
1-6-2024

Exploring Women's Education and Employment Opportunities in India, Syria, and the Philippines

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Recommended APA Citation

Sarcol, E. R., Coutinho, I., Maguire, E., Collins, H. C., & Jolliffe, P. A. (2024). Exploring Women's Education and Employment Opportunities in India, Syria, and the Philippines. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(1), 116-140. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.5728>

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Abstract

The implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 marked a new chapter in global development and laid the foundations for addressing inequalities that hinder holistic progress. However, gender gaps pose a significant threat to achieving these goals. Project DREAM (Developing Resilience, Education, Aspiration, and Motivation) sought to explore women's sense of aspiration, achievement, and lived experience in India, Syria, and the Philippines, as well as develop pilot interventions to address gender disparities. Semi-structured interviews with 69 young women from India, Syria, and the Philippines informed the development of three interventions, namely an aspiration and job skills workshop series in the Philippines, Motivational Interviewing training in Syria and the Philippines, and a social media presence and launch event worldwide. This paper presents the findings of this international project, identifying four key parallels underpinning women's lived experience: poverty, incomplete education, tradition, and patriarchy. Pre-existing gender inequalities, aggravated by the widespread health, economic, and social disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, must be urgently addressed to ensure that no one is left behind on the road to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Keywords

education, employability, Maslow, phenomenology, poverty, women

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Exploring Women's Education and Employment Opportunities in India, Syria, and the Philippines

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The implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 marked a new chapter in global development and laid the foundations for addressing inequalities that hinder holistic progress. However, gender gaps pose a significant threat to achieving these goals. Project DREAM (Developing Resilience, Education, Aspiration, and Motivation) sought to explore women's sense of aspiration, achievement, and lived experience in India, Syria, and the Philippines, as well as develop pilot interventions to address gender disparities. Semi-structured interviews with 69 young women from India, Syria, and the Philippines informed the development of three interventions, namely an aspiration and job skills workshop series in the Philippines, Motivational Interviewing training in Syria and the Philippines, and a social media presence and launch event worldwide. This paper presents the findings of this international project, identifying four key parallels underpinning women's lived experience: poverty, incomplete education, tradition, and patriarchy. Pre-existing gender inequalities, aggravated by the widespread health, economic, and social disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, must be urgently addressed to ensure that no one is left behind on the road to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Keywords: education, employability, Maslow, phenomenology, poverty, women

Introduction

Major social and political changes over the last two decades have instigated structural changes across much of the world; there is evidence that these changes impact women and men very differently (Pesando, 2019). While women's status worldwide has improved substantially over the past decades educationally, economically, and politically (United Nations, 2015), gender gaps persist in most countries (UN Women, 2016). Unsurprisingly, these gaps are worse in countries with enduring civil wars such as Syria (Canham, 2017). While the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will go some way to addressing inequalities, eradication of seemingly outdated prejudices, norms, and antiquated modes of thinking is painfully slow, and understanding what causes such delays and barriers to achievement for women is crucial. This article therefore explores women's experience of education and employment. In exploring gender, the article shows how barriers to women's aspirations and achievements are evidenced, as well as the strategies women used to overcome them. In developing this argument, the paper demonstrates the usefulness of different interventions designed to improve outcomes for women, from the participants' perspectives.

Throughout this paper we will refer to both sex and gender. By “sex” we mean the biological characteristics that determine whether an individual is male or female. By “gender” we mean the social meanings we impose upon those biological facts – the way women are treated because they are perceived to be female. One is man-made, but both are real, and have consequences for women as they navigate the world of work constructed on male data, thus we feel justified in using both terms.

In this article, we explore the lived experience of young women in three Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries – India, Syria, and the Philippines – in terms of their aspirations and achievements in the areas of education and employment. Since these societies are not typically considered individualistic, findings will be used to critically evaluate the applicability of Maslow’s theory in these contexts. The DAC is a subsidiary of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and aims to assist in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, that is, the UN SDG’s (OECD, n.d.).

Research was conducted in the context of Project DREAM (Developing Resilience, Education, Aspiration, and Motivation), an initiative led by Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) in partnership with non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and individual stakeholders from India, Syria, and the Philippines. Project DREAM is part of the Better World of Work (BWoW) agenda which aims to create work security, help protect employees when accidents occur in work, provide opportunities, and give a voice. One of the inspirations for Project DREAM was due to the success of the Roma Education Aspiration Project (REAP), which was under BWoW (Better World of Work, 2021a). The purpose of REAP was to enhance the employability of Roma individuals and improve educational aspirations and expectations in young Roma. Project DREAM used learnings from REAP to inform the design and implementation of two interventions for young women in the Philippines: a series of workshops and the use of Motivational Interviewing (MI).

The right to work and education has a pivotal role within society today. Against a backdrop of decreased access to education and employment for females in some countries such as Afghanistan, it is now more imperative than ever that initiatives like Project DREAM are given prominence. This study provides new insights into women’s perspectives of education and employment in India, Syria, and the Philippines. The findings should make an important contribution to the field of research regarding the role of women and their education and employment in DAC countries. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the views of women in DAC and how their aspirations can be promoted.

Literature

Women play a crucial role within society (Yada, 2019), yet despite the United Nations introducing SDGs in 2015 that cover gender equality and decent work for all, according to Abella (2020), women are faced with career barriers and are still underrepresented. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) cites the current global labour force participation rate for women at just below 47%, compared to 72% in men. In both developed and developing countries, gender can restrict female employment opportunities (Jayachandran, 2021). Even a woman’s personal preference for paid work, estimated at 70% globally (Gallup, Inc. & ILO, 2017), is strongly influenced by socio-economic barriers and expectations surrounding traditional gender roles. For example, access to transportation and affordable childcare, as well as family demands, affect the likelihood of women participating in the labour force (ILO, 2022). As stated by Azid et al. (2021), education can provide a platform to reduce poverty and encourage jobs. According to Serneels and Dercon (2021), implementing interventions that help shape aspirations can help improve education outcomes. This may be

particularly relevant to poor households in breaking the cycle of poverty, as their children start life disadvantaged (World Bank, 2018).

Poverty represents a barrier to further needs or desires; according to the Maslow hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1963) there exists a common pattern on how people's needs are organised and recognised (Gawel, 1996). In the hierarchy, there exists five different needs: physiological, security, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation (Mathes, 1981). Maslow (1963) initially proposed a person could only pursue the next market once the former was fulfilled (Noltemeyer et al., 2021). According to Schulte (2018), a person can only focus on their career or educational aspirations after fulfilling their physiological, security, and belonging needs. This view is supported by Hagerty (1999), who stated a person could only focus on investing in themselves after they had access to food, safety, belongingness, and being valued. However, Maslow himself (1987) revised his preliminary theory and suggested that the hierarchy was more dynamic than originally proposed, refuting the idea that a person could not progress to the next need until the first had been completely met (McLeod, 2023). It is worth noting that Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a Western theory, therefore based on an individualistic society rather than a collectivist one (Noltemeyer et al., 2021).

Motivational interviewing (MI) has been used to support people with employment and financial issues (Barnes et al., 2018), as well as to prevent dropout of young adults in an education and employment program (Sayegh et al., 2017). MI is essentially having a conversation about change; it is a person-centred counselling style that addresses the common problem of ambivalence about change. One of the founding principles of MI is supporting the client's self-efficacy to change, which includes boosting confidence regarding ability to make and sustain change. Affirmation is a core skill used in MI that aims to enhance client confidence in this process (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). REAP utilised MI to empower Roma champions and support workers to catalyse change and broaden the impact of the project (Collins & Harrison, 2021).

Project DREAM investigated barriers faced by women in education and employment, with the aim of designing interventions to create opportunities in the same areas. The conflicts in Syria severely affect women's education (Bahbouh, 2019). According to Marta Guasp Teschendorff (2015), education will help to develop Syria's population for a better future. However, as stated by Mukhopadhyay (2021), women face social barriers regarding education as it can impact on their family stability and the women's role as a wife.

The United Nations SDG 8 to "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" (United Nations, 2021, p. 42) provides a framework for goal setting and data analysis. One of the targets underneath SDG 8 aims to significantly reduce the proportion of youth (15-24 years) Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). In 2019, the youth NEET rate stood at 22.3% of youth globally, with data indicating a worsening rate in most countries from the end of 2019 to mid-2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic in 2019, young women were twice as likely to experience NEET compared to young men, with rates of 31.1% and 14% respectively. This gender gap is expected to worsen as women have suffered disproportionate job losses in the pandemic (United Nations, 2021).

In the Philippines in 2020, the overall youth NEET rate was 18.6% of the total youth population. Young women were more likely to not be in education, employment, or training compared to their male counterparts, with the female youth NEET rate at 21.5% compared to male youth's NEET rate of 15.9%. In India in 2020, more than one in four young people were not in education, employment, or training, with an overall youth NEET rate of 28.2%. A stark gender difference of more than threefold exists, with a 44.5% female youth NEET rate compared to 13.6% NEET in male youth in 2020. Corresponding data was not available for

Syria, but a threefold gender disparity was seen in unemployment, with 21.5% and 7.1% of the female and male labour force unemployed, respectively (ILO, 2021a, 2021b).

The overall youth NEET rate in the Philippines jumped from 16.9% in January 2020 to 25.3% in April 2020, and as of January 2021 remained above pre-pandemic levels at 19.4%. The lower participation of young women in the education and labour force has been linked to marriage and family formation; conversely, marriage was associated with a lower rate of NEET in men. Higher NEET rates were also associated with low educational attainment and low-income backgrounds (Orbeta et al., 2021).

A study on youth who experience NEET in the UK (Department for Business, Innovation, & Skills, 2013), showed that self-confidence plays an important role in youth entering education or training, as both a motivator and a barrier. Youth cited the opportunity to improve their confidence as a motivation to learn, even if they had no current plans regarding learning. Meanwhile, a higher level of confidence in self-ability to learn was associated with youth re-entering education or training after experiencing NEET. A lack of confidence was identified as a barrier to learning, particularly for youth who desired to learn in the future and those who were looking for learning opportunities.

USAID's Mindanao Youth for Development (MYDev) program in the Philippines highlights self-confidence as an important resource for Out-of-School Youth (OSY), to participate in their self-development (learning, training, and employment) as autonomous and empowered partners. Private sector partners in the MYDev program noted that additional time, mentoring, and patience was needed in supporting participants from vulnerable youth populations to develop self-confidence, and that progress in this area was especially rewarding and fulfilling (Education Development Center, Inc., 2017).

Researchers in this study sought to elicit the experiences of women in India, Syria, and the Philippines to portray individual stories and draw insights across different contexts, to fill out the picture behind the numbers. This qualitative data then informed the development of interventions; thereby starting another cycle of information gathering via evaluation, with subsequent recommendations for practice and implementation.

Research Contexts

In each of the three DAC countries – India, Syria, and the Philippines – Project DREAM partnered with local stakeholders, namely two NGO's and one individual. The NGO partner in India, Reaching the Unreached (RTU), provides support for marginalised children and their families within the local community or at one of their children's villages in Tamil Nadu (RTU, n.d.). Our partner in Syria is an alumna of LJMU and has since returned to Tartous. Glory Reborn, the NGO partner in the Philippines, is a charity maternity clinic that provides care for marginalised mothers and babies of Cebu (Glory Reborn, 2023).

Authors' Personal Experience

The lead authors of this paper included a home student, an international student, and the field coordinator in the Philippines, all guided by the lead researchers based in the UK. Given our different backgrounds and experiences, we would like to share our perspectives of our involvement in Project DREAM.

I (first author) participated in Project DREAM as a 'researcher in residence' (Marshall et al., 2014); that is, I grew up in the West but have lived and worked in the Philippines for seven years. As a young woman of similar age to the participants of this project, I knew there would be significant differences in our lived experiences of opportunities and barriers, but it was nevertheless striking to hear them enumerated via interview. I really enjoyed leading the

“Your DREAM Journey” workshop series and getting to know some of the young women better, sharing our attempts to put into practice what we were learning. Wrapping up the project brings a sense of uneasiness as we (the authors) can walk away from the issues that were explored, as we continue with our work and studies, but participants continue living the reality of persistent barriers and limited opportunities in those very same areas of employment and education.

I (second author) participated in project DREAM as the research assistant with an international background, due to having lived in different countries in Europe and therefore experienced different cultures. What I gained most from this experience was the reality shock that my perceptions of countries such as the Philippines were very wrong. I clearly remember when I was first introduced to the countries we would be looking at, I was surprised that the Philippines was included as I thought it was a very developed country. However, this belief changed quickly when the first author explained to me what the actual barriers were and are for young women and the lack of support they receive. This project made me realise that when discussing how to support communities we do not belong to it is important to gather these communities’ opinions on what type of support and tools they need. Upon reflecting I think what I gained most about this experience was the knowledge that not everything we “Westerners” believe of other countries is accurate, but simply a representation of how those countries choose to portray themselves and equally how Westerners choose to portray them. Moreover, the importance of actively listening to people’s desires and dreams.

I (third author) also participated as a research assistant in Project DREAM. The opportunity arose whilst completing my final year of my undergraduate degree at Liverpool John Moores University. I have always taken opportunities as they are presented to me, and I saw this as a chance to develop my skills. Little did I know at the time I would come away with much more than skills to put on a CV. This project opened my eyes to the experiences of women in other countries and the barriers they face regarding employment and education. I enjoyed building the Better World of Work website, Facebook page, and podcast channels to support promoting the Project DREAM journey. Being a part of Project DREAM highlighted the importance of promoting education and employment, and this inspired me to change my career and go into teaching. I hope to help the next generation, who sometimes take education for granted. This was an invaluable experience as it enhanced my verbal communication skills as well as improved my confidence when speaking to others across the world. I have always been passionate about rights to education and employment, and I believe that Project DREAM has had a positive effect on everyone who took part and has set out what it aimed to do; to raise young women’s aspirations and create opportunities for them to participate in education.

Method

Methodology

Project DREAM consisted of the collection of primary data and the development and implementation of three interventions – workshops, motivational interviewing, and social media. Primary data included semi-structured interviews with 69 young women aged 18-30 in the three DAC countries: India, Syria, and the Philippines. We also captured demographic quantitative data such as age and family characteristics (see Appendix A).

Researchers use semi-structured interviews in the focused exploration of a specific subject; therefore, they normally have a list of questions to support the interview in a purposeful yet flexible approach. This design choice allows for participants to feel comfortable during the process and promote honest accounts of their lived experiences. The purpose of qualitative research interviews is to draw information about participants’ lives, their experiences, and

feelings (Fossey et al., 2002). Both qualitative and quantitative designs are valuable (Arghode, 2012). Qualitative methods allow researchers to focus on expanding their understanding of the importance of individuals' experiences, due to the focus on the interpretation of subjective information (Fossey et al., 2002). On the other hand, a quantitative design is focused on clarifying causes through generalising information gathered from large populations using statistical information (Arghode, 2012). A qualitative approach was selected for this study to allow for a better understanding of our participants' lived experiences of being young women in the DAC countries. Based on a phenomenological paradigm (Firestone, 1987) the research lends itself to the study of individuals' meanings of their own circumstances and supports the belief that many realities exist which are equally valid (Ridenour & Newman, 2008). In true phenomenological spirit we used the technique of epoché, and in so doing suspended any preconceptions about the participants we worked with to enter a more subjective relationship with them.

Now we will share the three interventions. Intervention One included the development of a series of workshops on aspirations and job skills for young women in the Philippines. Intervention Two was the use of Motivational Interviewing to train field coordinators in Syria and the Philippines, and Intervention Three was a social media presence and launch event. Participants from all three DAC countries were included in the semi-structured interviews, whilst the Philippines also led workshops and MI trainer support. The research team comprised of two academics from Liverpool John Moores University (UK), one UK research assistant, one international research assistant, and three field coordinators; one each in India, Syria, and the Philippines. The research team met online using Zoom regularly to provide feedback on the process and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions.

Participants

Most of the India participants were known to the NGO RTU, including former beneficiaries or those who grew up in the care of RTU, from scheduled castes (also known as Dalits or untouchables) and tribal castes. Most Syrian participants were women who had become internal migrants due to the ongoing conflict in Syria. All interview participants in the Philippines were pregnant patients enrolled in prenatal care at Glory Reborn.

All participants in Syria were recruited by the Project DREAM field coordinator, herself a former LJMU Master's student with excellent English, thus also acting as translator. The field coordinator already knew some participants, and a process of snowball sampling recruited more. The majority were women internally displaced due to the civil war and had arrived in Tartous, a relatively peaceful part of Syria, from the conflict-torn cities of Aleppo and Homs. In 2023 Aleppo has once again been marked by tragedy, this time due to the earthquake.

Participants for the workshop "Your DREAM Journey" series in the Philippines were recruited via interview with a social worker at Glory Reborn. Recruitment was driven by participant interest in exploring and developing their aspirations in education and employment, as well as availability to attend workshops. Participants were pregnant at the time of recruitment and enrolled in prenatal care. A limited number of participants were recruited due to COVID-19 restrictions, and participants could not be in late pregnancy to ensure continued availability and attendance. As a result, a total of three participants were recruited to attend the workshops, with an average age of 22 years (ranging 20-24 years). All participants had attained university-level education but had either not yet graduated or had dropped out prior to graduating. Travel expenses incurred by workshop attendance were reimbursed, to minimise the risk of financial barriers limiting attendance.

MI training participants included the field coordinators from Syria and the Philippines, as well as staff from Glory Reborn. Most MI training participants were therefore clinical workers (nurses and midwives) with direct patient contact.

Sampling

This research generally used purposeful sampling, as researchers promoted the study and participants chose to participate, yet it was also purposive as researchers advertised the study in locations where women would be (Brewis, 2014). Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling that is dependent on participants' motivation in expressing their opinion on a specific subject (Stratton, 2021). Moreover, by using a purposive sample, the researchers were able to gather rich information on the phenomenon they were studying.

Participants' Semi Structured Interview Demographics

Research participants were young women between 18-30 years old. The most highly represented age group was the 22-25 years old group. Twenty-nine percent of participants were married, and 48% had at least one child, while 30% of participants had two children. In terms of education, 34% of our participants had attended college and university. It was found that 92% of participants had siblings. The most common statuses were to have two brothers and one sister, correspondingly 49% and 32%. In participants with at least one sister, 38% of participants' sisters had never attended university, whilst participants with at least one brother reported that 40% of brothers had never attended university. On the other hand, the percentage of one sister attending university on average was 19%, whilst one brother attending university was 38%.

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and gained from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). The researchers were aware of the importance of informed consent and all participants read and signed before engaging in the interviews, thus they were aware of their participation in the study (McNeill & Chapman, 2005). Furthermore, due to the importance of confidentiality, for the participants to feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences, this study used partial anonymity, meaning participants' identities were protected from the public but the researcher still can discover participants' identities (Given, 2008). This assures confidentiality and allows the researcher to analyse data relevance and accuracy for the research study (Mathison, 2005).

Data Collection

The study utilised an interpretive qualitative approach anchored on social constructivism with the expectation that multifarious realities are constructed (Endres & Weibler, 2017). The purpose is to obtain rich data.

Semi-structured interviews took place between February and October 2021 in India, Syria, and the Philippines, facilitated by local stakeholders and transmitted to researchers in the UK. The interviews were structured around four themes: firstly, key barriers which young women faced in their contexts; secondly, what they considered to be a good job; thirdly, what barriers exist for young women in achieving their "good job"; and finally what support they needed to overcome their barriers. These themes were adapted, with NGO input, from those used by academics in Liverpool Roma research (Collins & Harrison, 2019). To aid

dependability and credibility, pilot interviews were undertaken in India, Syria, and the Philippines. The pilot interviews allowed the researchers to check that the scope of the study was met, and consistent interpretations drawn (Dunwoodie et al., 2022), particularly as the study was conducted in three field locations. For example, the feedback from India was that two of the questions were aimed at educated people with jobs and they asked about the uneducated; thus, questions 6 and 7 were changed. Subsequently, all interview recordings were transcribed as early as possible, to facilitate the data organisation and analysis (Widodo, 2014). Prompting questions were also included to aid adaptation to each environment. For example, the prompting for question 3 was “What level did you get to? Why did you stop?” (See Appendix B).

Qualitative data was extracted by researchers in their respective DAC countries (India, Syria, and the Philippines) from interviews through transcription of audio recordings. In countries where the interviews were conducted in the local language, namely Syria and the Philippines, researchers translated qualitative data into English before transcribing. English transcripts of interviews were sent to researchers in the UK for review and data processing and analysis. Field coordinators were informed to destroy their recordings after transcription.

Data Analysis

To analyse the information gathered, the researchers used thematic analysis to find and code themes. When doing thematic analysis, researchers tend to start with descriptive information and move towards interpreting it (Terry et al., 2017). Therefore, for this study the researchers first found themes from the interviews and then looked at their frequency. Thematic analysis is a flexible way to analyse qualitative data, however, it is important to have a clear understanding of what are the researchers’ anterior beliefs (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The operational steps taken to the analysis were as follows. Initially, a naming strategy was developed and used. The first number denoted the name of the country, the second one the number of the participant and the third number the line of the analysis. For example, Philippines 1, participant 2 and line number 5. Thus, if the overall 3–5-digit number started with a 1 then we knew it was a participant from the Philippines. We then cut and paste each transcript into word, added page numbering and inserted the Viewmaster SideBar (Right). We included the naming strategy and concept that we coded in the sidebar e.g., 2.4.7 ethnic minority. After the two academics read each interview transcript and conducted the coding separately, they met to bring together the codes and sort them into categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, our data analysis was an interactive process where the two researchers regularly met to discuss ideas and move between the data and the literature. We met online via Teams and used OneNote to work simultaneously when integrating the concepts and working out the categories (Williams & Moser, 2019) and then the themes. We achieved an audit trail by creating an analysis template and updating this regularly.

Interventions One and Two – Workshops and MI training

Project DREAM in the Philippines piloted a series of workshops, entitled “Your DREAM Journey,” on aspirations and job skills with the aim to facilitate young women’s access to education and job opportunities in a localised context, on a small scale. The workshops were held at Glory Reborn in partnership with Google Business Group (GBG) Cebu¹ between May and July 2021. The overarching scheme of learning for the workshop series was based on REAP, implemented in Liverpool with Roma families in 2019–2020. It

¹ Thereafter known as Digital Skills Community Cebu until the discontinuation of the program in 2022.

was adapted to the local context, with significant contributions from three female associates and one male associate from GBG Cebu focused on technology.

Another component of Project DREAM in the Philippines was training on MI for staff of Glory Reborn. The two-day course was delivered online by a UK Consultant Clinical Psychologist and MI expert in March 2021.

“Your DREAM Journey” workshops were evaluated using Vevox live polling technology (www.vevox.com) by participants’ self-evaluation according to their knowledge, skills, and confidence in areas relating to employment and education, both pre-and post-workshop attendance. Likewise, Vevox was used to evaluate participants’ knowledge, skills, and confidence at the beginning and end of the MI training.

Intervention Three: Social Media

Social media has changed the way we advertise events and share information (Subramanian, 2018). To publicise the launch of Project DREAM, a clear plan was formed to help spread the word about Project DREAM and how the public could get involved. Planning was participative, including stakeholders from India, Syria, and the Philippines to ensure that outputs were widely representative and culturally appropriate. A website was created as a base for all the Better World of Work projects, with a dedicated section for Project DREAM that provided visitors to the website with further information and opportunities to be a part of the conversation (Better World of Work, 2021b). Monthly newsletters and blogs were produced to give regular updates on how Project DREAM had progressed, which were disseminated via the website and a Facebook page (Better World of Work, 2021c). The Facebook page also shared a short series of Spotify podcasts that were created by the Project DREAM team to raise awareness and prompt conversations (Maguire, 2021). It was decided that the launch event for Project DREAM in May 2021 should be shown live on both Facebook and YouTube as both social media platforms are highly accessible across the world. According to Pikas and Sorrentino (2014), YouTube and Facebook are effective platforms to advertise and reach out to people. Vevox live polling was also made available for launch event participants to share their feedback.

Findings

Our findings will be structured as follows. Firstly, we will share the interview analyses, followed by the three interventions: workshops, motivational interviewing, and social media. As we are sharing the story of our overall experience, we will provide an overview of the interview findings.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Despite the limit of generalisability of qualitative data, our findings from the interviews with young women highlighted the importance of context in each DAC country. Namely, the experience of the following: HIV/AIDS in participants from India, the war in Syria, and poverty in participants in the Philippines. Such contexts produce drivers that inherently affect the holistic lived experience of young women, not limited to education and employment. Furthering the data collection, common to all three country contexts, was the persistence of the word “tradition.” Many participants argued tradition was valued in terms of keeping them safe. However, at the same time, their cultural tradition caused many restrictions on their personal choices about their future aspirations relating to employment and education due to early marriage and cultural pressures.

The three key themes that underpinned the findings were the impact of family, finance, and gender. While there were significant differences between the three countries, we have chosen to give an overview of the commonalities.

Family

The family was a double-edged sword for many participants, acting as a barrier and a lifeline to education and employment. By family, we include all relationships, such as parents, siblings, partners, and relatives. Other aspects of family that influenced the women in this study included number of siblings, position in the family, finance, location, and ability to migrate internally. Early marriage and motherhood, particularly in India and the Philippines, went hand in hand with an incomplete education.

Family expectations around the role of women influenced participants in India, Syria, and the Philippines. We also found evidence of the influence of drug and alcohol use on family members in the Philippines and India and how this impacted participants' ability to stay in education and seek work. In Syria, society's traditions and stigma around divorce were significant in impacting women's access to good work. Many participants from all three DAC countries cited a lack of connections or poor networks because of their primary role as caregivers in the family. Women were expected to play a secondary role to men in both education and employment. A quote from a participant in Syria highlights the common experience of interdependent relationships to help and support each other; Farah says, "I would like to stay at college, but my family need me to farm." Each is dependent upon one another, and like a jigsaw, if one part is missing it can alter the landscape of the situation. Marriage was cited as a key piece to the jigsaw, as exemplified by Kimaya: "I did not continue my study after 12th standard because I had two sisters. I had to marry early. Then only I will save my sisters." For Kimaya, by choosing marriage and having a husband to support her, she freed up the family support for her younger sisters.

At the same time, family was positively linked to life satisfaction in some instances, especially among those participants who reported strong family ties. In Shyula's account we witness the breadth of family support to help her complete her studies. Firstly, her uncle and then her husband, whom she is dependent upon to provide this support: "My uncle helped me to complete my undergraduate and my husband helped me to complete my B.ED."

An essential feature of these results involves intergenerational continuity across generations, and in the Philippines and India, this was sometimes associated with a family occupation. For example, as Farah shares, "My siblings work in production, and get me in. I get my younger siblings in because we understand production."

The impact of precariat work on the family was evident, particularly in the Philippines. For example, Alma explained how her dad was in precariat work and Ariane whose partner is in precariat work, as she explained that he is "sometimes there three, sometimes two [days]."

Finance

The second central theme was the role of finance, marked by poverty, particularly in India and the Philippines, where participants had to pay for their education. As a barrier to education, family finance was cited several times as why participants could not start or had to leave education early and not complete their studies. Shirley refers to this barrier when she describes, "My elder sibling wanted to support me but because of how many we are [in the family], the money for my tuition was used by my mother." The impact of insufficient finances on the education of the family was gendered, as in Layla's case: "I left school early so that my parents could pay for my brother's education." Participants experienced being dependent upon

adults to provide, however needs were not always met, for instance Hannah's hopes were raised and dashed by her mother: "She would ask me whatever I needed, and she wouldn't give it, so it was like nothing."

The motivation to gain financial security to complete education and support their families was strong. For instance, Devina says, "I would like to study nursing, but I can't choose my higher study. Because my father is a drunkard who does not take care of my family." Participants' experience of poverty was a driver, especially in the Philippines and India. However, while a good income featured in many participants' accounts in response to "What is a good job?" Other factors were deemed as important for many. In India, the desire for secure work was evident as many of the participants cited the desire to work for the Government, whereas in Syria participants wanted to get out of the house into a new environment. Participants from India, Syria, and the Philippines looked forward to the chance to learn. Unsurprisingly, Mary Rose's dream is for a boss who "will treat you well."

Gender

The third theme that emerged was the impact of gender discrimination on participants' experiences. Seeing men as the human default was fundamental to the prejudice of females in education and workplaces, manifested in all three countries in daily harassment of women. This was evident in the home of Saumya: "My parents hated me [because] I was a girl." Through to the exclusion of women like Ruth from some jobs and completing education: "You're a woman so you should just stay at home... usually it's really the man who works."

Paradoxically, the very traditions that closed doors for females also enabled them to participate in work and education to a point, a point determined by family needs and expectations. As Lavanya puts it, "After 10th standard I... to study nursing. My brother did not allow me to go there... In College I got an opportunity to train the college students, but my husband didn't allow me to there."

Other barriers were prevalent because of being born a woman, as experienced by Meera: "I like to join a BSc Physical education, but I can't because I am a woman." There was evidence that some women were at the very least dependent upon their husbands, and at most controlled by them, as in Lavanya's case: "My husband didn't allow me to... speak to others ... he verbally abused me many times ... he treats me as a slave in his home."

However, as we mentioned in the family aspect, many husbands and fathers supported women in their pursuit of education.

Thinking and operating laterally rather than vertically could result in a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to women's aspirations in education and employment experiences, and might more effectively serve women in DAC countries, regardless of provenance. This aligns more accurately with the reality of women's lives, for example Diala recounts:

When I migrated to Tartous I tried to do a market stall but there was only one place, and it was for a man. Even if it was empty, I would be trouble if I took it. Best to stay empty than let a woman take it.

Other barriers often cited by women were war, which made access to school/college impossible; sexism present in education, which resulted in participants not viewing their education as a priority; and the lack of disposable income.

In terms of employment, participants described a "good job" to feel empowered and be independent of one's family. In addition, a "good job" was associated with being able to

network with others outside their social environment, being respected, having a balanced work-family life, and continuing developing oneself.

On the other hand, many barriers to getting a “good job” were recognised by young women in the three DAC countries. These were poor English skills, poor social networks, lack of education, traditions, poor ICT literacy, physical illnesses such as HIV and mental illness, being female and social stigma resulting in few connections.

Finally, in terms of what support they would require overcoming the barriers to education and employment, this included feeling safe in pursuing these paths, network effectively, traditions not being used to restrict them, support from private charities and the power of prayer.

Despite existing barriers, many participants exhibited hope and optimism, and continued to believe in a better future.

Intervention One – “Your DREAM Journey” Workshops

Workshops were led by the Project Manager at Glory Reborn, with the assistance of a local volunteer, in the local language. Volunteers from GBG Cebu provided online learning materials in the local dialect for Workshops 4, 7, 8, and 9 (see Figure 1). Apart from access to online learning materials, participants had the opportunity to hear from a local community member who had succeeded in achieving her aspirations in employment as a new mother and participate in creative activities such as collage-making and role play.

Figure 1

Workshop Series Visual



Due to the small sample size of workshop participants, evaluation data is not published here. Nonetheless, it is of interest to note that the participant who attended the most workshops had the highest increase in self-evaluated knowledge, skills and confidence in areas relating to education and employment, while the participant who attended the fewest workshops reported the lowest change (in fact, a slight negative effect). This cautions against a one-size-fits-all approach even for a seemingly homogenous group, as aspirations and confidence are intensely personal constructs, underscoring the importance of continuous monitoring and evaluation of projects that seek to impact them.

Intervention Two – Motivational Interviewing

A total of nine participants from Glory Reborn in the Philippines and one participant from Syria attended the MI training. MI was not only directly relevant to the project activities in the Philippines and Syria, but it was also identified by staff from Glory Reborn as a helpful tool in promoting lifestyle change for clients in the maternity care program. Indeed, there is a wealth of evidence for the use of MI in the context of health behaviour change in pregnant populations (Miller, 2020).

Participants' knowledge, skills and confidence at the beginning and end of the course are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Effect of MI Training on Participants' MI Knowledge, Skills, and Confidence

Criteria	Average Pre-Course (5-point Likert scale)	Average Post-Course (5-point Likert scale)
Knowledge	3	4.5
Skills	3	4.5
Confidence	3	4

The qualitative feedback is summed up by one participant: "I learned how important it is to be a good listener, not to be judgemental and not to suggest or give the solution...but to let the client decide...I also learned how important affirmation is."

The field coordinators in the Philippines and Syria received further supervision and training from the Clinical Psychologist monthly for the remainder of 2021, to enhance sustainability and continued application of MI in their local contexts.

Intervention Three – Social Media

The launch event in May 2021 was a success, with 62 and 55 people joining the live event from around the world on Facebook and YouTube, respectively. Twenty-one months later, the count stands at over one thousand views on Facebook and 70 views on YouTube (BWOW, 2021; Project DREAM, 2021). Women from India, Syria, and the Philippines shared their lived experiences in their local contexts, and how Project DREAM has helped them. Local influencers in the Philippines were also invited to share their experiences, particularly as they related to overcoming barriers to education and employment as women. These women represented peer role models, and their participation expanded the reach of the launch event to their networks and followers (Pradia, n.d.; The MommyPedia Podcast, n.d.). A short extract from one of the workshops on online job skills provided by GBG Cebu was introduced by a female associate and broadcast during the event. Respondents to the Vevox poll for the launch

event were unanimously positive in their feedback, with suggestions to translate into the respective country dialects for more participation, sharing and collaboration.

Discussion

The qualitative results from the interviews with young women in India, Syria, and the Philippines and the three key themes of family, finance, and gender, shed light on the underlying mechanisms and processes by which females experience disparities in education and employment, compared to their male counterparts. “Tradition,” or the cultural expectations placed on women in their respective contexts, was a key upstream factor in women’s education and employment, preceding that of personal choice or preference. While this phenomenon is apparent on a global scale (ILO, 2022), it was interesting to find that the concept of “tradition” was used elastically by participants; some viewed it as a barrier to education and employment, whereas others drew feelings of safety from it. This difference did not necessarily represent a dichotomy, as someone can experience tradition as a barrier while simultaneously experiencing a perceived security from it (Yunis et al., 2018).

As the workshop participants of “Your DREAM Journey” progressed from pregnancy to motherhood, they assumed the role that most young women in the NEET population in the Philippines fill: home carer (Orbeta et al., 2021). It is interesting to consider that home carers are classified as “economically inactive” – their unpaid work is surely essential and of some present economic value, as well as ensuring the future economic productivity of next generations. The United Nations (2021) estimates that women spend around 2.5 times as many hours doing unpaid domestic and care work compared to men and has observed an increase in this burden due to the pandemic. However, with the recent increase in remote work opportunities and basic technical literacy, it is plausible that many home carers could transition from the NEET population to the labour workforce, as demonstrated by the workshops on online job skills.

A recent comprehensive review of the quantitative impact of COVID-19 on gender inequalities by Flor et al. (2022), found that labour force participation and unpaid work were two key areas where women were differentially affected. Women interviewed in our research reported numerous barriers to getting a good job, which are likely to have been exacerbated by the pandemic as women experienced disproportionate job loss compared to men; 26.0% and 20.4% respectively, in September 2021 (Flor et al., 2022). There is quite a significant difference between women and men’s time spent on unpaid work. This type of work may involve household, childcare and volunteer work (Shelton, 2006). In the case of India, historically women are responsible for the household affairs which correspond to unpaid work, whilst men are responsible to provide financially for the household (Budhwar et al., 2005). This results in less than a quarter of the Indian workforce being women (Wadhwa & Retnakaran, 2020).

Indeed, disparities faced by women in education and employment are by no means novel challenges introduced by the pandemic; rather, they represent pre-existing inequalities that have been amplified by the widespread health, economic, and social disruption caused by the pandemic. For example, discrimination in education based on sex, cited by women as a barrier in our interviews, has also been highlighted internationally, with women and girls 1.2 times more likely to report dropping out of school than men and boys during the pandemic (Flor et al., 2022). Similarly, settings that were already resource-poor like the Philippines, where 21.1% of the population lived below the national poverty line in 2018 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021), experienced further economic hardship because of lockdowns. Vulnerable workers, such as daily wage earners, who were able to resume work under varying levels of community quarantine, were faced with a lower workload and corresponding lower income a year into the pandemic (Chronic Poverty Advisory Network, 2021). Globally, 58.4%

of respondents in the study by Flor et al. (2022) reported loss of income, with women in Southeast Asia experiencing significantly greater income loss than men. Lack of disposable income was repeatedly cited by young women in our research as a barrier to education and employment; financial security is impacted by income loss in both men and women, considering the family and community contexts of the young women who were interviewed. This may be an especially relevant barrier for women in Syria, given the country's latest staggering poverty rate of 90 per cent (Kamal, 2022). A similar theme emerged in the LREN and REAP projects in Liverpool, as precarious financial situations were identified as a challenge experienced by the Roma population (Harrison et al., 2020).

As the world works to recover from the “worst recession since the Great Depression” which disparately affected young people and women (United Nations, 2021, p. 42), we are at a crucial stage to overhaul aggravated gender inequalities and respond with gender-sensitive policies to achieve equity for all. As countries seek to boost their economies, such as the Philippines' vision to become a “prosperous, predominantly middle-class society where no one is poor” by 2040 (President of the Philippines, 2016, p. 2), diverse stakeholders must be present at decision-making tables to ensure that no one is left behind.

Professional Practice Recommendations

As previously mentioned, Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is a Western one. Its relevance for this study could be low due to the collectivist nature of society in the three DAC countries where data was collected. However, the fact that our participants did not realise their inequality in society could be a result of being food, safety, and feeling valued insecure. Therefore, supporting Maslow's belief that one can only focus on themselves when the necessities are fulfilled. Thus, many of our participants had not thought about how being a woman could be affecting them, as they are still trying to overcome the first two steps in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, such as overcoming poverty and finding a secure place to live. Furthermore, Lygnegard et al. (2013) stated that the lack of one's needs being fulfilled can result in young people not being able to fulfil their potential. Something that we found surprising was how much our study linked to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and without the needs being catered for it was difficult for the women to see their inequality within society.

Although parallels in gender inequalities can be drawn between different contexts and trends analysed on a global scale, distinctions remain at the regional, national, and local level. Gender dynamics and the way they play out as inequities are specific to context, as traditions and expectations vary both geographically and over time (Morgan et al., 2022). Therefore, gender-responsive policies are not one size fits all; they will look different across different contexts, even with a shared target such as SDG 8. Flor et al. (2022) noted gaps in gender-disaggregated data for numerous aspects of wellbeing; the importance of this data for evidence-based policies cannot be understated, although its current dearth should not be used as an excuse for delayed action and response. The scarcity of published data for Syria, for example, should be a sounding alarm for increased attention and investment in the lived experience of young women there.

The “Your DREAM Journey” workshop series and training on Motivational Interviewing provide examples of context-specific interventions that simultaneously add to the qualitative knowledge database surrounding women's aspirations in education and employment. Although implementation was small-scale, it can be used as the preliminary stage of a proof-of-concept study and contribute to the design of larger scale programs.

Data sharing across fields and settings is an essential tool to track progress towards the UN SDG 8, identify existing roadblocks, and collaboratively working towards a fairer future for all, especially youth and women. The parallels identified in this paper lend more weight to

the need and potential impact for shared learnings, and we urge the UN to include a diverse range of such grassroots organisations in stakeholder meetings to achieve this goal. Future research should be multidisciplinary in nature and consider “end-users” by seeking the meaningful participation of youth and women at all stages from planning to dissemination of evaluation results.

Limitations

Several limitations of our research can be identified. Firstly, the different contexts of researchers in their respective DAC countries meant that data collection was not uniform across all three settings. Researchers used the same base forms in English for data collection, such as informed consent and interview questions, however resulting translations into local languages may not have been directly equivalent to each other. Secondly, the sampling method used was a non-probability sampling, which introduces the risk of motivation bias, non-participant error, and limits generalisability to the wider population (Stratton, 2021). Data on non-participation was not collected, which hinders assessment of the impact of non-participant error on the qualitative results. Thirdly, data analysis was not systematic, which calls into question the replicability of the research. Despite these limitations, the study’s intention to act as a pilot investigation of the lived experiences of young women in DAC countries in relation to their aspirations surrounding education and employment was not compromised, as a wealth of information was collected, forming a library of case studies from which further research can be designed and implemented.

However, our qualitative research in this study enriches understanding of the broader landscape of gender inequality in employment and education and provides a window into how these might be addressed on a local scale. The interventions implemented in the Philippines inform the future expansion of the project and design of similar initiatives in other contexts. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of efforts to build and achieve aspirations is central to their impact and responsiveness, especially in the current dynamic global situation marked by war, poverty, and inequality.

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Appendix A

Demographic Information Sheet



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PROJECT DREAM Developing Resilience, Education, Aspiration, and Motivation

Demographic Information (please circle)

What is your Gender?	Male	Female	I prefer not to say
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What is your Nationality?			
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What is your Age?	18-21	22-25	26-28	28-30
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Are you married?	Yes	No
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Do you have children?	Yes	No
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How many children do you have?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8+
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Do you have brothers and sisters?	Yes	No
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How many brothers do you have?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8+
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How many sisters do you have?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8+
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What is your highest level of education?	Primary School	High School	College	University	Other
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How many, if any, of your sisters attended University?	
How many, if any, of your brothers attended University?	
What area do you live in?	

Appendix B

Prompting Questions in Semi-Structured Interviews



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PROJECT DREAM Developing Resilience, Education, Aspiration, and Motivation INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell us a little bit about your background/history?

Prompt: Where are you from? Your family?

2. What opportunities are/were there for you in terms of education and work?

3. Tell us about your education?

Prompt: What level did you get to? Why did you stop?

4. What barriers did you or do you face in attending School/College/University?

5. What would help/helped you attend School/College/University?

6. Tell us about your work?

Prompt: What work have you done? How did you get the job(s)

7. What is work like for you?

Prompt: What is the job like in terms of pay/contract/working conditions?

8. What does a good job look like to you?

9. What barriers did/do you face in getting a good job?

10. What would help/helped you get a good job?

11. Are there any additional barriers to work/education because you are female?

12. When you are faced with a barrier or a problem, how do you deal with it?

Author Note

Emma R. Sarcol worked in the Philippines for seven years after completing her Masters of Science in Public Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. As the Project Manager at the NGO partner in the Philippines, Glory Reborn, she coordinated all relevant project activities, including leading the “Your DREAM Journey” workshop series and undergoing extended training in Motivational Interviewing. Emma played an active role throughout the project life cycle, from conceptualisation and planning through implementation to monitoring and evaluation, culminating in leading the writing of the manuscript. Please direct correspondence to emmarietbergen@gmail.com.

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Article Citation

Sarcol, E., Coutinho, I., Maguire, E., Collins, H., & Jolliffe, P. (2024). Exploring women’s education and employment opportunities in India, Syria, and the Philippines. *The Qualitative Report*, 29(1), 116-140. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2024.5728>
