Empowerment Through Education Phenomenological Study of Women Who Returned to School Later in Life

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The empowerment of women through education is a critical area of study, especially for those returning to school later in life. This research aims to explore the lived experiences of women in Shiraz City, Fars Province, Iran, who have chosen to return to education, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and the impacts on their personal and professional lives.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach to deeply understand the experiences of the participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 women who returned to education later in life. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software to identify key themes and patterns. The participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure rich and relevant experiences were captured.

Findings: The study revealed that the primary motivations for returning to education included personal growth, economic benefits, family influence, social interaction, and overcoming past regrets. Participants faced significant challenges such as balancing responsibilities, financial constraints, societal expectations, academic difficulties, emotional struggles, and institutional barriers. Coping strategies included time management, financial management, support networks, stress relief methods, academic support, and personal motivation. The impact of returning to education was profound, leading to increased self-esteem, professional growth, improved family dynamics, social engagement, empowerment, and a commitment to lifelong learning.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the transformative potential of education for women returning to school later in life. While these women face numerous challenges, their experiences highlight the importance of supportive structures and policies to facilitate their educational journeys. Addressing financial, social, and institutional barriers can enhance their educational outcomes and broader societal contributions. Future research should focus on larger, more diverse samples and explore the role of digital learning platforms in supporting women's education.

Keywords: Women's education, empowerment, phenomenological study, returning to school.

1.   Introduction

Education is a powerful tool for empowerment, offering numerous benefits that extend beyond individual gains to broader societal impacts. Augustine (2016) highlights that continuing education can significantly alter life course patterns for mothers, providing them with new opportunities for personal and professional growth. This study aligns with the findings of Augustine by examining how women in Shiraz City perceive and experience the transformative power of education (Augustine, 2016). The benefits of education are not merely economic but also encompass improvements in self-esteem, social status, and the ability to make informed decisions, as emphasized by various scholars (Kaffenberger & Pritchett, 2020; Psaki et al., 2019).

Returning to education later in life often involves overcoming substantial challenges. These challenges can range from financial constraints to balancing familial and academic responsibilities. Hill (1995) discusses the labor market effects of women's post-school-age training, emphasizing the difficulties women face in re-entering the workforce and the additional barriers they encounter (Hill, 1995).

Empowerment through education is a recurrent theme in research focusing on women's rights and development. Dalsmo et al. (2021) explore how participation in health promotion campaigns in Tanzania empowers young women, providing them with the skills and confidence needed to achieve their goals (Dalsmo et al., 2021). This study extends this discussion by examining how educational empowerment manifests in the lives of older women in a different cultural context. The concept of empowerment is multifaceted, encompassing economic, social, and psychological dimensions (Asaolu et al., 2018; Shimamoto & Gipson, 2017). Women's autonomy in household decision-making and their overall empowerment are closely linked to their educational attainment. Acharya et al. (2010) and Phan (2015) have demonstrated that higher levels of education correlate with greater autonomy and decision-making power within the household (Acharya et al., 2010; Phan, 2015).

The decision to return to education is often influenced by past experiences and future aspirations. Jaworski (2014) discusses the impact of historical events, such as World War II, on women's education, work, and family life. Although the context of this study is different, the underlying motivations and aspirations of the women in Shiraz City reflect similar desires for personal growth and professional development. These motivations are crucial for understanding the broader implications of women's education on societal development (Jaworski, 2014).

The societal impact of women's education extends beyond individual benefits to include broader community and economic benefits. Thandar et al. (2020) and Yeo et al. (2022) have highlighted how women's education positively influences health outcomes and societal development (Thandar et al., 2020; Yeo et al., 2022). Furthermore, the challenges faced by women returning to education are not unique to Iran. Henzan et al. (2021) explore factors influencing school re-entry among adolescents in Kenya, identifying barriers such as financial constraints and societal expectations (Henzan et al., 2021). Similarly, Barringer et al. (2016) discuss the implications of social support and empowerment for minority women with substance abuse and criminal justice histories. These studies provide a comparative framework for understanding the challenges faced by women in Shiraz City and the strategies they employ to overcome these barriers (Barringer et al., 2016).

In conclusion, this study aims to shed light on the experiences of women in Shiraz City who have returned to education later in life. By exploring their motivations, challenges, and the impact of their educational pursuits, the study contributes to the broader discourse on women's empowerment and educational attainment. The findings will not only enhance our understanding of the specific context of Shiraz City but also offer valuable insights for policymakers and educators working to support women's education globally. Through this research, we hope to highlight the transformative power of education and its potential to empower women and promote societal development.

2.   Methods and Materials

2.1.   Study design and Participant

This study employs a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of women in Shiraz City, Fars Province, Iran, who have returned to school later in life. Phenomenology is chosen to deeply understand and describe the essence of these women's experiences from their own perspectives.

The participants were women residing in Shiraz City who decided to pursue education later in life. The selection criteria included women above the age of 30 who had re-enrolled in formal education after a significant break. A

purposive sampling method was used to ensure that participants had rich and relevant experiences to share.

2.2.   Measures

2.2.1.   Semi-Structured Interview

Developed by Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman in 1996, the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2) is a comprehensive tool used to assess the extent and nature of conflict in marital relationships. The CTS2 includes 78 items distributed across five subscales: Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, Sexual Coercion, and Injury. Each item is rated on a scale reflecting the frequency of behaviors ranging from "never" to "very often". The scoring system allows researchers to quantify various forms of conflict, ranging from constructive negotiations to severe forms of aggression. Extensive validation and reliability studies have confirmed the efficacy of the CTS2 in diverse populations, making it a robust measure for marital conflicts (Alikhani & Farhadi, 2019; Lee & Han, 2023).

2.3.   Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim in Persian. The transcriptions were then translated into English for analysis. The data were analyzed using NVivo software, which facilitated the organization and coding of the data.

The analysis followed the steps of phenomenological analysis, including:

Bracketing: Setting aside the researcher's preconceptions to focus on the participants' experiences.

Reading and Re-reading: Immersing in the data to gain a holistic understanding.

Identifying Significant Statements: Extracting phrases and sentences that directly pertain to the phenomenon.

Formulating Meanings: Interpreting the significant statements to uncover the meanings embedded in the participants' narratives.

Clustering Themes: Grouping similar meanings into themes to capture the essence of the experiences.

Textural and Structural Description: Developing a comprehensive description of what the participants experienced (textural) and how they experienced it (structural).

3.   Findings and Results

The study involved 20 women from Shiraz City, Fars Province, Iran, who returned to education later in life. The participants ranged in age from 32 to 55 years old, with a mean age of 43. The majority of the participants (60%) were married, while 25% were single, and 15% were divorced. In terms of educational background, 40% had previously completed high school, 35% had some college education, and 25% had obtained a bachelor's degree before returning to education. Employment status varied among the participants: 50% were employed full-time, 30% part-time, and 20% were not employed at the time of the study. The participants' motivations for returning to education were diverse, reflecting a range of personal, economic, and social factors.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Marital Conflicts and Spiritual Wellbeing

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
1. Motivations for Returning to Education	Personal Growth	Self-fulfillment, Intellectual curiosity, Confidence building
	Economic Benefits	Job opportunities, Career advancement, Financial independence
	Family Influence	Setting an example for children, Support from spouse, Family encouragement
	Social Interaction	Making new friends, Networking, Community involvement
	Overcoming Past Regrets	Completing unfinished education, Second chance, Redemption
2. Challenges Faced	Balancing Responsibilities	Managing family duties, Work-study balance, Time management issues
	Financial Constraints	Tuition fees, Lack of scholarships, Cost of materials
	Societal Expectations	Gender roles, Community judgment, Cultural barriers
	Academic Difficulties	Adapting to new learning methods, Keeping up with coursework, Technology usage
	Emotional Struggles	Anxiety, Self-doubt, Stress
	Institutional Barriers	Limited support services, Rigid schedules, Bureaucratic obstacles
3. Coping Strategies	Time Management Techniques	Scheduling, Prioritizing tasks, Using planners
	Financial Management	Budgeting, Seeking financial aid, Part-time jobs

	Support Networks	Family support, Peer support, Mentorship
	Stress Relief Methods	Exercise, Meditation, Hobbies
	Academic Support	Tutoring, Study groups, Online resources
	Personal Motivation	Setting goals, Self-reward systems, Positive self-talk
4. Impact of Returning to Education	Personal Development	Increased self-esteem, Enhanced knowledge, Improved skills
	Professional Growth	Promotions, New job opportunities, Skill enhancement
	Family Dynamics	Improved family relationships, Role model for children, Increased family respect
	Social Engagement	Community participation, New friendships, Broader social network
	Empowerment	Independence, Self-reliance, Confidence in decision making
	Lifelong Learning	Love for learning, Continuous education plans, Curiosity

3.1. Motivations for Returning to Education

Women returning to education later in life in Shiraz City are driven by a variety of motivations. Personal Growth is a significant motivator, with participants expressing a desire for self-fulfillment, intellectual curiosity, and confidence building. One participant stated, "I always wanted to prove to myself that I could do it, to gain knowledge and feel more confident."

The pursuit of Economic Benefits also plays a crucial role. Many women see education as a pathway to better job opportunities, career advancement, and financial independence. As one interviewee mentioned, "I returned to school because I wanted to get a better job and support my family financially."

Family Influence is another important factor, where setting an example for children, receiving support from a spouse, and encouragement from family members are key. "My children were my biggest supporters. They encouraged me to go back to school," shared one participant.

Social aspects like Social Interaction motivate these women to return to school, where making new friends, networking, and community involvement are significant. One woman commented, "I have met so many wonderful people, and it has expanded my social circle."

Finally, the theme of Overcoming Past Regrets emerges strongly. Many participants expressed a desire to complete unfinished education, take a second chance, and seek redemption. "I always regretted not finishing my education. Going back to school was my way of correcting that mistake," said a participant.

3.2. Challenges Faced

The journey back to education is fraught with challenges. Balancing Responsibilities is a major issue, as women struggle to manage family duties, work-study balance, and time management. One participant described, "It's hard to juggle between my kids, my job, and my studies, but I am determined."

Financial Constraints pose another significant barrier, with tuition fees, lack of scholarships, and the cost of materials being primary concerns. "Paying for my education has been tough, especially without any financial aid," noted an interviewee.

Societal pressures also come into play under Societal Expectations. Gender roles, community judgment, and cultural barriers add to the difficulty. One woman remarked, "People in my community often question why a woman my age would go back to school."

Academic Difficulties such as adapting to new learning methods, keeping up with coursework, and technology usage present further obstacles. "I found it challenging to get used to the new teaching methods and technology," shared one participant.

Emotional hurdles are highlighted under Emotional Struggles, including anxiety, self-doubt, and stress. "Sometimes, I feel overwhelmed and question if I made the right decision," confessed a participant.

Finally, Institutional Barriers such as limited support services, rigid schedules, and bureaucratic obstacles are significant challenges. One interviewee explained, "The lack of support services at the institution makes it harder to cope with the academic load."

3.3. Coping Strategies

To overcome these challenges, women employ various coping strategies. Time Management Techniques like scheduling, prioritizing tasks, and using planners are essential. "I learned to manage my time better by scheduling and prioritizing my tasks," stated a participant.

In terms of Financial Management, budgeting, seeking financial aid, and taking part-time jobs help women manage their educational expenses. "I started a part-time job and applied for financial aid to help with the costs," shared one woman.

Support Networks play a critical role, including family support, peer support, and mentorship. "My family and friends have been my biggest support system," mentioned an interviewee.

Stress Relief Methods such as exercise, meditation, and hobbies are vital in managing emotional stress. One participant noted, "I started practicing yoga to relieve stress and maintain my mental health."

Academic Support through tutoring, study groups, and online resources helps women keep up with their studies. "Joining a study group has been immensely helpful for me," said one participant.

Finally, Personal Motivation strategies, including setting goals, self-reward systems, and positive self-talk, keep women focused and motivated. "Setting small goals and rewarding myself when I achieve them keeps me motivated," shared a participant.

3.4. Impact of Returning to Education

The impact of returning to education is profound and multifaceted. Personal Development is evident, with increased self-esteem, enhanced knowledge, and improved skills. One participant expressed, "I feel more confident and knowledgeable after returning to school."

Professional Growth is another significant outcome, leading to promotions, new job opportunities, and skill enhancement. "Returning to school opened up new career opportunities for me," stated an interviewee.

Changes in Family Dynamics are also observed, with improved family relationships, acting as role models for children, and increased family respect. "My children look up to me now, and it has strengthened our bond," noted a participant.

Increased Social Engagement is seen through community participation, new friendships, and a broader social network. One woman commented, "I have become more active in my community and made many new friends."

Empowerment is a key outcome, marked by increased independence, self-reliance, and confidence in decision-making. "Returning to education has empowered me to take control of my life," shared a participant.

Lastly, Lifelong Learning becomes a new norm, with a love for learning, continuous education plans, and a sustained curiosity. "I have developed a love for learning and plan to continue my education further," said one interviewee.

These findings highlight the multifaceted experiences of women who return to education later in life, underscoring both the challenges they face and the profound impact it has on their personal and professional lives.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women in Shiraz City, Fars Province, Iran, who returned to education later in life, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and the impact of their educational pursuits.

The findings revealed that the women were motivated by personal growth, economic benefits, family influence, social interaction, and overcoming past regrets. They faced challenges such as balancing responsibilities, financial constraints, societal expectations, academic difficulties, emotional struggles, and institutional barriers. To cope with these challenges, they employed various strategies, including time management, financial management, support networks, stress relief methods, academic support, and personal motivation. The impact of returning to education was profound, leading to personal development, professional growth, improved family dynamics, increased social engagement, empowerment, and a commitment to lifelong learning.

The motivations for returning to education among the participants were multifaceted, encompassing personal growth, economic benefits, family influence, social interaction, and overcoming past regrets. These findings are consistent with those of Augustine (2016), who identified similar motivations among mothers pursuing continuing education. The desire for self-fulfillment and intellectual curiosity, as well as the need for economic stability and career advancement, were prominent motivators in both studies.

Moreover, the influence of family, particularly the support and encouragement from children and spouses, mirrors the findings of Shimamoto and Gipson (2017), who highlighted the role of family support in women's empowerment and educational pursuits (Shimamoto & Gipson, 2017). The social aspects of returning to education, such as making new friends and expanding one's social network, further align with Dalsmo et al. (2021), who noted the empowering effect of social interactions in health promotion campaigns (Dalsmo et al., 2021).

The participants faced numerous challenges, including balancing responsibilities, financial constraints, societal expectations, academic difficulties, emotional struggles, and institutional barriers. These challenges resonate with the

barriers identified by Hill (1995), who discussed the difficulties women encounter in post-school-age training, particularly in balancing work and family duties (Hill, 1995).

Financial constraints were a significant barrier for the participants, as echoed in the work of Henzan et al. (2021), who found that financial issues were a major obstacle for adolescents re-entering school in Kenya (Henzan et al., 2021). Similarly, societal expectations and cultural barriers, which hinder women's educational aspirations, were also reported by Psaki et al. (2019) in their systematic review of education's effects on sexual and reproductive health (Psaki et al., 2019).

To navigate these challenges, the participants employed various coping strategies, such as time management techniques, financial management, support networks, stress relief methods, academic support, and personal motivation. The use of support networks, including family, peers, and mentors, was particularly effective, aligning with Barringer et al. (2016), who emphasized the importance of social support for minority women with substance abuse and criminal justice histories (Barringer et al., 2016).

The strategies for stress relief, such as exercise and hobbies, are in line with the findings of Dalsmo et al. (2021), who noted that engaging in health-promoting activities can empower women and enhance their well-being (Dalsmo et al., 2021). Additionally, the reliance on academic support mechanisms, like tutoring and study groups, reflects the findings of Kaffenberger and Pritchett (2020), who highlighted the importance of tailored educational support in enhancing women's learning outcomes (Kaffenberger & Pritchett, 2020).

The impact of returning to education on the participants was profound, encompassing personal development, professional growth, changes in family dynamics, increased social engagement, empowerment, and a commitment to lifelong learning. These outcomes are consistent with Acharya et al. (2010), who demonstrated that women's education positively influences their autonomy and decision-making power within the household (Acharya et al., 2010).

The professional growth experienced by the participants, including promotions and new job opportunities, aligns with Hill (1995), who reported that post-school-age training significantly enhances women's labor market outcomes. The positive changes in family dynamics, where women became role models and improved family relationships, mirror the findings of Jaworski (2014), who discussed the impact of historical events on women's education and family life (Hill, 1995).

The study also found that returning to education led to increased social engagement and empowerment, echoing the findings of Thandar et al. (2020), who reported that women's education enhances their participation in community activities and decision-making processes (Thandar et al., 2020). Furthermore, the commitment to lifelong learning observed among the participants is consistent with Yeo et al. (2022), who noted that women's education fosters a sustained interest in continuous learning and personal development (Yeo et al., 2022).

5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, comprising only 20 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study was conducted in a specific cultural context in Shiraz City, Fars Province, Iran, which may not be representative of other regions or countries. The reliance on self-reported data through interviews may also introduce bias, as participants might have provided socially desirable responses. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow for the examination of changes over time.

Future research should consider larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how the experiences and impacts of returning to education evolve over time. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts could also shed light on the universal and context-specific aspects of women's educational experiences. Additionally, exploring the role of digital and online learning platforms could offer new perspectives on how technology facilitates or hinders women's return to education.

Practitioners and policymakers should focus on creating supportive environments that address the unique challenges faced by women returning to education. This includes providing financial aid and scholarships, flexible learning schedules, and robust support services, such as counseling and mentoring programs. Institutions should also foster inclusive and empowering educational settings that encourage women's participation and persistence. Finally, raising awareness and challenging societal norms and expectations around women's education can help create a more supportive and enabling environment for women to pursue their educational goals.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan branch, under the ethics code IR.IAU.KHUISF.REC.1402.149. Prior to participation, all participants provided informed consent after being fully informed about the study's aims, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Confidentiality of participant data was strictly maintained throughout the research process.

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