount of raw data and gain a logical understanding supported by evidence. This specific approach to data analysis is known as *thematic analysis*, which entails recognising patterns and themes within qualitative data (Lester et al. 2020). Hence, this research used thematic analysis due to its inherent “theoretical flexibility”. I manually conducted thematic analysis by transcribing data into verbatim texts, highlighting and organising phrases relevant to access barriers, and categorising findings into three main themes. Thematic analysis provided meaningful understanding of the investigated phenomenon and generated theory-driven findings.

Following Jessica Lester et al.'s (2020) model on analysing data in qualitative research, five steps were taken: (1) collecting and organising data; (2) transcribing interview data; (3) becoming familiar with the dataset by carefully reading through transcripts; (4) coding the data; and (5) generating themes. Findings were deductively coded and categorised under *a priori* themes based on Bourdieu's (1986) framework components: economic, cultural and social capital. Manually coding the data allowed for data triangulation, whereby the findings were cross-checked, refined and double-checked for any repetition (Plano Clark and Creswell 2014).

To establish credibility in qualitative research, I used “member checking” (participant validation) during interviews and at the end of the data collection process. Interview transcripts were shared with participants to check and confirm whether their words were captured correctly and as intended. To ensure transferability of the research, I prepared a detailed description of the study procedures and protocols. To establish dependability, I clearly reported and documented the entire research

process to enable others to replicate the work. Finally, to establish confirmability and eliminate possible bias, I outlined the reasons for employing a qualitative research design, as well as the logic behind participant selection. In addition, I maintained a journal log to record my thoughts regarding the study, possible preconceptions and any factors that could possibly impact the objectivity of the investigation.

Limitations

As with any study, this one has its limitations. First, the absence of applicable laws governing refugees' access to higher education in Egypt resulted in relying only on the subjective narratives of participants regarding what they deemed to be their rights. Second, participants' views might not be representative of other African refugees whose voices were not captured in this study (e.g., Libyan refugees). Third, translating the interview protocol from English to Arabic may have changed the meaning of the interview questions or led to different interpretations that deviated from the intent of the original questions. In order to validate the findings and reach a more comprehensive conclusion, future studies should engage multiple research settings, recruit refugees from all African countries, and employ both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

Findings

The findings derived from the interviews offered valuable insights into the barriers that obstruct African refugees' access to universities in Egypt. These identified barriers were grouped and categorised into three main themes that respond to the research question: sociocultural, economic and psychological barriers.

Sociocultural barriers

With regard to the sociocultural barriers that promote social inequality and hinder the access of African refugee students to higher education, study participants highlighted several factors that widen the gap between refugee and local students. These factors include refugee status, documentation and qualification recognition, lack of protection, lack of social capital and language barriers.

Refugee status

Participants expressed that priority is given to Egyptians who have guaranteed places in Egyptian universities. They also noted that non-Egyptians access higher education based on their nationality and not their refugee status. According to the Egyptian Department for Foreign Students Affairs, the tuition rate is determined based on the student's major (degree programme) and nationality (CU 2017). Rana further clarified this point:

"Some majors like medicine are reserved for some nationalities. My refugee status does not help me get enrolled in the major I want even if I can afford it."

Refugees' socioeconomic status was also cited as a significant contributor to social inequality between refugees and Egyptians. Participants noted that such inequality is apparent when refugees are unable to enrol at Egyptian universities without a scholarship, whereas Egyptians study for free under the subsidisation policy for higher education (Assaad 2010). Maya noted, "Just because I am a refugee, I have to pay higher tuition fees when Egyptians pay very little". Salam elaborated:

"In the School of Pharmacy, Egyptians pay the tuition fees in pounds (EGP 800 [Egyptian pounds]) while refugees pay in dollars (USD 5,000), which is a significant amount of money that many people cannot afford."

Documentation and qualification recognition

In order to apply for university, students are required to hold a valid passport, which many refugees do not have. The legal status of refugee students has been identified as a major obstacle that prevents their access to higher education in Egypt. Speaking to this point, Ahmed stated:

"I have been a refugee since I was born and I am never treated equal to locals. Why can't I have a passport? Because of [the] UNHCR card,⁴ many people are trapped and can't have an ordinary life like citizens."

This situation creates a deadlock for refugee students because they do not have a passport and other required documents for university admission.

Participants pointed out that a lack of documentation and unaccredited credentials contribute to their sense of social inequality. Required documents for university admission include the original copy of a high school certificate, a valid passport and a birth certificate (WAFEDEN 2019). The majority of participants reported that they do not possess a valid passport or certificate to apply to universities. Abdulla stated quite pointedly:

"The Eritrean certificate is not accepted in Egyptian universities, and I don't have a passport, which makes it hard to get accepted to a university in Egypt."

Similarly, Jamal said:

"I don't have documents. I had a soft copy of the documents on my e-mail, but I lost my e-mail account and could not retrieve my documents."

Participants highlighted that even if students from specific nationalities are allowed to access university at a discounted rate, the majority are unable to present their official documentation such as a passport or other certification, either because these have expired or been lost. Salma shared:

⁴ This refers to an identity card issued by UNHCR to provide refugees with a document that demonstrates their identity and refugee status.

“I am eligible for a discount because I am Sudanese; however, the required documents for college [university] admission are not easy to get because I am not able to go back there.”

Equally important is Jamal’s comment:

“When I arrived in the host country [Egypt], I found that my documents are not complete, but I can’t go back to my home country to re-issue the lost document or verify my certificate.”

Lack of protection

Seven participants reported that refugee students face racial discrimination such as stalking and bullying by fellow students or Egyptian citizens. They expressed that racial discrimination and harassment are incidents commonly faced by African refugee students. According to Mona, “... to Egyptians, refugees are intruders who came to their country to consume their resources and therefore they are not welcome.” Other participants pointed out that racial discrimination also happens inside universities with professors treating Egyptians more favourably than refugees. Mohamad noted:

“Harassment and bullying take place inside and outside universities. However, it happens more often outside the university because people are not aware of different cultures, but many students are well educated and some of them respect the different other.”

Although there was consensus among participants that discrimination contributes to their sense of social inequality, they had different experiences regarding how it affects them and how they deal with it. Some reported that they do not pay attention and ignore such incidents, while others explained that it greatly affects their psychological well-being to the extent that they get discouraged from applying to university or even drop out. Omar’s frustration was apparent:

“There is nothing going well and you cannot do anything about the discrimination that you face. The best thing is to ignore or it will get to you and ruin all your plans.”

Lack of social capital

The findings also revealed that social networks and connections impact African refugee students’ access to higher education. Participants explained that lack of information and awareness of application procedures and available scholarships is associated with a lack of social networks and connections. They mentioned that they are unaware of scholarship and application procedures because they are disconnected. There was consensus among all participants that building networks and connections with others is useful in terms of getting information about the application process and available scholarships, and gaining social recognition. Ali stated:

“Egyptians could guide you when it comes to procedures or work opportunities while [other] refugees provide emotional support.”

In addition, social networks and connections were perceived to help refugees integrate into society by increasing their social awareness and adaptation to new cultures. Mona shared:

“Lack of social connections and networks result in social anxiety or fear of the outside world and therefore suffer[ing] from psychological problems.”

Equally important is the participants' perception that connections and networks with refugees enrolled in a university positively impact students' motivation to pursue higher education themselves. Rafik said, “If I know anyone like me in university, I will have the desire to enrol as well”. Similarly, Mohamad explained:

“If there are other refugee students who could share their academic experience with me, it will motivate me and make me want to apply to university.”

Language barriers

Lack of foreign language skills and cultural awareness alienates refugee students and contributes to their poverty and social inequality. According to the participants, proficiency in Arabic is essential if refugees are to succeed in university, adapt to the culture and secure employment. Salam argued:

“Refugees in Egypt are non-native speakers and the majority of them don't speak Arabic, and given that professors sometimes use a mix of English and Arabic while teaching, refugees might face major difficulties to succeed[ing] in universities.”

Adam concurred:

“Students from African countries who don't speak Arabic face major difficulties enrolling at Egyptian universities, blending in the community or finding a job.”

Economic barriers

In terms of the economic factors preventing African refugee students from accessing higher education, the reported challenges focused on university costs and high tuition fees. Participants also agreed that living and study expenses, unemployment and low-income jobs worsen their financial situation and exacerbate the problem.

University costs and high tuition fees

Participants agreed that it is expensive for international and refugee students to enrol in higher education institutions in Egypt. They reported that tuition fees are determined based on nationality and range from USD 500 to USD 7,500 per year, which exceeds the financial capacity of refugees. Jamal shared his experience:

“I applied for political science major in public and private universities, and I found that the required fees were 4,000 to 5,000 Euros excluding additional registration fees. I can afford the additional registration fees in Egyptian pounds, but I can’t afford the Euro fees.”

Maya, a physiotherapy major at Cairo University, concurred: “I am required to pay USD 6,000, but I have not paid them yet”. Sometimes students have to drop out due to not paying tuition by the end of the first academic year. Elaborating further on this issue, Ahmed noted:

“If I can’t pay the tuition fees all at once, my final results will not be announced and I will not be able to progress to the next academic year until I pay the fees.”

Living and study expenses

In addition to high university costs, participants reported that additional study and living expenses constitute another financial burden. They explained that study expenses include transportation, books, stationery and tools. According to Mohamad, “[t]he materials and tools cost EGP 16,000 to 17,000”. Furthermore, participants argued that they can barely afford their living expenses such as rent, food, utility bills and residency renewal fees. Samuel shared, “I can’t pay the rent fees which means I can’t study because of the financial challenges I’m facing”. These living expenses exacerbate their economic hardship and create financial pressures that make it impossible to enrol in higher education institutions. Rafik reported:

“My father passed away once we arrived in Egypt. I was studying back in my country, but war turned my life upside down, and I can’t resume my studies given our financial situation and expensive living cost and tuition.”

Unemployment and low-income jobs

When asking participants about unemployment and how it prevents them from accessing higher education, they argued that employment, if available, would not facilitate their access to higher education for two reasons: the lack of decent job opportunities, and low salaries. Participants agreed that the lack of job opportunities is due to high unemployment rates and the absence of academic qualifications required for well-paid jobs. They explained that the only available opportunity is domestic work, which is not acceptable for some families, especially for girls, due to its potential risks. In addition, participants reported that part-time jobs pose another challenge to accessing higher education, and in certain jobs, priority is given to Egyptians. Omar explained:

“Working part time means that you will never get to know when you will be working. The schedule always conflicts with university time.”

Similarly, Salam shared:

"I wanted to work in a call centre as a part timer but I was told that this job accepts Egyptians only ... Part-time jobs sometimes force us to work more and we have to be absent from university in some days of the week for work duties and this definitely affects our academic results."

Psychological barriers

Bullying, past trauma and lack of support systems were reported among the factors that affect African refugee students' psychological well-being and prevent them from accessing higher education in Egypt.

Bullying

The majority of participants agreed that African refugees experience bullying due to their dark skin colour and spoken language. Participants explained that bullying is one reason why refugees cannot integrate into Egyptian society and access social services. As a result of bullying, they said that the entire African refugee community in Egypt experiences insults, disrespect and humiliation. Adam clarified this point further:

"Bullying affects the psychological well-being of students, and it does not allow refugees to adapt to the new society. Many local students don't accept other cultures and make fun of us ... I tried to make friends, but I failed. This is so insulting, demeaning and inhumane. All Africans here experience the same thing."

Participants reported that even when they are enrolled in a university, they might drop out due to bullying. Mira shared her story:

"I experienced many situations where I got bullied and discriminated against inside the classroom. Many students have dropped out because they are treated as second-class citizens who have no rights."

Participants also experienced racial harassment and unanimously expressed being called names such as "Badingana/Eggplant", "Samara/Black" and "Chocolate" due to their dark skin colour.

Past trauma and lack of support systems

Participants argued that past experiences, vulnerability, social instability and lack of support systems affect the psychological well-being of refugee students. Maya, for example, noted:

"... we suffer from depression due to past experiences as refugees, such as being smuggled to the host country and the traumas we go through due to war."

Furthermore, participants expressed their feelings of alienation in host societies and explained how the lack of social integration negatively impacts their mental health. Mona stated:

“... feelings of alienation and the realisation that it is not your country create a sense of fear and insecurity which adds to your stress and misery.”

In addition, having refugee status proved to be psychologically detrimental for some. Rafik said:

“... the fact that I want to continue my education, when I can’t, makes me feel there is no equality. Everyone sees you as a refugee with no rights and this is destructive. No one is there to help.”

Moreover, the absence of social safety nets and caregivers deprives refugees of social support, demotivating them to pursue higher education and creating a sense of social isolation and financial instability. Speaking to this point, Mira reported:

“My father is missing since I was in Sudan and did not come with us to Egypt. I only have my mother who is working very hard to provide for me. This negatively affects my psychological well-being to a large extent ... when you don’t have anyone to help you financially and support you emotionally, you become frustrated and feel it is impossible to enrol at university. We are left alone in the dark.”

Equally important is this comment from Samuel:

“No one is helping us to overcome the difficulties here. It is impossible for me to go to university if there is no official support coming from the government or international aid organisations.”

Discussion

Participants’ perceptions of the barriers that obstruct their access to higher education focused on sociocultural barriers, economic disparity and psychological distress. In this section, we analyse and discuss these findings in light of the literature related to refugee students’ access to post-secondary education in Egypt and elsewhere. All findings resonate with Bourdieu’s framework (Bourdieu 1986), which explains how lack of social, economic and cultural capital reinforces unequal access to education. The discussion follows a parallel thematic structure based on the findings reported above (i.e., sociocultural, economic and psychological barriers).

Sociocultural injustices

In Egypt, the lack of social and cultural capital puts refugees at a disadvantage and therefore makes it difficult for them to enrol in university. Specifically, our findings demonstrate that lack of foreign language skills and recognised qualifications obstruct university access. In support of this argument, Linda Morrice (2013)

explains that the degree evaluation process hinders refugees' education because it is time-consuming, tedious and inefficient. In addition, language and cultural barriers contribute to refugees' social and academic disadvantage (Celik et al. 2023; Karkouti et al. 2020; Molla 2020). Findings from our study also show that a lack of language proficiency widens refugees' cultural gap, prevents them from accessing higher education and hinders their integration into the host community.

Several studies have suggested that inequality and social exclusion are central to the concept of "social disadvantage", which refers to economic hardship, deprivation of resources and cultural dissonance that prevent people from seizing certain opportunities (Molla 2020; Vinson et al. 2015). The study participants argued that refugee status, socioeconomic hardship, lack of documentation, language barriers and lack of information are the product of weak social ties and networks. According to Bourdieu (1986), the acquisition of social capital brings several benefits to individuals. Louise Ryan (2011) confirmed these benefits and proved that social ties facilitate the integration of migrants into host societies and improve their access to various sources of information. Consistent with Bourdieu (1986) and Ryan (2011), the findings of our study clearly demonstrate a relationship between social connections and access to available scholarships and funding opportunities in Egypt.

Although most participants agreed on the importance of social networks and connections to obtaining information on accessing higher education, our findings did not confirm which type of social ties are most beneficial to African refugee students in Egypt. A possible explanation is that different types of social ties could bring specific benefits. For example, "bonding" ties with community members provide emotional support and motivation to pursue higher education, protection against bullying and adaptation to the new culture. This supports Robert Putnam's (2000) argument that bonding social capital within the same ethnic group is useful as it protects vulnerable and disadvantaged groups from bullying and discrimination. The current study yielded similar findings, where participants linked their social networks and connections to high self-esteem and increased motivation.

Study participants agreed that their willingness to build social networks is undermined by the bullying and disrespect they experience in Egypt. Furthermore, their ability to access higher education is challenged in instances of family breakdown, which forces refugee students to work and support themselves and their dependents. Coupled with the absence of professional and personal networks, these challenges decrease refugees' sociocultural capital and obstruct their access to higher education.

Economic disparity

Differential access to higher education remains a huge problem to non-nationals in Egypt, especially refugees who find themselves in socially and economically disadvantaged positions. According to Sarah Dryden-Peterson (2012), nationality serves as the primary determinant of refugees' tuition rate. Similar to Dryden-Peterson's study, participants in the present study also perceived their refugee status as an obstacle to accessing higher education because tuition is based on students'

nationality. In addition, participants agreed that their refugee status, economic hardship and weak social ties further widen the gap with their Egyptian counterparts, contributing to their sense of social and economic inequality, and impeding their access to higher education.

According to Stephen O'Brien and Mairtin O'Fathaigh (2005), refugees' differential access to higher education is usually addressed from a financial standpoint. In addition to tuition fees, O'Brien and O'Fathaigh explain that other expenses such as transportation, books, information and communications technology (ICT) tools and stationery play a role in determining whether students will access higher education. Findings from the current study show that high tuition fees and other living and study expenses obstruct refugee students' access to higher education in Egypt. These findings align with Morrice's (2013) study, which highlights how higher education institutions prioritise international students who can afford the international fees, while overlooking migrants and refugees who lack the financial means. Furthermore, findings from our study confirm that factors such as unemployment and low-income jobs are among the economic factors that impede higher education for refugee students. This resonates with Barbara Zeus's (2009) study, which explains how the absence of job opportunities prevents refugees from achieving financial self-sufficiency due to their dependence on resources that are either limited or non-existent.

In addition, financial problems force refugees to find a job instead of pursuing their studies (Morrice 2013; Stevenson and Willott 2007). Several studies have reported that refugee students sometimes engage in child labour in order to support their families (Harris et al. 2015; Karkouti 2022; Platzer 2018; Schneider 2018). This comes at the expense of their education and leaves them behind because refugees cannot go to school and work at the same time. More importantly, refugee status and lack of qualifications prevent refugees from finding decent job opportunities which are usually dedicated to nationals, hence contributing to discrimination and inequality. These findings confirm Marie-Agnès Detourbe and Gaële Goastellec's (2018) argument that the socioeconomic status of refugees serves as the primary driver of inequality in accessing higher education.

Psychological distress

Regarding the psychological factors preventing refugees from accessing higher education, participants explained that bullying and lack of support systems decrease the ability to cope with trauma. Mounting evidence suggests that refugee students refrain from applying to universities due to the destructive effects of bullying, racial discrimination and social isolation (Kanno and Varghese 2010; Morrice 2013). Gaële Goastellec (2018) explains that psychological trauma caused by forced displacement constitutes a significant barrier for refugees trying to pursue higher education, and this was supported by our findings.

The absence of social and familial support blocks information on higher education opportunities that refugee students can later pursue (Bajwa et al. 2017). Therefore, the absence of support systems subjects refugees to emotional and psychological pressures. In a similar study, Diane O'Rourke (2011) found that refugees are

emotionally disadvantaged due to the lack of role models or peers with university experience. According to Diane Reay's (2000) concept of emotional capital, familial support and involvement – including love, attention, care and time devoted to children – contribute to children's success in education. The lack of familial support is commonly reported by the majority of study participants due to the absence of parents, separation of parents when fleeing their country, or even the death of a parent in war. Without parental care, refugee students become vulnerable, weak and unable to make informed decisions regarding their education. Tammy Bean et al. (2007) studied the differences in trauma, distress and experiences of unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents. Unaccompanied refugees scored higher than accompanied refugees in terms of traumatic stress and depression. Our own study confirmed that unaccompanied refugee adolescents and minors are more prone to developing psychological problems compared to those living with parents or family members.

Conclusion

Similar to the research highlighted above, the current study demonstrated that bullying and social exclusion, displacement trauma and lack of family support contribute to refugee students' vulnerability, sense of hopelessness and inability to make informed decisions regarding their education. Based on these findings, we can conclude that there is an association between different types of capital due to the complex situation of African refugee students in Egypt. To elaborate, our findings show that the lack of social and cultural capital exacerbates refugees' psychological distress and depletes their emotional capital, which in turn prevents them from accessing higher education. In addition, bullying and discrimination, which African refugee students frequently experience, prevent them from building social networks in host societies and undermine their acquisition of social capital. Finally, the lack of economic capital also affects African refugee students' acquisition of social capital due to their low socioeconomic status.

The relationship between multiple types of capital confirms that economic capital is not solely important when examining refugees' unequal access to education. In addition to economic capital, social, cultural and emotional capital are all relevant when explaining refugees' inability to access higher education. These types of capital are interrelated and interconnected, and the lack of one undermines the acquisition of the others.

Findings from this study clearly show a set of barriers facing African refugee students in Egypt. First, these students face a social barrier due to the systematic social inequality and exclusion practices that alienate them. Second, they face an economic barrier stemming from their financial status, low-income jobs and lack of decent job opportunities. Third, these students face multiple psychological barriers resulting from their forced displacement experience, trauma, lack of support systems, bullying and discrimination. Finally, African refugee students face procedural barriers due to their lack of documentation, the challenging process of qualification recognition, demanding scholarship requirements, and bureaucratic hurdles.

Based on our research findings, we argue that African refugee students' social, cultural, economic and emotional capital are partially or completely eroded due to their forced displacement. African refugee students also experience difficulty in mobilising the capital they do possess due to the barriers they face in Egypt. Not only do these barriers obstruct African refugee students' access to higher education, but they also degrade the quality of their lives and limit their social mobility prospects.

Recommendations

To enhance refugee students' resilience and alleviate their situation, humanitarian aid agencies should work closely with host communities to generate context-specific policies that expand their access to higher education. These policies should tackle issues related to admission requirements, tuition fees and administrative processes. Georgina Ramsay and Sally Baker (2019) argue that policies should also offer refugees tailored educational programmes and adequate social services during their university years. Related to this goal, it is imperative to educate faculty members and other staff about the specific needs of refugees in order to facilitate their transition to higher education and enhance their learning experience. Furthermore, implementing anti-bullying programmes and incorporating culturally sensitive training into all aspects of university operations is necessary. As mentioned earlier, schools and universities play a vital role in the lives of refugee students as these institutions help shape their futures and define their career paths. Therefore, creating a secure and non-discriminatory environment for these students to thrive in is of utmost importance.

In countries like Egypt, online learning can compensate for the lack of national policies concerning refugees' access to higher education. Due to its flexibility and affordability, online learning has been regarded as a compelling solution for integrating disadvantaged refugees into higher education (Halkic and Arnold 2019). Thomas Crea and Neil Sparnon (2017) started an online education programme, "Jesusit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins", which was launched in Africa to provide higher education to refugees residing in camps. During the pilot years (2010–2014), 462 students managed to complete one or more degree courses (Crea and McFarland 2015). The online programme successfully equipped refugee students with the skills needed for the job market. Implementing a similar programme in Egypt could prove highly beneficial.

Another good example is the initiative by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) where volunteers are paired with refugee students to help them learn English or any other foreign language (Streitwieser et al. 2020). Similar programmes could be implemented in Egypt where local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) offer Arabic and English language classes for refugees to help them overcome language barriers. Peer coaching and mentorship could also help refugee students to overcome procedural barriers by providing them with the informational support needed to navigate their path to university (Bajwa et al. 2017). Finally, to

help refugees overcome their traumatic experiences, universities in Egypt should offer trauma-informed care and psychological counselling services.

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the work in this manuscript.

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