Transitional Challenges, Assimilation Strategies, and Changes That Higher Education Libyan Female Students at Western Universities Inspire Upon Returning Home

by

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis employs a feminist narrative approach to shape a qualitative study that introduces and explains the journey of four Libyan women (including myself as a participant) who traveled abroad with/without their families to achieve a higher education degree from a Western university. The thesis also explores these women's adjustment to the Libyan community when they returned home. The study strives to contribute to the existing literature by filling the knowledge gap associated with the lack of adequate research on the challenges Libyan female learners face, mainly due to their Islamic background, when pursuing higher education abroad. The thesis results will be instrumental in understanding the role of unique cultures in influencing lived experiences for female learners in international universities in Western nations. These insights are necessary for shaping future strategies to help students from such populations successfully transition to their new environment (Alzain et al., 2014). The study adopts a qualitative feminism approach to derive the meaning of the recorded responses. More specifically, I analyze conversations while considering their social context. The focus is on analyzing the purpose and impact of the different cultural experiences, beliefs, values, and assumptions the women communicate and the cultural rules and conventions inherent in their communications. The data analysis sections reveal common themes across the participants' feedback. Each woman describes experiencing culture shock, social isolation due to language barriers, and challenges with Western pedagogy. Through a feminist research approach that employs face-to-face interviews and focus group tools, this research captures the participants' personal experiences as female students from Libya. The challenges they encounter expose them to psychological and emotional stress, restricting their academic success (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). To overcome these

challenges, the women reveal their utilization of different coping mechanisms, including Western universities' support systems, social support, and instructor support.

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On the authority of the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him: “The best of people in terms of blessings are those who continue their present with gratitude, and return what has passed from them with patience.”

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Dedication

To whom I am honoured to bear his name …

To the one who passed away to his creator …

My father, may Allah have mercy on you.

To whom were her prayers and words my companion …

To the light of my eyes, the light of my path, and the joy of my life, my mother

Chapter 1: Introduction

I divided this chapter into six sections. In the first section, I introduce the broad research context. The second section refers to my personal experience and declares my transition since week one as an international student at a Western university. Finally, in the rest of the sections, I describe the research problem, the context of the study, the research questions, and the purpose of the study. I also present an overview and the study's organization.

International education is increasingly gaining popularity. Like many other students pursuing international studies, I considered the opportunity to study at this University of Victoria (UVic), Canada a positive move towards accomplishing my academic and professional ambitions. As a professional teacher of English, I eagerly embraced the opportunity to experience a foreign culture while interacting with native English speakers and to gain first-hand insights into the language. The Western university system is advanced compared to my home nation; hence, pursuing higher education abroad allowed me to gain knowledge of advanced teaching pedagogies while enjoying the prestige that comes with it. Indeed, I felt such an opportunity would provide me with a competitive edge over my peers pursuing similar academic goals back home in Libya.

According to Wu et al. (2015) and Asmar et al. (2004), with increasing globalization, students require global exposure that offers them the opportunity to interact with individuals from different nationalities, providing them the chance to experience diversity, which is key to thriving within a global context. Students pursuing a teaching career are no exception. This argument corresponds with Lilyman and Bennet's (2014, p. 65) research findings that international students accrue many benefits, including gaining new and exciting chances to interact with a wide range of nationalities and enhance their confidence and commitment to learning. The authors also assert

that international learning exposure provides students with a rich ground where their opinions concerning different subject matters are challenged, making them independent thinkers and change champions.

Moreover, with such benefits, the learners improve their career perspectives, often becoming leaders in their specialization areas upon returning to their home nations. Other benefits include linguistic improvements and ideological transformations concerning their interactions with the world and their sense of self. These experiences often shape the learners' lives forever. Quoting global service-learning (GSL) contributions in promoting gender and sustainable development in rural Tanzania, Obserhauser and Daniels (2017) argue that gaining international academic qualifications benefits both the student and the greater community. With international exposure gained during education pursuit internationally, the learner's level of global awareness and critical thinking skills improves significantly, and they then disseminate their new-found knowledge to the greater community. Therefore, pursuing international studies opens new opportunities the learner would otherwise have missed if they had studied locally. This research strives to explore the lived experiences of the participants during their studies at an international institution. It also looks at how they plan to use their gained knowledge and other benefits to influence their education system in their native countries.

Despite the many benefits that international students accrue, learners also experience many challenges that may hinder their academic success. According to the existing literature, international learners experience obstacles including, but not limited to, culture shock, financial challenges, new academic culture, unfamiliar food, language, and personal barriers (e.g., Chennamsetti, 2020; Wu et al., 2015). Several authors highlight culture shock as the main difficulty facing students pursuing international education, reporting that when students encounter

a new culture that is different from their native one, culture shock is inevitable, along with anxiety, stress, and confusion (e.g., Wu et al., 2015; O'Neil & Cullingfold, 2017). The authors attribute such changes to the acculturation process, which takes shape through social, psychological, physical, biological, and cultural domains contributing to the culture shock. The acculturation process can be either positive or negative, with the latter experience relating to the challenging nature of change and adaptations to new cultural and social expectations.

In cases where students fail to fit smoothly into their new environments, they also experience psychological adjustment challenges associated with a sense of alienation, frustration, and confusion. These emotions may affect their overall well-being. According to Sam and Berry (2010), an individual's or group's ability to strike a balance between culture maintenance and contact determines the impact of the culture shock. Therefore, an individual's ability to appraise the acculturative stressors and their coping skills influences the extent of their psychological and social adjustment, producing a positive acculturation process.

For students studying abroad, the English language and classroom learning styles are also different in the host nations. According to Khanal and Gaulee (2019), the variations in English language spoken in various Western nations, along with the variations in learning pedagogies, expose international students to unprecedented challenges. English is typically not international students' first language, which causes them socio-linguistic complications and challenges in their courses (p. 567). The socio-linguistic complications arise from the cultural norms that influence the individual use of language. The students may face difficulties interacting with peers due to poor pronunciation and inability to articulate, forcing them to withdraw from social and academic settings. Moreover, with native speakers overshadowing them with superior language proficiency, international students may be discouraged from actively engaging in conversation. The challenge

is even more aggravated in learning institutions with non-accommodative cultures. In these environments, students tend to sideline those who fail to fit in the system due to language barriers or otherwise stereotype them as “them vs. us”.

Another barrier is teaching styles in Western universities. These assume new approaches based on curriculum structure, linguistically distinct teaching styles, heavy course workload, high-performance expectations, and culturally distinct teaching models (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). As the students struggle to cope with new classroom experiences, unfamiliar teaching approaches may act as a stressor source, affecting their performance. According to Aydin (2020), the language barrier is a leading cause of poor relationships between international students and other groups. The focus of this study is to evaluate how these challenges may impact female Libyan international students’ performance.

Often, the above-delineated challenges negatively affect students’ ability to exercise their full potential and achieve academic success. In a competitive culture, international students may fail to achieve good grades, leading them to experience demotivation and curtailing their ability to commit to the new academic community. Female Libyan learners pursuing international studies encounter these challenges like other international students. However, despite these and other issues facing them as students studying abroad, they can learn to view the challenges as learning opportunities. Additionally, I believe that female Libyan students can use their lived experiences to influence their home country's education system and society positively when they return. Therefore, I plan to engage them in discussion to understand how they intend to achieve such an end, helping me build a body of knowledge around the topic of interest.

Such an argument corresponds with Arar's (2019) research findings that, although Arab women face obstacles like the expectation to attend to house chores when pursuing their professional careers, their leadership skills can be a valuable asset. These women employ their dynamic traits, empowered agency, and values that can improve their social status. With a renewed energy facilitated by academic empowerment, the women can overcome restrictive cultural norms, such as those confining women to domestic chores, and use the available resources and opportunities to transform their professional and personal identities. I support such an analogy, believing that Libyan women will overcome personal and community inhibitions that have historically limited women from taking leadership roles to compete for senior management roles in a predominantly patriarchal society characterized by Arab traditions. However, this trajectory can only progress if an increased number of them participate in academic pursuits at Western universities, which will equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to influence women to transition from a conservative to a more liberal mindset, necessary for one to display independence.

Personal Reflection

As an international student from Libya, I would describe my first week at a Canadian university as highly engaging and insightful. I had to undergo the orientation process, meet new friends, and spend the better part of my time at workshops. My story as a female international student enrolled in a doctorate program in education at a Western university forms the basis for the data collection of this study. I arrived at the University of Victoria with my family, including my husband and my then eight-month-old baby, who was still breastfeeding. I had managed to secure a scholarship offered by the Higher Ministry of Education of Libya to cover my tuition fees.

Still, I soon found many other challenges to confront, even without undue financial worries. Some of these I had anticipated, such as culture shock and different dress codes, but some took me by surprise were the significant differences in food between Libya and Canada and the vastly different learning styles. Based on my story as a Libyan woman and concerning the relevant literature, the present study investigates how culture shock across various spheres, such as lifestyle and learning systems, impacts my own lived experience and that of other Libyan female scholars who study at Western universities.

Research Problem

As an international female student from Libya studying at a Canadian University, I feel obliged to share my first-hand experiences of a Western university. Currently, there exists limited literature highlighting the plight of international students studying in Western universities using Libyan international students as the study participants. This points to a gap in the literature, because although some of the findings from the past research can be generalized to fit the Libyan international learners, some issues unique to their context are never captured. Past research, including the studies by (and not limited to) Wu et al. (2015) and Khanal and Gaulee (2019), has focused on international learners from Asian countries such as Japan, China, and South Korea pursuing higher education in the United States and the United Kingdom. Also, my review of existing literature reveals a gap in knowledge concerning the non-focus on female international students, particularly those from developing nations and, in this context, those from Libya. Therefore, the focus of this study on female Libyan international students offers insights critical for filling the knowledge gap.

Additionally, the existing literature fails to explore the connection between gender and cultural shock, particularly in Libyan women pursuing higher education in Western universities.

Such a knowledge gap hinders finding evidence-based solutions to the problems facing this category of learners. According to Le et al (2016), "[i]nternational female learners have to negotiate multiple aspects of their identities as non-native students and women in a culture characterized by different gender norms than their home nations" (p. 128). Although all students in a new learning environment face challenges, international students experience greater challenges, and the situation is even worse for female international learners.

In their diversity research, Asmar et al. (2004) argue that exposure to diverse learning environments is an essential factor contributing to the learner's cognitive development, problem-solving, and critical thinking. However, the many challenges international students face curtail these benefits to a greater extent, influencing the degree to which such students internalize these benefits. This research strives to explain the unique challenges faced by Libyan women than their Asian counterparts in Western universities. The study also includes a synthesis of how Islamic religious norms contribute to the struggle of female scholars in a new learning environment.

With growing globalization, universities experience growing diversity. However, according to Possamai et al.'s (2016) research, a knowledge gap exists in comprehending the growing ethnic and religious diversity in institutions of higher learning across the globe. The researcher pinpoints a gap in knowledge concerning Muslim students' cultural and spiritual experiences in Western universities, explicitly referencing the Australian context. In her research, Tarantino (2016) supports this argument, citing how higher learning institutions fail to factor in religious diversity. According to this author, a persistent culture in the universities perpetuates the assumption that religious neutrality promotes inclusivity. This hypothesis never negates the prevailing religiosity and spirituality that infuses the lives of the learners. Indeed, the emphasis on the worth of a diverse student body cannot suffice on the whims of racial and ethnic diversity. If

anything, cultural diversity assumes religious and spiritual aspects, often ignored in favor of assimilating diverse ways of thinking to a classroom or campus setting. Thus, faculties may host learners with diverse religious or spiritual backgrounds, and yet fail to manage such diversity in ways that enhance positive learning for every student.

Possamai et al. (2016) and Tarantino (2016) explore whether universities factor in the needs and implications of the life-world of an emerging student generation from diverse religious and cultural traditions. There is an unprecedented need to examine how these students adapt and assimilate to new norms across time, presenting insights that may be crucial for developing student-centered supportive approaches in the classroom and other university settings. By viewing this issue from a constructive lens, I believe that some of these experiences would be instrumental in positively influencing Libya's teaching pedagogy and cultural norms. Furthermore, by incorporating feminist research, I perceive that Libyan society and education system could benefit from how the research draws positive insights from the Western environment to cultivate diversity, democratic decision-making, and female empowerment in school leadership, organizational management, and public participation in economic policies.

Context of the Study

This study investigates Libyan women's cultural challenges when transitioning from Libyan culture to Western culture during their higher learning experiences in international universities. The fact that I am a Muslim female pursuing higher education at a Western University influences my choice of the study group. With first-hand experience with such experiences, I can relate to what other participants in this research revealed during their interviews on the topic, providing grounds for establishing points of convergence and divergence, which then drive to a plausible and reliable conclusion and recommendations. I reflect on my experiences as an

international student and those of the other participants to inspire and transform different aspects of the education sector in my home country, Libya.

The experiences include reflecting on academic pedagogy during classroom interactions and lessons, while adjusting to different lifestyles and interacting with a diverse student body and belief system. I am confident that such experiences would offer rich grounds for inspiring my people in Libya, influencing them to embrace new ways of learning and living. Specifically, my focus would be on offering female students an opportunity to have their voices heard in professional settings and inviting women leaders in academic settings to fine-tune educational policies in ways that correspond to global standards. This is necessary because, for Libyan women in a patriarchal society, education is key to equipping them with the required knowledge and skills to change their country by providing new ways of thinking that positively influence society.

My focus is on Libyan female students pursuing higher education in Western universities, highlighting how cultural aspects influence the pursuit of education. Four Libyan female scholars (myself included) with experience in Western university learning are the study's participants. Some of us have completed our studies and are back in Libya, and some are still pursuing our education at Western universities.

Research Questions

1. What different socio-cultural and academic experiences do Libyan female students studying in Western universities undergo as they transition into their new environment? What opportunities do they exploit to learn and adapt to the experiences in the new learning environment, finding footage for their academic and social pursuits?
2. How do these Libyan women negotiate their experiences to bridge the cultural gap while in the West, and what kind of learning can they take back to Libya?

How does a feminist perspective influence the negotiation process?

Sub-questions:

(i) What efforts do international universities and Libyan authorities currently make to bridge the gap between female Libyan international students and Western culture?

(ii) What significant social, cultural, and academic challenges do Libyan female students face when studying at Western universities? How do these challenges differ from Libya, and in what ways do they compare to the Libyan perspective?

(iii) What, in the participants' perceptions, was most insightful and enriching, and how does such enrichment translate into their teaching and research work when they return home?

(iv) What challenges have they faced upon their return home?

(v) How do they use what they have learned to address gender issues at home?

Purpose of the Study

This study evaluates how Libyan female students pursuing higher education in Western universities use their lived experiences characterized by many challenges, transforming them into learning opportunities that they can employ back in Libya to influence positive change. The interview sessions reveal that their enrollment with Western universities offers them a chance to grow, develop, and transform their perception of education, allowing them to reflect on systematic changes necessary in their home country. It is essential to synthesize whether social justice issues such as gender inequality and social privileges they experience in the Libyan context motivate them to work harder and utilize their new knowledge to influence education authorities to address emerging issues associated with challenges they encounter when pursuing higher education at Western universities.

I presumed at the outset of this study that the Libyan female graduate students have an astute understanding of the need to transform their home country's pedagogies and influence gender issues when they complete their higher degree courses in the West. Although male and female international students share systemic cultural shock, female Libyan students are more prone to challenges due to gendered roles in Libya. Men in Libya are afforded privileges such as being primary decision-makers at home and are entitled to demand care and concern from the women in their household. There is an unprecedented need for them to influence systemic change, including eliminating women's traditional roles and allowing them to participate in decision-making roles. For instance, a survey conducted by Abdul-Latif (2013) indicates that Libyan women aged 55-64 years have considerable decision-making roles. The interview also shows that most women state that they jointly decide with their husbands on daily household purchases (Abdul-Latif, 2013). They can influence Libyan society to embrace some Western norms regarding gender roles and the participation of women in higher education. This includes emphasizing aspects of what they learn concerning Western-style social interaction and opportunities for women to participate in educational policy formation while employing the advanced pedagogical styles to change the classroom experience for their students back in Libya.

The Libyan female student participants in this study express that they are often torn between assimilating some Western cultures, which are considered foreign culture back home, and remaining loyal to all Islamic demands associated with their home country's culture. The Libyan Islamic traditions are restrictive to a point where they consider it immoral for a female to live alone without a male family member’s watchful protection. This need is attributed to the Libyan culture's conservative nature, which perceives women as weak and unable to exist independently. However,

this tradition makes it challenging for female Libyan students to fit into Western culture, which is more open and recognizes individual freedom.

Similarly, transiting back is equally challenging, because Libyan society is ethnocentric; hence, it resists the infusion of cultural elements from an external culture. Any female student striving to introduce some aspects of Western culture they feel are progressive is perceived as a traitor, prompting them to hold back and fit into the traditional way of doing things, mainly due to unrelenting opposing forces (Sheen et al., 2018). For instance, Islamic teaching requires all women to wear a hijab, which is different in Western culture, where women dress according to individual taste and choice. Thus, introducing the element of individual freedom into the Libyan context in the purview of women's freedom could be met with stern opposition and rebuke.

Compared to the Western education system, the Libyan higher education is still in the developmental stage. Most learning environments assume a theoretical approach, with students cramming their classroom notes to pass their exams instead of engaging in deep and critical learning that takes shape through intensive exposure to vast knowledge sources. The lack of materials and technological resources in civil war-torn Libya contributes to this challenge. Therefore, the Libyan government sponsors Libyan students to study abroad, cultivating room for knowledge transfer that will bring home advanced teaching pedagogies to enhance the nation's quality of education.

Libya has suffered political unrest over the past several years caused by a chain of civil protests against Muammar Ghaddafi's regime that impeded higher learning in the country. This study acknowledges the potential challenges that female Libyan students face when transitioning to Western countries to pursue higher education (Alzain et al., 2014). Furthermore, the study strives to motivate female Libyan students to develop insights into overcoming pedagogy and

socio-cultural challenges during their studies abroad and employ their experiences to influence others back home, acting as change agents. This research also emphasizes the importance of the returnees using their experiences to act as gatekeepers in both the West and in their home environment.

Additionally, I intended to investigate the impact of Western culture on international female students from Libya using a feminist perspective. According to Jenkins et al. (2019), women's views can help foster social change and produce new knowledge on how to assimilate the new culture, despite encountering gendered marginalization. I also include knowledge on how the feminist perspective can help address gender issues in Libya based on what learners assimilate into Western culture. My personal experience as an international Libyan female student living and studying in Canada motivates my focus on female students.

Chapter Summary and Thesis Organization

This introductory chapter included a broad range of experiences that Libyan women (in specific) and other international students (as examples) may face when they pursue higher learning abroad. This chapter also highlighted some existing literature on international learners' transition from their home country to the host country, and suggested what kind of obstacles they may face during this transition. In general, I discussed all the contextual issues from which my research questions' information is drawn. I also introduced the study's problem statement, its context, and its purpose.

Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive literature review of the research as well as a discussion on the Libyan identity (e.g., culture, education, lifestyle, values, and beliefs). Chapter 3 discusses

the research methodology, which includes the study philosophy and design. Chapter 4 explores the study findings and provides information about the participants and data collection procedure.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The chapter focuses on Libyan women's challenges in transitioning from a highly patriarchal culture to a more liberal Western culture. The literature review synthesizes the existing research on challenges women from other cultures face when pursuing studies in Western universities to demonstrate how Libyan women are more likely to face significant challenges than any other category. The chapter presents that Libyan women have to adjust from the traditional mindsets that tune them to meet Islamic expectations and overcome pressures from their Libyan colleagues who demand accountability by assuming a "friends keeper" role. Therefore, this chapter argues that although Libyan women face similar challenges to foreign learners attending Western universities; Still, the cultural expectations and demands make their transition even harder, increasing the challenges they face when transitioning to Western culture.

Also, the literature review argues that after going through Western education, Libyan women internalize new values emphasizing women empowerment, causing conflicts as they transition back to Libyan society. With a new way of thinking that pushes for an open society away from the conservatism Libyan thinking that expects women to remain submissive and assume traditional roles, the Libyan women find it challenging to integrate back into the Libyan society. This forces them to introduce some enlighted ideas to their audience selectively.

The focus on the literature is critical in understanding the challenges the Libyan women attending Western universities face when pursuing Western university education and during their integration back into Libyan society.

Cultural Differences between the Libyan and Western Societies and their impact on Libyan women pursuing higher education.

Women face challenges in transitioning to Western culture during their advanced studies abroad. Like all students pursuing higher education in a foreign country, women encounter problems with their day-to-day interactions. Lee et al. (2009) report that female international students face more aggravated adjustment challenges than their male counterparts, with gender roles playing a key part in influencing maladjustment. This is because obligations and demands of traditional gender roles impede the women's attempts to adjust to the host culture. According to Wu et al. (2015) and Le et al. (2016), the number of international students pursuing higher education has increased significantly in the last few decades, with the United States recording the highest enrollment. These studies note the many tensions that arise due to conflicts in gender roles the female learners experience upon joining Western universities. The authors cite students from Asian nations like Korea, who have historically experienced traditional gender norms that limit their potential; Libyan women experience similar challenges associated with Islamic traditions that compare closely with the Korean context.

Transiting from highly restrictive cultural norms to a more liberal culture that characterizes the Western world exposes female students to unique challenges. In related research, Le et al. (2016) argue that international female learners struggle with diverse aspects of their identities as both non-local students and women in a cultural context that embraces different gender norms than their country of origin. The authors assert that such conflicts exacerbate the stressors associated with studying at Western universities.

In their illustrations, Le et al (2016) cite the case of female Chinese international students pursuing higher education in American Midwestern public universities who struggled with negotiating a positive social identity. The natives viewed their efforts to achieve interpersonal

harmony that characterized their home country's culture through the need for balance, coordination, and harmony in relationships as submissive (Le et al., 2016). In their research, Alquadayri and Gounko (2018) support such an analogy with their findings, revealing how students from Saudi Arabia struggled to assume new roles that mark the Canadian cultural context. The authors note how the female students experience pressure from their Saudi Arabian colleagues, who still demand they adhere to Arab culture expectations, such as wearing a hijab. According to one of the participants in the research, Canadians did not criticize her for not wearing a hijab, but her fellow Arab students did.

Historically, Libyan women have experienced restrictions associated with authoritarian state structures and non-state extremists that shape the country's legal, political, and social actions, directed toward subverting the women's ability to compete at the same level as their male counterparts. As St. John (2017) observes, since Libyan independence in December 1951, the country has adopted a rigid traditional and patriarchal socioeconomic structure dominated by male members, monopolizing leadership and authority from the lowest level of social structure within the micro-and macro social environment settings. As per Libyan social expectations, women should remain housewives, take care of children and husbands, and do other household chores. A study by USAID (2020) affirms this position by arguing that Libyan society is profoundly patriarchal and paternalistic, with a clearly gendered division of roles in civic life, workplaces, and the household, reinforced by government policy.

The Gaddafi regime (1969-2011) made several policy strides toward women's emancipation, despite many staunch conservatives in the country's ruling party disagreeing with his efforts. Nonetheless, Gaddafi persistently expanded policy framework on women's roles in political, economic, and education spheres until he was overthrown and executed in 2011.

However, the legal framework that sought to offer women and men equal opportunities was only on paper, not routine. This is because, although modernization and globalization influenced the policy framework, the legitimacy revolves around tribal trends of social organization in Libya (Hweio, 2012). Since then, women's progress across the named domains has slowed. A report by Gender Concerns International (2020) reaffirms Hweio's (2012) observation, arguing that Libya has experienced widespread discrimination against women in the post-Ghaddafi era, perpetrated by conventional perceptions and cultural practices prejudiced against them. The situation is associated with the inability of the current government to attain complete independence and influence from the Gaddafi regime.

Since the Libyan civil war outbreak in 2011, Libyan women have continued to fight for political space in disputed societies aggravated by socioeconomic crises and political instability. For instance, in the spring of 2012, Libyan women were drastically underrepresented when the government appointed only two to the 20-person transitional government. The low number of female participants resulted from the persistent lack of women's rights and access to political participation, along with underrepresentation in state offices, despite Libya's revolution in 2011 to improve women's position (e.g., Gender Concerns International, 2020).

Without denigrating Gaddafi's efforts in this area, it remains a fact that his administration never abolished the traditional family laws that have persistently perpetuated a discriminatory stance toward women. Indeed, Gaddafi introduced the *Declaration of the Authority of the People* in 1977, which disadvantaged women's financial independence and emancipation. His reign also saw diminished educational access for women, as his policy limited their opportunities. The policy adhered to cultural biases regarding gender roles, with women being restricted to employment in health care, light industrial work, and administration fields. Hence, women could

not participate in the economic and political fields, in contradiction to the earlier established equality laws (Gender Concerns International, 2020). The USAID (2020) report reinstates this position by arguing that women remain underrepresented in elective and appointment posts across governance institutions and processes, limiting their participation in leadership and policy-making processes. Although women empowerment units exist in ministries, they are weak, a trend which is different in Western countries.

In most Western countries, women's participation in leadership roles is more advanced. For instance, according to Hamdan (2009), Canadian women take an active role in leadership across many sectors apart from some spheres where women's leadership is limited, such as in business and police, among others. Hamdan illustrates that having female role models in leadershiop positions has contributed to women (and some men) contesting society's perception of women's capabilities and traditional roles. The author argues that Canada provides an excellent example of how women have achieved a higher status in society. Such achievements should inspire Arab Muslim nations such as Libya. However, these differences can also create cultural confusion amongst Libyan women studying in Canadian universities (Hamdan, 2009). Therefore, international female students from restrictive patriarchal societies face heightened challenges associated with the quest to abandon such cultural norms in favor of adopting new ones propagated in their host culture.

Access to higher education enhances a woman's ability to make informed decisions across different life spheres. In his research, El-Halawany (2009) compares the impact of higher education on women from the Upper Egyptian region's self-autonomy in both home and work settings. The author argues that although participation in higher education for Upper Egyptian women significantly impacts their empowerment, self-autonomy, and gender equality mainly

within the home setting, it still imparts limited influence on other aspects of their lives. El-Halawany (2009) concludes that social, cultural, and economic issues must be favorable if women's higher education is to significantly influence their perception of gender equality and articulation of self-autonomy.

The authors' findings generalize to the Libyan population, because the two nations share Muslim culture. Similar to other sub-Saharan countries which have an Arabic populace, Libya and Egypt have yet to expand women's education to a level that accommodates seamless integration with the labor market, hindering women's transformation beyond traditional gender roles. Traditionally, and within Libyan households, males exert power within the residence and are expected to propel the family name. Such traditional values are closely embedded in the education system, which barely values the quality of education for women. The result is that the structural underpinnings rarely allow women to employ the skills they acquire in higher education institutions to compete with men for lucrative jobs. One of the surveys highlights that the education system emphasizes theory more than practice, limiting how women can pursue alternative economic activities away from employment (El-Halawany, 2009). In a system that embraces gender inequality, women cannot compete for available job opportunities with men because the latter retain an upper hand.

Students from some African nations often find transitioning to studying abroad a challenge associated with cultural restrictions. According to Caldwell and Hyams-Ssekasi (2016), these students must seek their visas and organize their studies abroad in secrecy. The authors reveal that the communities back home potentially react with suspicion and jealousy when they learn of the planned departure. Other communities and families are overprotective, especially when the case involves a female student, fearing that their daughter may not fit in the Western culture that

assumes different tenets compared to home country culture. The authors argue that these students often find the situation stringent and struggle with the separation process; some leave their home nation without informing their families and extended relatives. According to Priest (2021), an individual's community, family, and friends serve as a source of secure attachment, offering a platform to overcome challenges in life. However, in the context of the African students pursuing international higher education, the relations are a source of anxiety, making the transition process difficult. Such a trajectory has an impact on their adjustment during their studies in international universities.

Western nations' individualistic culture harbors values that conflict with the collectivist culture practiced in some African nations. Individuals from collectivist countries are isolationist by nature and associate Western culture and education with a negative influence. Such cultures feel their daughters will adopt Western cultural values that threaten their collectivist ideals. For instance, the collectivist culture values family ties, with women expected to remain subordinate to male figures. This contrasts with Western culture, where there is an emphasis on gender equality and where Western women's travel and advanced studies are routine. Some African international students recalled that the transition to the new Western host culture required nearly ritualistic measures. Failure to prepare for separation adequately caused them significant challenges in the unique circumstances. Many of the students admitted failing to sufficiently prepare for the transition due to the complexity and unpredictability of the application procedures they had to undergo (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016).

In light of these difficulties, the authors suggest that Western host universities should enhance their understanding of international students' backgrounds to develop more culturally inclusive higher learning (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016). Stakeholders in the industry can

achieve such a trajectory by encouraging educators to understand the unique learning needs of diverse students, implementing a universal design for learning, encouraging peer-to-peer interaction, and employing proactive interventions. This approach would offer international students a supportive platform to interact and assimilate to their new environment.

Pedagogy and Language Challenges

Learners pursuing higher education abroad experience a wide range of challenges that limit their ability to succeed. According to Caldwell and Hyams-Ssekasi (2016), African students experience stressors associated with the complex and frustrating visa-acquisition process and the tensions of leaving their home countries. Such pressures subsequently affect their ability to adjust to life in the new learning environments. Similarly, Nazir and Bulut's (2019) research reveals that students pursuing higher education from international learning institutions in the West experience challenges with culture, language, and the education system. Liu (2011) reports that the language barrier is a major challenge that university students attending higher education institutions in Western nations struggle with. She narrates her own experience, citing how she found it difficult to understand what her teacher said in class. Her language barrier restricted her ability to ask for direction, and she had difficulties interacting with peers. Such issues affected her self-esteem, making her feel inferior to others in her class.

The higher institutions of learning tend to treat all international students as a single entity, making it difficult for the institutions to factor in the unique challenges that the students face. Learners from various cultures struggle to adapt to their new environment, a trajectory influenced by individual characteristics. For instance, Alshibany (2017) cites the case of Libyan students whose socio-cultural standards influence Libyan classroom culture. The specific socio-cultural

perspective defines the learners' values, perceptions, and attitudes they assume in their learning environment. Such aspects define the interaction between learners and teachers concerning the teaching methodologies and the teacher/learner duties in the classroom.

According to Newsome and Cooper (2017), the time allocated for transition to the new culture and learning environment limits the international students' ability to adapt to new teaching styles, curriculum content, and assessment techniques. The authors suggest that attention to cultural diversity and its impact on learning styles would be instrumental in enhancing a responsive learning environment away from the current approach that emphasizes the need to correct other cultures and behavior by transposing or imposing on the host nation's standards. As an international student pursuing Western education at the Ph.D. level, it was challenging to maneuver the teaching styles in a different language. For instance, in the Libyan learning context, research work is basic and more of a theory than practical. This forces students pursuing research at Western University to familiarize themselves with the new research approaches while adjusting to fit in the new teaching environment to succeed in their academic work. This is a challenge to international students because they always fall back on their academic work than the natives who already are familiar with the education system demands. Despite such challenges, I acknowledge the need to accept and adapt to the Canadian teaching approaches with the same zeal as I did in Libya if I am to succeed in my new environment.

Financial Constraints and Lifestyle

Many international students experience financial constraints during their studies abroad. Often, these students rely on parental and relatives' financial support when they pursue education in their home countries. However, when landing an opportunity to study in Western universities, they find that the financial demands require them to seek employment opportunities in their host

countries to meet their financial obligations. Unfortunately, their lack of competitive skills limits their ability to secure a high wage, and they can only get low-paying jobs. This scenario exposes them to stress, because they can barely earn enough to meet their financial needs. With the conflict associated with dual roles of studying and working and the additional challenge of dealing with workplace settings, the students experience increased stress (Kwadzo, 2014). International learners cannot access loans because the legal provisions do not cover them. Also, they do not qualify for stipends in their initial phases of academic pursuit. Those who qualify for such stipends are assessed on their academic performance, which translates to a very small number qualifying (Akanwa, 2015). At the same time, their academic, cultural, and language barriers compound these challenges to hinder optimal academic performance further.

I must acknowledge the vast financial support from my family throughout my academic journey. Libya's Ministry of Education was also financially supportive by offering the academic fee and monthly allowances to help those studying abroad. However, despite such financial support, I was caught up with other challenges associated with cultural expectations of women. For instance, in Libyan culture, women are expected to take care of domestic activities and children, a responsibility I assumed when my two years child fell sick from pneumonia. Such a challenge adversely affected my education, prompting my department to offer a new opportunity to rewrite my Comps.

The aspect of lifestyle revolves around family expectations and challenges and interlinks with financial stability. Students with social backing are likely to receive financial support from their families, which enhances their ability to participate in activities that will help them integrate into Western university and society lifestyles easily.

International students experience challenges adjusting to social life in their new environment. According to Akanwa (2015), international students strive to adapt to the social norms of Western society, citing their struggle to form friendships with host students. Prejudicial attitudes or complex histories of intercultural relations exacerbate these difficulties. International students who form friendships with native students overcome acculturative stress, positively influencing their academic performance. In their research, Rienties and Tempelaar (2011) reveal that social life outside the educational setting influences academic integration. The study highlights the importance of social aspects such as sharing accommodation, participating in sports activities, and joining clubs and students' associations to influence social integration for international students.

When they first arrive to study at Western institutes, many international students lack awareness of the host culture's implicit cultural norms and customs. Their social life becomes a negative factor in their acculturation process when they fail to make friends in either similar or host cultures. Those who struggle with emotional distress brought on by these factors tend to exhibit even less connectedness to international universities' social and academic life (Rienties & Tempelaar, 2013). This argument underscores the need for universities to establish structures for international students joining the institution to facilitate their social and academic integration.

On a positive note, Binsahl et al. (2020) postulate that Australia's excellent educational system and multicultural society are why Saudi female international students prefer Australia to other Western countries. The study mentions that Australian universities slowly separate newly arrived female Arab students to transition them into mixed-gender classes. Along with initial segregation, institutions could also offer the online and offline services these students need, such as finding accommodation and assigning interpreters for those struggling with English language

comprehension. The Australian and other Western university faculty could also acknowledge the cultural differences that prevent female international students from seeking help (including relevant information that could affect their academic progress). These include being free to visit libraries and open interactions with their instructors. According to the authors, the Australian universities acknowledge unique cultural norms, offering a free and available online environment that influences information-seeking behaviors for international students.

I believe it is essential to explore these lifestyle differences by incorporating feminist concepts to understand how women's standpoints can inform Western universities' social realities. Jameel et al.'s (2022) support such an analogy, citing the friendly learning environment nurtured in Australian universities that is attracting an increasing pool of students from Saudi Arabia. The author finds that the Saudi students attending Australian universities experienced vital psychosocial well-being, academic success, and cultural integration.

Diverse Pedagogies

In Libyan culture, students are taught to maintain a respectful relationship with their teachers. According to Abdelhamid (2011), the students are active receivers of instruction and have to maintain silence in the portrayal of respect. Such passivity, however, restricts their opportunities to develop and portray their creativity. The author underscores the teacher-oriented pedagogy that characterizes the Libyan education system, where the instructor takes center stage, controlling and commanding the subject and the classroom. Under this scheme, students cannot interrupt their teachers when they are delivering lessons or argue over debatable concepts. The approach also limits their ability to become critical, opportunistic, and autonomous learners, pedagogies that are prevalent in Western higher learning institutes. As a result, Libyan students attending Western universities find it challenging to fit into the Western learning environment.

The Libyan teaching style focuses on theoretical aspects instead of practical application. Abdelhamid (2011) argues that the teacher-centered approach focuses on English knowledge delivery and is not skills-based; the teachers instead focus on syntactic, phonological, and semantic knowledge. Mezughi (2021) supports such an analogy by arguing that Libyan English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers prepare students for monthly quizzes and final exams, with minimal emphasis on communicative and speaking classroom activities. The author explains how he applied the traditional teaching approach in his formative years as an EFL Libyan teacher, only exposing learners to the required information while expecting them to memorize new vocabulary. These authors clearly elucidate the differences in pedagogical approaches between Libyan and Western universities.

Conversely, Western universities espouse a student-centred approach to learning. Tamburri (2011) asserts that Canadian instructors apply an innovative student-centered pedagogy that requires learners to take significant responsibility for their knowledge acquisition and the practical application of that knowledge. In this approach, educators facilitate learning instead of imparting knowledge. They also utilize inquiry- and problem-based learning exercises, case studies, seminar-style classes, and experiential learning. Bayram-Jacobs and Hayırsever (2016) elaborate that the student-centred paradigm emphasizes that teachers should not interfere with maturation, but instead lead and promote it. The article further explains that such an approach creates a learning environment that constructs personal meaning by linking new knowledge to current understanding and conceptions (Bayram-Jacobs & Hayırsever, 2016). I perceive that this learning paradigm is essential in the current learning system of Libya. I can use the insight to influence my home country's teaching pedagogy to shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centred approach to foster Libyan students' knowledge acquisition, with an eye to its practical application.

Different students report varied experiences concerning their experience with learning in Western universities. Poteet and Gomez (2015) assert that international students have had different experiences regarding learning within the Canadian context. Some students reported feeling invisible in class when called upon, while others felt comfortable answering professors' questions. Conversely, some felt very uncomfortable when inadvertently put on the spot during class sessions in ways that accentuated perceived cultural differences. One of the respondents in Poteet and Gomez's (2015) study recalls constantly receiving Cs on his assignments. The professor argued that the low score reflected his low English language proficiency. These challenges emanate from the observation that professors treat international students like domestic ones by not acknowledging their unique status, such as having a lower command of English and experiencing feelings of exclusion. The university instead could consider the students' low language proficiency by offering them opportunities to revise their papers before the final grade allotment.

Wu et al. (2015) evaluated international learners in their social and academic environments. Using qualitative interviews, the authors revealed that these students experience social isolation, cultural adjustment, and academic challenges that include language barriers that limit their communication with professors, staff, and classmates. The study established that the subjects pretended to understand conversational content when conversing with native English speakers, but they did not comprehend every element of the conversations, a challenge associated with their limited language comprehension. However, such an automated response on the part of international learners could give their professors the impression that these students are unprepared for their classes (Wu et al., 2015). The students also may fail to optimally articulate their ideas in assignments due to the language barrier, and as a result receive lower grades. Instead of penalizing international students for their low language proficiency, professors could help prepare these

learners to transit into the new pedagogy by facilitating remedial classes before taking regular courses.

Libyan Culture: Language, Religion, Values, and Education

An individual's identification with the country's culture offers a sense of belonging. According to Mercuri (2012), an individual's culture is a principal aspect of their identity, contributing to their self-image and influencing their group identity, which is the group they inherently feel they belong. The author asserts that language is an intrinsic element of culture, performing the social function of communicating the group's values, norms, and beliefs, and fostering a sense of belongingness. Libya's interconnectedness centers on its social fabric, which is a mixture of Arab and Berber cultures. Linguistic pluralism is a feature of the multiculturalism of societies, and Libya is no exception.

However, Advameg Inc. (2021) highlights that Libya's indigenous population is essentially homogenous, in that 90% are of Arab ancestry, and so share a common language. The article argues that the country's linguistic affiliation traces its origin to the Bedouin invasion of North Africa in the 11th century that brought the Arabic language to Libya and other nations. The Berber language also remains widely spoken in Libya, but is mainly confined to southern oases in the western mountains. Therefore, Libya's culture is homogenous, and Libyans speak distinctive Arab dialects in public domains. Schools teach standard Arabic, and businesses and the government use Arabic for communication. Libya is part of this Arab world in culture, religion, and language. Most of the foreign workers in Libya come from Africa and Asia, with the neighbouring countries being Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt, Chad and Niger. The language informs the homogeneity in religion among these groups, strengthening a sense of identity.

Figure 1: Map of Libya

Source: (WorldAtlas.Com)

Islam is the official religion of the Libyan state, and Islamic law (Sharia) is one of the sources of Libyan legislation. This is characterized by personal statutes, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and wills. It also encompasses Doctrinal/Hudud crimes, including murder, adultery, defamation, and armed robbery/Heraba (Jaeger, 2017). Libya is also religiously homogenous with its linguistic homogeneity, as nearly all of its inhabitants embrace the Islamic belief system. A small minority belongs to other religions, but these people are primarily non-permanent residents.

Most Muslims in Libya are Sunni and follow the Maliki school, with a small minority following other schools, such as the Hanbali and Shafi'i. There are very few Jews in Libya, most having left the country in the 1960s to relocate to Italy or Israel. Despite the different Muslim sects in the country, all Libyans share the same customs and traditions (Jaeger, 2017). The most important values are keeping promises, being truthful and honest, and maintaining kinship among relatives. Islam also recommends good treatment of one's neighbor, as Allah Almighty said in the Holy Quran:

> Worship Allah and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, relatives, kinsfolk, orphans, Al-Masakin (the poor), the neighbor who is near of kin, the neighbor who is a stranger, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet), and those (slaves) whom your right hands possess. Verily, Allah does not like such as are proud and boastful (An-Nisa, 4:36).

Overall, Libyan society is a linguistically and religiously homogenous theocracy based on Islamic law, both educationally and morally. Higher education comprises universities, multiple technical schools, and well-developed primary and school systems. Over the years, the number of Libyans going to university has dramatically increased, with female enrolment numbers rising

around 25% between 1969 and the 1980s (Advameg, Inc, 2021). Tayal (2018) reports that the Libyan government funds post-secondary education. It also awards students a monthly stipend of 1,600 euros, which helps sustain their pursuit of higher education. As well, the country has made it mandatory for students to attend primary education, accessible through public schools. Such an approach has been key to boosting literacy rates in the nation. As part of Libyan culture, religious practices significantly influence the ways of life of its citizens, including Libyan students' experiences in Western universities. The following section highlights how religion plays a role in influencing the learning and social life of female Libyan students pursuing international education.

Religious diversity is yet another major influencing factor in how international learners adapt to Western universities. According to Asmar et al. (2004), institutional and internal differences can influence the students' sense of belonging, despite having satisfactory academic and commitment outcomes. International Muslim students reported stereotyping when expressing their faith. In some cases, they felt the academic staff offered inadequate support and that they felt targeted by media misrepresentation.

Further, Asmar et al. (2004) highlight the difficulties these students experience as they strive to meet their religious obligations. The participants expressed their wishes to have Australian universities help them meet their religious commitments to enhance their satisfaction in the learning environment. In response to the universities' efforts, the participants were pleased with the Islamic centers' contributions to acknowledging and embracing practices such as wearing a headscarf. The study found that recognizing students' religious needs paralleled the participants' general commitment to valuing variations. For instance, one of the participants indicated that the new female learners who wore hijab were not segregated. One university also allowed students to participate in morning and evening gatherings, Qur'an reading sessions, and Friday prayers. The

participants were appreciative of such freedoms and expressed the need for universities to recognize the role of religion in their lives, giving them a platform to reconnect with their creator while identifying with their home country's religious expectations.

Other Western universities could consider adopting similar norms to accommodate female Libyan students who practice Islam, facilitating their transition into an environment characterized by diverse faiths. Alsalkhi's (2013) study establishes the critical importance of religious commitment in enhancing happiness and satisfaction among Muslim students. A learning environment that includes spiritual support reinforces international students' positive attitudes and self-esteem, improving their well-being and academic performance. Similarly, Cole and Ahmadi's (2003) study examines the value of maintaining religious practices such as veiling among Muslim women attending Western universities, revealing it as a crucial component of the women's identities. However, some peers and faculty held negative views of veiling, and the women felt targeted for wearing hijab, amounting to stereotyping and adversely affecting their academic progress and language acquisition.

Nevertheless, the study participants in Cole and Ahmadi's (2003) study felt compelled to persist in wearing hijab instead of giving in to the pressure to take them off. These findings indicate that colleges have a strong potential influence in openly acknowledging the purpose and importance of the veil and other religious practices that remain valued for Muslim female learners. The Adegoke and Brewer (2011) study supports the findings of the above authors, arguing that religious commitment plays a critical role in enhancing students' life satisfaction and support. Based on the results, Western universities should address stereotypes that target the wearing of hijab, because it adversely affects Muslim female students' academic and social progress.

In a recently published work, Palmer et al. (2021) explore the dynamics of immigrant Muslims studying in Canada. The study reveals that Uyghur immigrants perceive Canadian education as empowering, a view they have held since they migrated to the country in the late 1990s, where they were raised as Canadians. However, one participant expressed frustration at Canada's broader traditional Muslim perspective, citing that most schools in the country teach against religion, including Islam. The participant feels that the Canadian educational approach to religious issues erodes Islamic norms and values. The author also observes that some of the participants' children deviated from their Muslim traditions, mainly due to their interaction with the dominant Christian traditions and engaging in Christian practices such as celebrating Christmas. The research demonstrates that transiting into the West involves learning norms and social values that potentially create unprecedented clashes in faith, mainly if the host country's dominant religion is different from that of the minority groups. Despite the significant role of religion and language in lives of Libyan people the lives, the education policy in the country has made it possible for both males and females to pursue education at any level.

Libyan education policies have stimulated demand for schooling, leading to increased construction of schools to accommodate the influx of learners. For instance, the adoption of Western Libya, a policy requiring males and females to study in separate schools, has stimulated increased construction of building facilities. Additionally, the government regulates the curriculum so that learners pursue only those fields that benefit Libya's current needs (Rhema, 2020). The standardized curriculum makes it fair for all students to accomplish their academic ambitions. However, although Libya's educational policies have promoted girls' education, the country has yet to address gender inequality in its education system. For instance, the education system faces persistent cultural stereotypes and higher numbers of girls completing their first six years of basic

education than boys (Tayal, 2018). Accordingly, the system has partially overlooked the need to invest more in boys' education. Such policies are influenced by globalization, which plays a critical role in the country's approach to education away from their long cultural practices.

Culture influences people's way of doing things, and Libya is no exception. Bezweek and Egbu (2007) posit that Libyan culture impacts communication and organizational culture in public and private institutions, influencing prevailing organizational structure. The authors also assert that the culture assumes Hofstede's dimensions, affecting individuals' communications behavior. The communist public administrative systems characterize many sectors in Libya, including education, political and social organizations, meaning that the Libyan government predominantly shapes policies the institutions employ. With advancements in globalization, Libyan organizations have increasingly adopted Western globalist models while disregarding their local values. This approach has been vital to facilitating competitiveness in the global arena. Such a system poses challenges concerning how Libyans deal with national and organizational values in the present era of globalization. Such challenges are associated with persistent conflict between national and corporate values. It has also generated substantial debate on how Libyan organizations should negotiate social issues when dealing with diverse people. The new approach recognizes that the world is interconnected and that no country or institution can exist in isolation.

Further, Bezweek and Egbu (2007) explain that in the early 1970s, few females attended schools in Libya or worked in organizations. However, such a trend has changed with the number of females attending schools now exceeding that of men, especially in social and human services. Libya Status Women polls report that 52% of Libyan females and 53% of Libyan males attend higher secondary schools. The survey also shows that 77% of female students under 25 years plan to achieve a secondary education or higher, compared to only 67% of their male counterparts

(Tayal, 2018). This implies that Libya has undergone a significant cultural change that includes opening more educational opportunities for its citizens, especially females.

Despite the progress, Libyan culture still has some major issues. According to Tayal (2018), interwoven networks of relationships take time to establish and sustain within Libya. Thus, it is difficult for Libyan individuals to disrupt the established relationship, even when joining a new cultural environment. Such a trajectory is a factor of the social practice concept of *wasta*, which translates as "influence". *Wasta* embeds personal relationships with family ties, honour, and trust. Libyans leverage *wasta* to establish critical personal contacts for creating a seamless interconnection necessary for achieving reciprocity. In other words, the Libyan culture allows nepotism to prevail where personal relationships influence the reciprocation of favors.

Libya is a largely traditional patriarchal culture, with the society consisting of large tribes and extended families influenced by the Islam religion. According to Bezweek and Egbu (2007), this culture is a contact one, allowing people of the same gender to stand and walk with each other. However, communication between genders is restricted, both in social and professional settings. In Libyan culture, communication between individuals in workplaces should observe accepted communication behaviors, because issues such as eye contact and the use of personal space are sensitive. The country's culture also prohibits closing an office door when colleagues of the opposite sex are in the same office. The article offers insights concerning how a Libyan woman would struggle to adapt to Western culture as an international student. She experiences cultural values that contrast with long-held and practiced traditions in Libya (Bezweek & Egbu, 2007). Globalization, however, assumes an open environment for interaction where males and females interact and embrace one another as equals. Indeed, globalization situates restrictive cultures (such as Libya's) as unprogressive and a hindrance to diversity.

Libyan culture generally assumes strict social expectations. According to Al-Nouri (1995), Libyan females' traditional upbringing emphasizes the need for girls and young women to adhere to their mother's advice, maintain physical distance from boys, and refrain from gossip. Most Libyan cultural practices standardize restrictions concerning interactions between males and females, which contributes to the widening of psychological distances caused by feminine and masculine qualities asserted by parents. Libyan families used to take pride in their girls' subordinate, bashful, and quiescent character as a symbol of their femininity (Al-Nouri, 1995).

The author further argues that feminine and masculine traits, which parents strongly drive, lead to significant distinctions between the genders, creating cognitive constructs that have lasting effects on the mind of the females (Al-Nouri, 1995). These distinct gender lines explain why Libyan society expects women to follow a path marked by marriage, housekeeping, and raising children. As recently as the 1990s, Libyan society was still confining women to domestic chores, such as childcare, milking, fetching water, weaving, and plant gathering, inhibiting their sense of adventure and the expansion of their capabilities.

Libya's historical events shape its culture and its historical relation with the West. Billet (1992) highlights how the overthrow of King Idris on September 1, 1969, and the start of the Gaddafi regime ushered in an age characterized by expansionism and a progressively hostile foreign policy. The government drastically transformed the pro-Western orientation King Idris championed, leading to the strained relationship between the West and Libya. The country's foreign policy also jeopardized Western remnants, including disregarding Western imperialism. Gaddafi's leadership emphasized three models entailing freedom, socialism and unity, as influenced by Gamel Abdul Nasser, former Egyptian President.

Gaddafi also envisioned that Libya could only attain freedom by controlling its national and international environment, a vision that ultimately cost Gaddafi his life. Still, it did inspire the rise of Arab culture in Libya and Northern Africa, including emphasizing the sense of unity in society and repelling Western ideologies. Gaddafi faced opposition from opponent powers comprising armed militia and organized groups, Libyan diplomats, and Libyan civil war proponents who planned to overthrow him. They rallied followers to fight his government with the help of NATO. The war led many Libyans to migrate to neighboring countries, and Libya suffered a significant economic downturn because of the war (Aghayev, 2013). Gaddafi's opponents saw him as a hindrance to the process of globalization.

Libyan Context of the Study Abroad Scholarship Program

The education sector in Libya has seen vast improvements over the past 50 years. What distinguished the Qaddafi rule from that of his predecessors is that, under Qaddafi, education became free for all Libyans at all levels, from primary to university. The Libyan government also began to support the education sector, with exceptional budgets allocated to advance the educational standards of secondary schools. As a result, the number of universities and various specializations likewise increased. However, despite a doubling of the number of graduates, the need to engage foreign teachers for secondary and post-secondary education persisted. Note that primary schools are still mostly staffed by Libyan teachers and have been since the 1980s.

The hiring of foreign teaching staff for high schools slowly began to decline at the beginning of the 2000s. Since the revolution of 2011, most heads of college departments have decided not to bring in foreign teachers but instead to appoint Libyan teachers. This has strengthened Libyan society’s confidence in the education sector and increased the teachers’ affiliation with the country.

The newfound self-sufficiency was the result of a previous decision by the General People's Committee (Implementing the laws and decisions issued by the basic congresses formulated in the General People's Congress. Playing the role as the primary instrument of Al Fateh revolution). This decision implemented laws formulated in the General People's Congresses to grant Libyan students the opportunity to study either in Libya or abroad in government-funded programs. The initial offer was to students with undergraduate degrees, higher institute diplomas, and master's degrees, but then expanded to include high school graduates as well.

By accepting the scholarship, students must adhere to several laws and regulations. For example, in Resolution No. 43 of 2005, article No. 1, the People's Committee defined scholarships to study abroad. In the resolution, students must fulfill the conditions of the scholarship to obtain an undergraduate, MA, or PhD degree in universities and majors determined by the committee. In article No. 2, the committee clarified the purpose of the scholarship. Specifically, its purpose is for students to undertake scientific or technical studies and research or obtain a scientific qualification in order to fill a shortage or meet a need demanded by a public interest in order to fulfill the requirements to work in a university or research center or other public authority.

Since the establishment of the scholarships, Libyan students have obtained a solid educational ladder based on purposeful hopes aimed at building an educated society capable of meeting its own needs. There are several conditions and controls that a student must adhere to, the most important of which are:

- The delegate must be of Libyan nationality.
- The delegate must be of a good conduct and behavior.
- The scholarship should be in their field of specialization and the nature of their work.

- The study must be in the language of the host country.
- The student's grade point average and GPA must be at least 65% in medical sciences, 70% and above in basic applied sciences, and 75% and above in social and human sciences. (Originally, priority was given to those with the highest grades.)
- The student must be nominated by the institution in which they began working for a period of not less than one year. (General People's Committee No. 43, 2005)

Annually, every educational or research institution in Libya issues lists that include a number of candidates for the study abroad program. The choice of candidates must take into account the aforementioned conditions for issuing the final decision for scholarship students and determining a comprehensive budget that covers all the expenses the students will incur while they are studying outside the country. The candidates include both men and women, ensuring there is no sexual discrimination.

However, other social aspects also come into play with regard to female scholarship candidates, such as whether or not they are able to leave the country without a male escort (so-called legal companionship in Islam). The Libyan blogger El-Fassi (2008) discussed this issue in one of her daily blogs under the title "Passport" (Libyan Woman Diary). El Fassi opened her article with a question that carries several meanings and directions, including religious, educational and social. The article also conveyed a message to officials inside the country who work to facilitate and complete the final stages after the post-decision stage. El-Fassi wrote: "Do not send them: What happens after sending single Libya women to study abroad?" Note that El Fassi lived in one of the Libyan communities in Newcastle (UK).

Through her discussion of the issue, El-Fassi explained that she is strongly opposed to allowing single women to study abroad alone. As she claimed,

> I was shocked by the presence of these scholarship women without company, and by that I mean legitimate company. Before I was in Newcastle, when I heard about sending female students there, it was usually mentioned that she either got married or was accompanied by a member of her family to complete her studies. (El-Fassi, 2008)

The blogger concluded her discussion about the problems that scholarship females may encounter in foreign countries, saying: "As a result of the delay in the financial delegation of the scholarships for about three months, some of them were forced to return because they could not manage their affairs".

What El-Fassi (2008) pointed out in her blog over a decade ago reflects Libyan society's view of this issue. On the other hand, this kind of intolerance and limited thinking on the part of the community also leads to female scholarship students being socially isolated during their study abroad, as Libyan families living in the host community will reject and shun them.

Possible Remedies

Given the increasing prevalence of international students, researchers contend that universities urgently need to address cultural and academic gaps. Akanwa (2015) states that universities should review institutional services for international learners and offer the necessary academic and social support. Additionally, they need to understand each learner's uniqueness and not treat all international learners the same. Still, they should not treat international learners the same as domestic learners. This understanding should guide them to facilitate adjustments to a friendlier educational climate, including modifying classroom practices and developing more profound cultural sensitivities to diversity.

Additionally, Western universities could help lower language barriers by organizing writing seminars and conversational partners, integrating more English and speaking assignments into the curriculum, and conducting English language workshops. International learners could, for instance, submit multiple drafts for instructor comments and establish constructive teacher-student relationships by having regular informal conversations (Akanwa, 2015.) Idris et al. (2019) suggest that international universities could adopt a peer learning approach to improve international students' adaptability to the host environment. The approach can improve students' learning experiences and outcomes by enabling and encouraging international learners to engage in social exchange and interactions on an informal basis. Less structured forms of learning, including cooperative and collaborative forms, positively modify international students' learning process and serve as an assimilation strategy. The idea connects to feminism by encouraging Western universities to accommodate female international students and perceive they have the right to excel academically.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a background and relevant literature review guiding this study. First, I discussed the cultural differences between Arab and Western countries. I also highlighted how significant conflicts between the cultures affects the outcome of international women learners and their lifestyle settings. Second, I discussed the outcome of the transition process and the changes it may bring to individual student's educational level and identity. Finally, I outlined the Libyans' cultural identity to give the reader a context for the study. I included in the outline some common

Libyan characteristics as well as a brief discussion about the Libyan scholarship program to help the reader understand the content and the findings of the study.

The literature review exemplifies convergence on the challenges experienced by Libyan female students pursuing Western education. Cultural differences between their home nation and Western nations influence such challenges. The pedagogical approaches in Western universities are different from the Libyan learning context, exposing Libyan females to learning challenges. Thus far, I have adopted procedures such as narrative and auto-ethnography to collect data based on personal perspectives in the next chapter. This approach is most relevant for this study because it allows the researcher to understand the participants lived experiences and use the insights to determine points of convergence or divergence with the existing literature.

The literature review also highlights the concept of diverse pedagogy methodologies. According to the literature, the Libyan pedagogical approach is teacher-centered, with the students expected to take instructions from their lectures. The literature underscores this approach is limiting because it fails to consider the learning needs of learners. Unlike the Libyan pedagogical approach, which is teacher-centered, most western universities embrace a student-centered pedagogical approach where learners actively participate in the learning process by asking questions and involving themselves in discussions.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

The choice of research methodology is pivotal in analyzing and assessing literary and nonliterary argumentations. Researchers adopt procedures such as narrative and auto-ethnography to collect data based on personal perspectives, using data to analyze and make sense of their cultural experiences. This approach resembles a form of self-narrative that integrates aspects of social context. Feminist researchers, in particular, find it helpful to use these methodologies to narrate their stories regarding their social, cultural, and political stances, as these strategies invite them to speak about themselves, thereby transforming personal experiences into stories that allow them to function as cultural mediators. This thesis delves into feminism as a research approach, with a focus on exploring both the purpose and the processes. It also explores employs narrative and auto-ethnographic methodologies to understand the participant's insights into the topic of the study, helping me answer the research questions and make plausible conclusions and recommendations.

My study is about women, for women, and done by a woman. This premise indicates that the analysis is feminist and is therefore primarily attending to gender elements contrary to conventional social sciences studies. Kaur and Nagaich (2019) assert that feminist research entails cultivating transformation and phasing out gendered asymmetry. This is critical, because it helps me employ a feminist perspective to shape the issue while addressing the gender gap in knowledge dissemination that has historically characterized the topic under study. I believe an understanding of historical women’s struggles and oppression posed by their male counterparts justifies the selection of feminist research.

Furthermore, the study incorporates feminist beliefs and values across all genders, generating awareness of the meanings women offer to the world in the context of institutions dominated by patriarchal systems. I understand that feminism as a methodology reflects my research topics, guiding Western faculties' decision-making regarding the female gender. I also perceive that the research explores diversity, women's empowerment, and democratic decision-making. The method also seeks to transform social inequality and eliminate imbalances between research and subject that begin with women's experiences and standpoints. Hence, the approach helps achieve the research aims by exploring particular cultural diversity issues among Libyan female students studying in the West.

Research Philosophy

As a leading voice in feminist research, Bell Hooks (2015b) offers insight into this study by delving into women's education on how the feminist agenda influences educational initiatives. Feminist research entails investigating barriers that inhibit women's progress and ways that women can overcome the problem, including through academic accomplishments. She recalls that the majority of contemporary feminist movements comprise college-educated individuals. For instance, Hooks' (2015b) article illustrates that feminist activist and scholar, Charlotte Bunch, explored the importance of politics in her article *Feminism and Education*. Bunch encourages women to embrace education challenges, including struggles with critical and analytical skills, claiming that women should strive for education to enhance their intellect and practice their freedom.

Hooks (2015a) also highlights that the improvements in finances and increases in leisure time have given female scholars and academics the ability to pursue their studies. She emphasizes that the most significant priority is to ensure that all women can read and write. Hooks perceived

that women should convey feminist ideas orally until every woman in society learns to speak and write. Additionally, Hooks (2015a) believes that women should not dwell on anti-male sentiment to form a bond, but instead should work toward ending sexist oppression by sharing interests and beliefs between both sexes.

In her article, Hooks (2015b) narrates how she strived to pursue her Ph.D., revealing how many competent feminist scholars could not register for their doctorate degrees, as they were either disillusioned with the university or could not manage burnout from overwork. The academic field remained a site of class privilege until the 1970s, which prompted feminist scholars to explore race and class differences. The author postulates that gender, class, and race perspectives transformed feminist thought. The assertion encompasses intersectionality, where groups of people experience disadvantages due to overlapping identities and experiences of their gender, sexuality, religion, physical appearance, and caste.

Hooks (2015b) states that although female scholars supported the feminist movement as a means to devise a theory to address women's realities, they worked constantly to overcome negative information conveyed by mainstream media about the campaign. Despite the backlash to feminism by mainstream society, these concepts should still empower international female students to believe that they have the opportunity to prosper in the scholarly field. These study findings contribute to the existing knowledge regarding cultural differences that affect female scholars as they strive to adapt to the host's cultural norms, values, and pedagogy.

Mehrabi (2019) informs the literature on how Western feminism did not explore Muslim women's accounts of their lives due to patriarchal societies' oppressive nature, and impediment that perpetuates racist stereotypes toward them. Antiracism theories, alongside collaborative narrative inquiry, enabled the researcher to establish that Canadian racism is embedded in people's

perception of Canadian-born Muslim women who practice hijab. The feminist stance can help the research articulate why some Canadians represent female international students as captive visitors or as individuals lacking agency and power.

In related work, Allan et al. (2009) draw on post-structural feminism that emphasizes the social construction of gendered subjectivities. The concepts offer insight into discourse analysis of predominant discussions that shape women's images. The findings show that people take femininity (a set of attributes, roles, and behaviors associated with women and girls) for granted when discussing women's leadership and gendered leaders' image. The author reports that people view women as collaborative, transformational, and relational leaders, yet some experts framed women as riskier and atypical. The authors highlight that inclusion of the feminist perspective is essential in higher education, where learning institutions and society should focus on teaching women autonomy and free choice. The article contributes to the research objective by emphasizing how femininity can shape attitudes and behaviors that prejudice women leaders.

In her research, Whitcher (2005) explores the impact of Western feminists on Muslim feminists in Egypt and Iran. The author reports that Muslim societies in the Middle East tend to reverse women gains that have accrued in recent decades, with women freely choosing to veil, a practice that is symbolic of their willingness to embrace male domination of their lives. Islam women who sought emancipation presumed that the faith was inherently patriarchal, emphasizing subjugation evidenced by veiling, dictum, family obligations, and rights. Besides, Whitcher (2005) reports that the emergence of women movements that embraced some Western ideologies while challenging some traditional Islam practices was met with resistance and that the political elites invested their efforts in dismantling them. Egyptian feminist movements also face challenges

posed by Islam ideology, such as reinforcing patriarchal structures. They have to overcome the dominant *shari'ah* laws and the perception that they let Western influence undermine Islam.

Mir-Hosseini (2019) postulates that the expansion of feminist discourses in the twentieth century enables many Muslims to perceive Muslim legal traditions as unjust to gender rights. The author echoes how *shari'ah* denied women equality rights. Additionally, Mir-Hosseini (2019) reiterates that feminists in Islam nations face resistance from religious establishments led by men asserting that they promote authentic Islam. They disregard feminism and decline to engage their advocates. Accordingly, feminist voices in Islam remain in a formative phase whose future depends on political development in their nations. The linkage of politics and Islam remains a key obstacle in the rise of feminists in Muslim nations. However, these movements can accomplish their feminist objectives by overcoming Islam and feminisms dichotomy through encoding knowledge production and power practices.

The Four Most Insightful Themes in Feminist Research

Feminist research advocates constructing new knowledge, focusing on studies conducted within a patriarchal institution, embracing diversity, and eliminating power imbalances between subject and study. By addressing these four key issues, feminist researchers believe that women will have a place in higher learning institutions, giving them a level playing field with their male peers that allows them to compete and achieve academic success.

Research Design

I employed a feminist explanatory research design in the proposed study, which researchers typically use to investigate an ambiguous issue: the challenges that Libyan female students face in Western Universities. This feminist approach allowed me to draw insights concerning women's experiences, using such to improve the women's place in institutions of higher learning.

Venkatesh et al. (2013) describe this type of design as one in which the researcher expands on the research question's findings rather than merely describing the phenomena. I anticipate that the invention was ideal for accomplishing the aim of my research concerning the cultural and academic experiences that challenge international students admitted to Western universities. While numerous studies have already explored this area, there is still a need to look deeper into the factors from a Libyan perspective. The design guided me, as an investigator, to interview participants to understand the challenges faced by Libyan women as they seek educational advancement in Western institutions.

Research Approach

The study adopts qualitative feminism to guide the procedure and collect open-ended data. Rahman (2016) asserts that qualitative research is ideal in work that seeks to produce a detailed description of participants' experiences, opinions, and feelings and interpret their actions' meaning. I experienced challenges finding participants, only managing to conduct three individuals who agreed to participate in the study. This was probably due to the limited number of female Libyan students pursuing Western education compared to men. The participants were cooperative, although some of their answers were brief due to their busy schedules. I had conversations with my participants, and we had a lot of commonalities concerning the challenges they faced in their journey to Western Universities. The questions I asked were insightful because they informed grounds for comparing existing evidence and making plausible conclusions. I utilized the English language in my interview, the same language my study assumes. My choice of language could have contributed to brief answers to some of my interview questions. The participants' age, family, and study influenced the participant's answers because they narrated their lived experience.

As a qualitative researcher, I understand I need to adopt a conversational mode when conducting interviews to lead to a social relationship with the participants. Qualitative interviewing facilitates data collection, allowing me to draw out participants' lived experiences and the meaning they make from these experiences. The research intends to understand the subjects' personal experiences studying at Western universities and their opinions on various cultural and sociological perspectives in their host nations. As the author of the present study, I assert that the methodological choice facilitates data collection by shaping meanings through and within the culture. Qualitative research is appropriate for investigating complex issues that impact societies, hence its applicability in evaluating international learners' behaviors that depend on cultural affiliation.

Research Strategy

Feminist interviewing

I employed feminist interviewing to gain insights into my research participants. I found feminist interviewing as the most plausible approach in this study because it offered the opportunity to incorporate Oakley's (2005) values and aims. They encompass participant empowerment, hearing silenced voices, delineating the power hierarchy between the participants and the researcher, motivating the participants to lead the research, and balanced sharing of thoughts, views, and ideas to sidestep challenges associated with participants' exploitation. Oakley's (2005) values also shape feminist interviewing by ensuring honest and open discussions throughout the research. I find these values and aims laudable, and I agree that as a feminist researcher, I should remain live in achieving them in this research. My approach corresponds with Jefford and Sundin (2013), who argued that feminist principles could be embedded into elements of research methodology. Feminist influences on studies in any field significantly contribute to

understanding the world. According to Hollway (2017), the feminist research approach is a response against the positivist and traditional research approaches that were viewed as male-dominated and oppressive to women. Although their existing conceptual and empirical evidence in qualitative research concerning the benefits, limitations, and utilization of individual interviews, there is a lack of data on how researchers can employ diverse techniques to center participants intersecting identities and sustain rapport, trust, and authentic connections during interviews with female Islamic women (Fletcher et al., 2019). However, I planed to leverage my insider status and exploit my cultural connections with the interviewees to pursue feminist interviewing with all participants successfully.

According to Oakley (2005), building rapport with the interviewees sustains close and equal relationships, enhancing the researcher's ability to achieve more fruitful and significant data. As Segre (2019) puts it, interviews should remain conversational; Oakley (2005) finds this argument relevant mainly when interviewing women. This is so because rapport building gives the women participants more control of the interview and the topics of focus; I, the researcher, was able to gain greater in-depth material. This kind of interview has implications in the purview of research methods because it offers greater internal validity. The use of questions can be easily explained plausibly because it generated answers which were easy to interpret, helping the researcher reach data collection objectives and fulfill the research question criteria.

Feminist interviewing is beneficial in data collection. This is because it empowers the respondent to respond to questions freely and in-depth. As for this interviewing process, trust prevails, providing grounds for generating more qualitative information. I cultivates an environment where the participants can perceive their input as valued, enhancing their ability to say what they want and not what the interviewer expects. All these benefits are a product of rapport

building. However, when establishing rapport, I remained critical that the idea could clash with the concept of objectivity in data collection. This is due to the possibility of good rapport minimizing firmly held viewpoints, controlling one's emotions that they fail to reveal their typical thoughts, or suggesting a perception of trust and mutual understanding that risks the feelings of disingenuously. The implication is that if the researcher performs the rapport, they risk a clash with the spirit of an open and honest feminist approach. Existing literature argues for the possible complexities in building rapport I ethnographic research (Soyer, 2014; Petkov & Kaoullas, 2016; Berger, 2015). These researchers argue that although building trust is core to achieving validity in qualitative research, it remains a challenge to create and secure. Pitts and Miller (2007) argue that when building trust, researchers must establish trust and reception formations like race, ethnicity, gender, class, and age, which also influence how and to what degree the participants receive the researcher. According to Brayda & Boyce (2014), even in research situations where the researcher holds an insider status, such as sharing a cultural background with the participants, rapport does not necessarily emerge. In some instances, a shared cultural background opens up the possibility of a deviant insider status, eliciting political motives for conducting the research and deep mistrust (Brayda & Boyce, 2014). In overcoming this challenge, I remained alert to instances when rapport prevailed easily, motivating me to remind the participants to remain typical of their thoughts and experiences concerning the phenomena under investigation. This was made possible through constant reflection on how I related to and positioned the participants through objective interview questions.

According to Bott (2010), feminist methodologies have implications for social science research around disclosure, reflexibility, and power in research. Given the complexity of research, it remains critical to sustaining a continual reflection as a researcher concerning the implication of

data collected and its impact on the state of knowledge in the Libyan education system in the future. Thus, I located myself throughout the research, carefully considering my influence on the interview process and my construction of self within the research to minimize my power over the phenomena of interest. According to Bott (2010), rapport influence how the researcher and participants locate themselves within the research and the interpretation of the data, mainly concerning how they identify/disidentify, like/dislike, and familiarize/etherize. Although all social science researchers face this challenge, it remains more pronounced for feminist researchers because it threatens the research process's ethics, which anticipates minimizing the power, treating all participants equally, and empowering silenced voices. Similarly and more importantly, it emphasizes the importance of not subsuming my full self to the performance of rapport to gather data. The researcher and participant subjectivities are relevant to rapport, study findings, and the interpretation of the results.

Feminist researchers support gender matching in cultivating rapport, reciprocity, and trust (Berger, 2015). This argument informs my study's focus on incorporating female interviewees in investigating the phenomena of interest. Gender matching promotes comfort for participants, allowing participants to remain open with the researcher, and promoting data collection. With gender matching, the research benefits from open discussions and more in-depth discussions that produce important data for analysis. However, as the researcher, I remained mindful of the possibility of participants closing off certain discussions because of the assumptions that we share viewpoints and understanding of the topic under study. In this context, the interviewee may feel that the researcher has knowledge and experiences concerning the phenomena of interest. The researcher may also play up in an attempt to cultivate rapport and, in the event, lose important data insights from the interviewees. Also, where the researcher seeks clarification and a more in-depth

description poses a risk of confusing and frustrating the participant who already has the view that they come from the same background and understands the issues surrounding the question, closing down the dialogue window. However, I found gender matching helpful in the context of my study because it offered the opportunity to decide what knowledge is credible, true, and worthy.

In the context of this study, I entered the interview space of discussion and dialogue while reducing the focus on easy rapport. I had to discuss this approach with the interviewees, setting up the discussion as an open dialogue. In any instances where rapport seems elusive, I will engage in reflective work on shared viewpoints and assumptions and its implication on findings. In any instance, the participant's viewpoints are at odds, and rapport is hard to elicit. I will accept the outcome and openly discuss the points of tension and dissonance toward reframing objectivity in the study. This would allow me to be honest with the participants and remain faithful to my feminist objectives.

Auto-ethnography

I also adopted an auto-ethnographical strategy to tell my own story alongside those of the selected participants. This approach fosters data collection via stimulating story sharing to promote developing emotional recall and systematic sociological introspection (SSI). As a research method, Ellis et al. (2011) assert that auto-ethnography blends aspects of ethnography and autobiography and allows the author selectively and retroactively to write about past experiences. The writing process blends interviews with comprehensive findings.

Additionally, I apply a self-reflection approach to explore my experience as a Libyan female international student studying at a Western university. The strategy entails exploring my story within the spheres of cultural diversity, gendered influences, educational insights, and social meanings. Besides selectively writing about my emotional experiences, made possible by being

part of the Libyan culture, I analyze my experiences as a means to blend them with similar experiences. I anticipate accomplishing this by examining relevant cultural artifacts (a Libyan text, a piece of media, objects of profound patrimony) that I link to Libya and Canada. The field notes and interviews reflect repeated feelings, happenings, and stories to facilitate understanding the Libyan culture for outsiders and insiders. I also strive to produce evocative auto-ethnographical narratives that cover in-depth personal and interpersonal descriptions by discerning cultural experience patterns evidenced by the interviews and field notes.

Sample Population

For my sample, I engaged four participants (three others and myself) representing the Libyan female population studying abroad. I drew the samples through the purposive sampling technique. As for purposive sampling, the researcher leverages their knowledge to settle for the best-fit participants for the systematic investigation (Etikan et al. 2016). To this end, I used my judgment to source participants who have an adequate understanding of cultural and educational transitions from their home country to Western universities. I considered my research purpose in sourcing these participants. The sample includes four Libyan Muslim women, including myself, who have studied at Western universities, some of whom have already returned to their home country (Libya). I steered them towards what they know, listened sensitively, and clarified the purpose of the interviews to allow them to narrate their experiences. I followed the respondents rather than my interview guide to unpack their experiences comprehensively.

The selection of the study participants considers their ability to narrate their experiences of Western culture and relate them to their gender affiliations. I perceive that the sample offers accurate and transformative information on international graduate students studying in Western institutions. The interviews reflect the feminist approach, with the participants providing insight

into the construction of new knowledge and the production of social change. Further, I believe that the participants are in a position to discuss factors associated with feminist values and beliefs, including meanings women offer to the world regarding cultural norms and academic prospects. Their responses inform the study on approaching the desired structural changes, such as enhanced teaching pedagogies, content that should be included in the curriculum to embrace diversity, and the use of technology in Libya based on what they experience in Western academic and cultural settings. The target sample also represents subjects who are all studying different programs at different universities, thus enlarging the variety of experiences. I adopted a focus group to identify and explore how they perceive and behave toward a Western style of living and learning and how their insights motivate them to act as change agents in their home country. I delved into questions of why, what, and how.

Data Collection Method

The data collection process assumes procedures and concepts of feminist narrative approaches, in which the respondents participate in interviews and a focus group. I sent the participants an email and reached them via phone calls to recruit them. In September 2021, I travelled to Libya and interviewed the participants face-to-face. I conducted 35- to 65-minute sessions with the participants, as I anticipated getting detailed responses. I transcribed my recorded interviews using computer software, followed by re-interviews which I coded and shared across group insights.

The questions reflected the concepts of the research objectives, meaning I asked questions to participants to narrate their experiences as Libyan women transitioning to Western culture. The second part of the question process included views on cultural differences between Libyan and Western cultures. The third part of the question process focused on the women's experiences based

on the pedagogical, lifestyle, and language challenges in Western culture. The fourth section sought to know their views on approaches that would reduce the differences between Libyan and Western cultures, which mainly entailed sharing my insights. Other relevant questions include how they planned to use their acquired knowledge to transform their workplaces and whether they inspired Libyan society to adopt some norms they learned in Western culture, including empowering women to take part in decision-making roles. I conducted each section once, as noted.

Next, I set a date for each subject where I conducted semi-structured interviews with every participant. The choice of semi-structured interviews corresponds to Cresswell and Poth's (2017) and Sparkes and Smith's (2014) argument that a robust conversational interviewing style can take shape through developing a few leading questions. I recorded these discussions in transcripts derived from oral recordings. I utilized the Windows dictation tool on my laptop to translate the audio recordings into text. This feature was helpful to efficiently generate large quantities of text data from interviews. The dictation function helped generate the words of the transcript. I then cleaned up the transcripts, with the spoken words matched to specific participants, and added punctuation for clarification. The technological approach eased the transcription process, saving me much time that would have gone to waste by utilizing ordinary transcription.

I also recorded my experiences in a diary to collect relevant data about my time in Western culture. I focused on data around education, teaching pedagogy, Canadian culture in general, how I interact with this culture as a Libyan female student, differences in gender values, forming friendships with students from the host country and other nations, and language differences.

Data Analysis

While collecting data at each phase, I analyzed them and adopted the analysis to develop the next phase of the research. The study adopted a discourse analysis approach to derive the

meaning of the recorded responses (Hodges et al., 2008). According to Perera (2020), discourse entails the complete pattern by which people communicate, providing a platform for a wide interpretation of language. It involves verbal and non-verbal communication and the wider social concepts that underscore meanings in language. More specifically, I used discourse analysis to synthesize conversations while considering the social context of the conversations. The focus was on analyzing the purpose and impact of respondents' different cultural experiences, beliefs, values, and assumptions they communicate and the cultural rules and conventions inherent in the communications.

The study employs empirical discourse analysis, which entails looking for broad themes through conversation analysis. This approach would be critical in ensuring. I elucidate meanings in my conversation with the interviewees to understand the transition challenges they face when joining western universities and Libyan institutions of higher learning. I will use the findings to draw a connection between the challenges interviewees face abroad and back home across the two transition points. I will utilize interview texts generated from four research participants, which corresponds to Barnes's (2005) conversation analytic approach applied in traditional sites for health communication research that entails a one-on-one interaction. I will structure the analysis to allow themes to emerge from the data. However, the focus is on themes illuminating the challenges around transition at the two different transition points.

The discourse analysis will utilize written interview text from each participant as the data source. I will analyze the data to help identify common themes (Hodges et al., 2008), providing grounds for understanding how the research texts construct the concept of transition in each phase setting. The first phase of data analysis will focus on texts of transition to western universities,

while the second data analysis will focus on the transition to Libya. The results of the data analysis indicate tensions in both phases of the transition.

Step 1: Generating and Applying Codes

In the coding process, I first utilized the initial coding by identifying key concepts, salient narratives, and recurring ideas. I started the preliminary colour-coding by reading through the transcripts while identifying shared and distinct narratives in accomplishing this goal. I utilized the highlighting tool to code the text into separate themes grouped by color, providing an effective way to group coding in clusters. I then put the clusters into separate documents and coded them depending on the category. Yin (2010) elaborates that illustrative words from original field notes will help generate the initial code.

I used two different colours to colour-coded the labels. This helped to facilitate componential analysis. The first color represented the participants in this study, and the second one represented domains and emerging themes from the codes. Representative codes are important for illustrating clusters in general details.

Step 2: Identifying Themes, Patterns, and Relationships

The level-2 codes entailed the formulation of clusters and patterns emerging from the color-coded labels. The second colour listed the conceptual themes relevant to the study. Emerging themes and sub-themes involve identifying common narratives drawn from participants conversation concerning each question during the interview. The entire interpretation process involved scanning primary data for the main (i.e., most-used) phrases and word responses. The process also involved collating the codes into broader themes related to the data. Codes that appeared redundant or those that become themes themselves I placed in a temporary mixed theme

and included later, if deemed necessary. I also considered words and phrases used with the participants' expressions of unusual emotions.

Yin (2010) illustrates that identifying patterns involves analyzing basic, new, and persistent patterns in the research data. I considered the procedure for identifying emerging patterns from the collected data. In so doing, I visualized the relationship between the different coded themes and levels of themes, checked whether some of them could be sub-themes to others, and subsequently modified them accordingly. I also searched for missing information that I expected the respondents to mention but never did. The process helped establish a causal relationship or correlational relationship of emerging variables.

Step 3: Summarizing Data

The final stage of analysis involved linking research findings to research questions. It encompassed the incorporation of essential quotations from the transcripts, and highlighting the findings' main themes and possible contradictions. The process offered substantive inferences based on level-2 codes, themes, patterns, and the relationship of the analyzed data.

Researcher's Position and Challenges

I benefited from the fact that the subjects were intellectually knowledgeable about conversing in a common language. Hence, there was no need for translation during the interview sessions, which enhanced data collection credibility. I also understood Libyan culture and social norms, which facilitated the data collection process during the interviews. The respondents accepted the invitation to participate in the study, as the interviewees were of the same gender. The process faced some challenges, such as the lack of training in data collection using technological tools. In addition, some respondents potentially offered biased responses by not acknowledging the essence of the study questions to the researcher. In other words, some of them

did not give adequate answers to the questions presented. Others hesitated in one way or another to participate in the research due to personal issues and professional commitments that constrained their availability, so I had to find a different participant.

Ethical and Political Considerations

I responded to ethical considerations during the data collection and analysis phases. My choice of topic acknowledges respect for human dignity. Additionally, my research results gain reciprocity from positive action. All the participants I included contribute to concepts that shape the future needs of the coming generations of females pursuing higher education in Western Universities. The participants mainly devoted their time, experience, effort, and wisdom to shaping the study's usefulness. I also secured informed consent, shared findings analysis with respondents, and preserved the confidentiality of the results.

As well, I took the responsibility of communicating the study's objective to the participants. I informed them that the research was for an academic purpose, and I assured them I was trustworthy and ethical. I also acknowledged the political considerations of the study, citing relevant research about Libya and the West. Finally, I diligently attended to the study's interpretive narrative by incorporating subversive stories and hegemonic tales. This helped to give a voice to the oppressed or least powerful in society.

Significance of the Study

This study is essential to the furthering of women's educational aims. It adds knowledge to the literature on how cultural diversity affects women students, and particulary Libyan women students, seeking to advance their education in an unfamiliar Western environment and their methods to cope with cultural barriers. Furthermore, the study informs university administrators of Western universities on how they could review their perception of female students from North

African regions regarding their social role in the Western environment. The study also enlightens educators on adjusting their teaching and learning strategies when handling female learners from the stated region.

Additionally, educators who have a limited understanding of cultural values that govern female Libyan students' education endeavors will gain insight into how they might successfully assimilate these students into Western culture. University administrators might also use the findings to modify the curriculum to suit these learners' academic level to equip them with the necessary knowledge they can use when they return to their country. At the same time, this study enlightens international learners to understand acculturation better and adjust their attitude towards their new educational environment both before and during their stay in the host country.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented a detailed explanation of the approach I have taken to convey the research question of this study. I examined the philosophy underlying the qualitative study and the possible remedies that play an essential role in addressing the cultural and academic gaps that hinder international students' success. I also reviewed the constructive thinking of feminist research in building high self-confidence to compete with male peers at the same level. Finally, I discussed my position as a researcher, the study's ethics, and the significance of the research findings, along with the research strategy, data collection methodology and data analysis.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter describes the findings that emerged from the data. The present study adopts a discourse analysis approach to derive the meaning of the recorded narrative and storied responses. More specifically, I analyzed conversations while considering their social context. The focus is on analyzing the purpose and impact of the different cultural experiences, beliefs, values, and assumptions the participants communicate and the cultural rules and conventions inherent in their communications. The findings reveal common themes across the feedback, with each participant admitting to experiencing culture shock, social isolation due to language barriers, and various challenges caused by Western-style pedagogy.

Additionally, this study aims to evaluate the transitional challenges, assimilation strategies, and other changes that Libyan female students who studied at Western universities experience upon returning home. Therefore, the study sample population includes female Libyan students pursuing higher education at international universities. During the course of this research, the participants either were still pursuing their studies or had completed their education and had returned to Libya. Purposeful sampling was essential for identifying and recruiting the right study population.

The four Libyan female students participating in the study are Rabab, Safa, Sukeina, and myself, the researcher. We are/were all fully covered by government scholarships from the Libyan Ministry of Higher Education to pursue our studies abroad.

Participants

All the participants requested to have their actual names used in the research.

The participants were four Libyan Muslim females who studied abroad in Western universities. I did a representative sample of these women, who studied in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. I looked at their educational journey and how they adapted to their new environment. I also looked at the difficulties they faced academically and socially, as well as how they re-adapted to Libyan society after returning home.

Although I was able to identify many themes and perspectives of the participants that point to commonalities in their experiences of higher education in the above-mentioned countries, I noticed that each participant used her own lens to understand the different isses and formulate her own experiences related to the host country. Table 1 summarizes the participants' demographic information and their unique perspectives of their experience in their respective host countries.

Table 1: Demographic Information about the Participants

	Name	Country of Study	Level of Study/Major	Participants' Perspectives of Host Countries
1	Huneda	Canada	Ph.D. in Education: Curriclum Studies	My exposure to a new culture has been a positive and enlightening experience, deepening my awareness of self and helping me gain an appreciation of a different culture. Conversely, the new culture also initially gave me culture shock. The culture shock was my first step in a long and positive process of redeveloping my beliefs and understandings. Meanwhile, this experience has strengthened my commitment to my cultural heritage, providing me with a perspective that accommodates harmonious assimilation of the new cultural experiences with my existing culture through phases of crisis, recovery, and adjustment.
2	Safa	United Kingdom	Master in Applied Linguistics	Living abroad was an exciting experience. Living with a host family off-campus gave me the opportunity to immerse myself into the culture of a second language naturally, which helped in the language-learning process. Additionally, I had the chance to attend many events with neighbours and the host family. Most people were friendly and curious to know about my background culture. However, this doesn't mean that the experience was 100% positive. There were times when I was misunderstood or felt left out due to cultural differences, but I think this is normal (for foreigners to feel that way) and I was fine by the end of the course.
3	Sukeina	United Kingdom	Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics	British culture is totally different from Libyan culture. They have different values. I could definitely say that I had culture shock at first. I had to try to adapt my values to understand and accept some of the different British values. It is well-known that Arabic is spoken in Libya, while in the UK English is spoken. This put more pressure on me, although I could speak English fluently. However, my husband and children did not speak English when we first arrived, so I had

				be with each one of them whenever they needed to go somewhere, which was time-consuming for me. Also, the differences in religious beliefs caused me some uneasiness. I called it "cultural misunderstanding", the sense I had that some locals look at Muslim females scornfully. When I got rid of this feeling, I was able to convince myself that it was just a misconception on my part.
4	Rabab	United States	Master in General English and English Literature	My experience has been a great one. Since my arrival, I felt that I am not a foreigner at all. I consider myself to be an American citizen. I was treated well, both on and off campus. I've heard about culture shock, but thank God I didn't go through it.

Huneda

I am the sole researcher of this study. During the time of the interview, I was 37 years old. I am married with one child, and I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies (Curriculum and Instruction) at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. My research interests include adult higher education, gender issues, feminism, and qualitative research methods. I am also interested in second language learning, social sciences, and learning through culture.

When I was growing up, I knew several Libyan families whose sons and daughters had attended Western universities. These families attracted appreciation and respect from Libyan society simply because they had family members studying abroad. Around the same time, the Libyan Ministry of Education began a sponsorship program to assist Libyan students to study abroad, which significantly boosted my aspirations. I also felt that pursuing higher education at a Western university would enhance my overall competitiveness in my career. I was not satisfied with the Libyan education system in its current state, and I did not believe it could satisfy my educational needs. All of these aspects motivated me to seek higher education abroad.

I have been pursuing higher education in Canada for the past five years. During the early stages of my studies in particular, I experienced culture shock, challenges with the teaching style, language barriers, and social isolation. Such issues were a source of stress for me as I struggled to fulfill my study expectations. Nevertheless, they did not deter me from continuing to pursue my educational goals. To upgrade my skills and better acclimatize to my new learning environment, I joined a writing class that focused on writing for research purposes. The class proved to be very fruitful, as I not only improved my writing and research skills, I also made new friends. Then, more confident in my academic and social abilities, and by working closely with my colleagues and instructors, I was able to overcome many cultural, social, and educational barriers.

I can now attest to my significant growth in English language skills, research skills, teaching style, and cultural competence. Interacting with peers and instructors one-on-one and in group settings brought me a sense of connectedness with these people that overcame our superficial differences. As well, sharing cultural differences that characterize each other's culture was instrumental in shaping our open and positive thinking towards each other. Despite my initial feeling of being overwhelmed and out of my league, I am grateful for the opportunities given to me (e.g., the writing class). I am also happy that I took advantage of these opportunities, as they opened other doors that ultimately led me to achieve my educational goals.

Rabab

Rabab, a 34-year-old married mother of three, is doing postgraduate work. She attended Gianni University in Erie, Pennsylvania, USA, graduating in 2010 with a master's degree in General English and English Literature. She currently teaches English Literature as viewed through the lens of ESL students. Her focus is on African American literature, which she argues

offers a sense of fulfillment in her quest to read and teach stories from real life. Rabab states that her desire to study in a native English-speaking nation derives from her need to gain first-hand experience of the English language while leveraging a Western university environment to gain new knowledge.

Rabab acknowledges that she adapted quickly to her new social environment mainly because she appreciated and accepted it for what it was (i.e., her preconceptions were fulfilled). However, she still found the classroom teaching style difficult to adapt to, as it differed from that of her home country. For instance, she had to read a whole play per class, unlike back home, where students study one play per year. This challenge corresponds to the literature review assertions that Libyan pedagogical and teaching styles differ significantly from those of Western universities. The heavier demands force students from Libya to read extensively to catch up with natives and succeed in their academic work. Although she adjusted easily to her new environment, Rabab feels that this did not exclude her from facing academic challenges. For instance, she cites how an African-American was critical of her Islamic roots by associating air travel with terrorism, which made Rabab feel she was a target solely because she was a Muslim.

Safa

Safa is 36 years old and is married with two children. When she was still single, she earned her master's degree in applied linguistics for ELT from the University of Southampton, U.K., in 2011. She plans to pursue a Ph.D. program in education soon. Safa is currently a lecturer in the English department at Surman University, Libya. This year, she became the dean of the department. Her thesis investigated motivations among Arab students studying English in the U.K. She has a life-long passion for studying and reading articles related to studying English as a foreign

language. Recently, she also started to explore topics that show how culture influences foreign language study, especially if the learner's culture is not English.

Safa mentions in her responses that her desire to be an excellent English instructor was her main reason for choosing a British university to pursue her M.A. program, as studying in the U.K. would allow her to engage with the English language and culture first-hand. Other reasons include the desire to learn the Western university educational system and the adventure of experiencing independence as a young woman at the age of 23. Safa's educational journey took three years, and she spent an additional nine months in the U.K. doing part time jobs before going back to Libya.

During her M.A. studies, Safa acknowledges experiencing social, cultural, and academic challenges. She could not make friends even within the university setting at Southampton University. However, when she shifted to Cambridge University, she found it easier to make friends there, as their culture was more open to foreigners. Safa narrates how she experienced culture shock when she arrived in the U.K., citing how the natives were judgmental concerning some practices associated with the Muslim religion. However, she also shares how a Libyan male student overstepped her space, appointing himself her keeper in ensuring she maintained Muslim traditions. His behavior corresponds to Libyan cultural expectations, where females do not spend time independently without the company of a male guardian.

Safa eventually made friends in the U.K., which helped her adapt to the culture, as the friendships offered an opportunity to exchange cultural ideas. Safa also cites academic challenges, mainly due to the collaborative classroom culture of the West, which is very different from the Libyan context, which embraces individualized learning with students cramming the content to

pass exams. Safa admits to receiving support from the security office when she faced challenges with one of the Libyan male students. Her colleagues and tutors were supportive, providing her with a conducive environment to adapt to her new setting.

Sukeina

Sukeina is over 45 years of age, married, and a mother of four. She received her Ph.D. in 2016 in Applied Linguistics from a British university. She cites the desire to gain world-class skills as the principal motivation for pursuing education at an international institution. She also attributes her pursuit of international education to its competitiveness and well-equipped institutions. She chose Applied Linguistics because it belongs to language skills, one of her favorite study areas. She is currently a lecturer in the English department at Sabratha University. She generally prefers linguistics and structural aspects such as syntax, morphology, and phonology. Sukeina is aiming for an assistant professorship and is working on publishing three papers. Like the other participants, Sukeina admits to facing academic challenges during her studies abroad, such as a lack of research skills going into the program. Moreover, as she encountered some people who hold antagonistic views concerning Muslims, Sukeina experienced cultural shock, which affected her adjustment to the new environment.

At the same time, Sukeina acknowledges the support offered to international students by Western universities as they adjust to their new environment. She believes that such a support system was critical for her academic success. No approval was forthcoming, however, from Libyan authorities. Sukeina feels that support from the home front is essential to help learners adjust with ease to their new environment

Participants' Transition to a Western University Environment

Motivations to Study Abroad

Several factors emerged from the qualitative analysis, including motivations for pursuing higher education at a Western university and challenges faced during studies, such as language barriers and social, cultural, and academic issues. These factors offered a platform to understand the participants' lived experiences better. The respondents used phrases, quotes, and narratives to explain their experiences and to show how the experiences challenged them. Overall, their feedback was insightful in determining any points of convergence and divergence from the literature review concerning the reasons for pursuing higher education at Western universities. The clusters include the participants' motivation for studying at Western universities, the challenges they encountered, the support systems that were available to them, and some coping strategies.

In my case, as a participant in this research, I chose a Western university for multiple reasons. Firstly, my country (Libya) suffers from a lack of skilled human capital, including shortages of teaching staff at its higher learning institutions, which contributes to an increasing dependence on foreign skilled labor. The Libyan authorities perceive Western education as advanced and better at preparing students for participating in the global arena. By pursuing a Ph.D. at a Western university, I hope to help my country fill human capital deficiencies in the teaching field. In addition, pursuing higher education at a Western university will help me achieve career goals by advancing my knowledge and skills that are critical for global competence. It was a great feeling when I became a graduate student at UVic, knowing I would receive an education from highly qualified professors and could access skills and resources not available in my home country. I believed that the programs offered at Western campuses would equip my colleagues and me with an extensive knowledge database in the teaching field.

Studying at a Western university also provides an avenue for improving English language skills, as Rabab explains: “First things first, because my major is English, and English is not my mother tongue language, and so that is why I wanted to study my master's degree at a foreign university.” Enrolling in a master's degree program in a Western country's institution of higher learning was insightful for Rabab, as it offered her the opportunity to experience the culture while learning new skills first-hand by interacting with native speakers. Professional and academic factors, such as the need to learn competitive and globally recognizable skills, also influenced her decision to attend a Western university.

For Safa, the main motivation beyond prestige and acquiring needed skills and knowledge was the opening up of a new academic and social environment for her. She states: “The university where I attended my course of study provided great guidance and support. Diversity characterized the learning environment, and each course was unique, with each tutor employing a different teaching style.” Such an open social environment influences skills acquisition, molding learners' minds to fit into ever-competitive professional and academic fields (Hunter-Johnson, 2021).

Sukeina highlights the research skills she gained as a Ph.D. student in the U.K. as a main motivating factor to study abroad. She refers to various skills she learned at her Western university, such as speed-reading, effective collaboration with peers, presentation skills, writing a thesis, conducting research, and applying theoretical foundations to shape a particular school of thought in any specific area of study. I and the other participants also acknowledge that we have benefited from the Western universities' collaborative classroom environment, engaging teaching style, and advanced research methods.

An additional motivating factor for studying abroad is prestige, as touched on by Safa. For Libyans, acquiring an international degree is prestigious, and Libyan employers attach a higher value to international than national certification. Moreover, Libyans also deem the families of international graduates to be successful. So while my attending the University of Victoria in Canada as a graduate student gave me many advantages in the scientific and social environment, it also boosted my family's social standing back home. When a Libyan student obtains a degree abroad – especially from Canada, which is well-respected in Libya and the Middle East – the whole family benefits. This is a notion that I share with Sukeina and Rabab.

My parents encouraged me from a young age to pursue an international education early, so I grew up motivated to fulfill their wishes. Due to globalization, I feel the need to acquire an internationally accredited education to fit into the global system, as I believe that such an education will equip me with global consciousness and experience with other cultures appropriate to compete internationally. The availability of the Libyan government programs supporting international students also influenced my decision to choose a Western university.

Lastly, a major motivating factor for all four participants was the complete scholarship programs provided by the Libyan Ministry of Higher Education, as these were highly instrumental in guiding the participants to study abroad. Safa explains: "Since I had my scholarship and the chance to go abroad for postgraduate studies, I was fully funded and had no financial worries of any kind". The main reason for establishing this program is that Libya is pushing its citizens to contribute to the nation's development programs. In so doing, Libya aims to advance its social and economic level through returning students who obtained certificates and various experiences abroad. My enthusiasm only increased to study in a Western country, given the broad-spectrum

support. As Sukeina comments: “I was happy to get there [the U.K.], and I am still happy that I had the chance to go and study a Ph.D. program at a Western university.”

Opportunities

Exposure to Advanced Pedagogy

The decision to join an international university offered vast opportunities to the study participants. Unlike in Libyan universities, this section discusses how the participants benefited from advanced pedagogy, technology, learning resources, and exposure to the English language. Such opportunities were key in making a difference in their personal, academic, and career life.

Exposure to the Western education system is beneficial in diverse ways, something we shared through our discussions and shared viewpoints throughout the interview process. First, the use of feminist interviewing served as a revelation to the individuals who are exposed to it. As the participants affirm, they would never have realized the inadequacies in Libyan teaching styles had they not experienced Western teaching styles first-hand. They now consider Libyan-style teaching to be narrow and teacher-centered rather than open and learner-centered. All of the study participants attest to the benefits of a collaborative learning environment, where they were able to participate in class discussions with peer students coupled with a supportive instructor. They argue that such an environment was beneficial, because it enhanced their critical thinking and problem solving. For me personally, I feel that my new skills and knowledge equip me with global competence, providing me with the confidence to work anywhere around the world. Similar to other participants, I also believe that my new knowledge base will help transform the education

system back in Libya. With Libya experiencing inadequate human capital, the participants will help fill this gap, bringing their Western-style teaching approach with them.

Advanced Technology and Infrastructure

Additionally, the participants illustrated the vast benefits of advanced infrastructure such as technology, teaching materials, equipped libraries, and other learning resources that characterized their respective Western universities. An extraordinary educational infrastructure was one of the most notable and prevalent remarks regarding all participants' experiences at higher educational institutions abroad. The participants found that the universities' state-of-the-art libraries and technological facilities improved their overall learning process and created an environment conducive to study, promoting their better learning and understanding. Such standards have been possible through quality standards set by the developed countries' governments. Universities and colleges in Western countries undergo constant scrutiny to assess and enhance the quality of education (Eaton, 2009), assertions that correspond with the participants' comments. This, combined with continuously updated accreditation, ensures that the institutions have continuous quality assurance and improvements. Western schools offer optimal learning opportunities by providing sufficient support and practical learning. For instance, and as Sukeina explains: "The university… did their best to ensure they availed all necessary learning resources, making us feel part of the system despite language, religion, and financial challenges. They listen to us and… gave us consultations whenever needed". The university had a well-established culture to support international learners.

Technology is an integral part of the culture in Western countries, so it is widely used in the academic sector. This differs from Libyan universities, according to the participants. Computer

literacy is essential in the West and assists in boosting self-confidence, especially for teachers. Sukeina notes: “Smartphones, Internet, things like that affected my ability and way of thinking. It made me confident when somebody asked me how to get something and know something. I know how to advise students.” In a globalized world, technology shapes everyday interactions, and academics are no exception. Thus, I had to adjust my pursuit of higher education at my Western university by ensuring I utilized technology to improve my academic success.

The Internet allows academicians to access many resources from the comfort of their desks. In Libya, the use of technology in the academic world is limited, restricting the learner’s ability to access resources. Such a scenario affects the learner’s knowledge base and limits their global competence. This is because, in a globalized world, new graduates will compete for employment opportunities with others from around the world. Students with technological exposure are more likely to be well versed in knowledge and skills than their counterparts who have gone through an academic system with limited technical exposure. As Rabab mentioned, when she returned to Libya, she could not access a computer and the Internet to facilitate her teaching, referring to the limited technological resources in the Libyan institutions of higher learning.

Exposure to Native English Language Environment

At the personal level, the participants also benefit from English language proficiency when attending a Western university, and such proficiency is a skill necessary for career growth. English is the official language commonly utilized for official interactions in Western countries. In Libya, the official language is Arabic, more specifically, Modern Standard Arabic. Higher learning institutions utilize English during classes in Libya, but most students converse in Arabic outside the classroom, as English is rarely their first language. This is why Arabic speakers who learn

English at school but do not use the language in their daily life struggle to express themselves fluently when they have the opportunity to go to a country where English is the first language. At most Western universities, the inverse is true, as students speak English both in and out of school.

The majority of locals in Western countries speak English as their first or second language. “English is [the language] most spoken in the U.K. other than in the classes,” explains Sukeina. The study participants agreed that conversing with native speakers greatly improved their English knowledge and confidence level. The learning experience would take shape through interactions like class teamwork, clubs, other social associations, and peer-to-peer discussions outside the classroom environment. Such opportunities offer Libyan female students the chance to improve their English skills.

Conversing with native speakers in and around my Western university during the school week improved my grasp of the language, as it is rare to chat in English outside the class in Libya. I had the opportunity to speak English both in class and outside classroom settings. Native English speakers are intimately familiar with the language and can help learners enhance and master it. For instance, they can guide a learner on the correct pronunciation of words, point out grammatical errors in speech quickly, provide a source for natural spoken English, and offer real-life examples of using verb tenses, conjugations, phrases, and expressions.

As mentioned earlier, learning English while attending a Western university was an essential motivator for all the participants in selecting a higher learning institution. Learning English is important, as English is currently the international language for communications. Since Western universities are not always keen on improving English proficiency levels for non-English speakers, exposure to native English speakers helps international students improve their skill

levels. The participants discovered that their university did little to improve their English proficiency, forcing them to employ their initiative to learn the new language elsewhere.

According to Sukeina, “to be a good English speaker, a person needs to spend time with friends and acquaintances who are fluent in English, practise hearing and speaking the language, and learn the culture that goes with it”. Experiencing the culture of a language is an essential factor for deeply understanding its use. Since language often represents the values and beliefs of a culture, learning the culture goes a long way to gaining a more profound comprehension of a language. The study participants engaged the local culture in their respective Western countries, which enhanced their overall language interpretation. For instance, my interaction with other students allowed me to learn better pronunciation and explanation of facts in the English language. Safa and Rabab also shared the same experiences by citing how they had to find ways of learning the new language. English language learning goes beyond rote memorization of words and grammatical rules. Immersing students in a culture enables them to think in that language, so they no longer need to translate words and phrases into their native language to understand them.

Peer learning

The study participants also shared that they could learn better from English speakers when immersed in the culture, creating a more effortless learning experience. Rabab was especially impressed by one of her classmate’s reading techniques. As observed in her answer to an interview question, Rabab argues:

> In Shakespeare class, we had to discuss one play [per] class, and it was a lot for me because, in the culture where I studied, it was like one play a year. I remember that I read every

> word. It's like reading from the heart, and that takes time. And there are many things to do, especially [since] I'm married, and I had a baby at the time, and I have some housework, so I have to manage all of these activities. The Libyan culture that requires women to take all household chores played a central role; thus, I had to juggle between my academic and household responsibilities all alone. So, I remember my friend Jessica… before the class she told me that she didn't read anything ever because she's an actor [and] works in theatre. She did something clever, and I learned from her. For example, she listens to all learners during discussions, striving to factor in all our suggestions. She concludes her opinion, and then she pops it out. Oh my God, I spent almost like 10 hours studying, and she was clear. It was like a shock for me. She did this every class. Oh my God, she's so good at manipulating the academic world and overcoming the instructors' unreasonable expectations.

Immersed in an English-speaking environment, Rabab could grasp the English language faster and, in turn, relay what she learned to students in her home country. This is because Rabab had an opportunity to observe and practise Jessica's approach to overcoming the unreasonable expectations of the instructor. These techniques include improving accents and grammar, speed-reading, and new learning techniques. I will be dwelling in a detailed discussion concerning this issues later in the chapter.

All of the participants in this study chose Western universities to get to know the culture behind the language. They also took courses relating to the English language, ranging from English Literature to Applied Linguistics. As Safa details:

> [My] main reason for choosing the U.K. as a place to pursue an M.A. is that it is the native country of English, so I thought it would be a good opportunity for me to improve my English, to work on my accent, to experience the culture itself, the culture of the language.

Learning English from a Western university is a good career move for people entering the teaching field in Libya, as it gives their credentials a prestigious boost. Additionally, the experience and skills the participants gained abroad enable them to offer advice to students who may not be able to study at Western institutions.

Challenges

Despite the participants' vast opportunities, various challenges characterized their experience at international universities. Such challenges hindered their adjusting to the new environment, affecting their personal and academic life. Some of the challenges they experienced include language barriers and cultural, social, and academic barriers. The section discusses the participants' experiences and how they were able to cope with the challenges.

Language Barriers

Learning a new language in a new environment is extremely challenging. This is because it can be difficult to get language help, even from a friend. For instance, I had such an embarrassing situation when I could not analyze or give the meaning of a word in one of the classes in my first semester. The instructor applied an example game of a word puzzle, and we needed to give the meaning of those words quickly. It was my turn, and I was stuck with no answer. I still can feel

how badly I felt when two women in my class laughed at me and said, ‘Wow, she didn’t know the meaning!’ I was afraid to speak up and needed extra time to answer. Such an instance was discouraging, and I thought my expectations for learning the new language would take longer than I expected. Learning the English language often happens more by default than by design, because not all English speakers are willing to help international students learn new skills. Hence, only those students who are lucky to form friendships with a willing individual make the interaction meaningful in learning English. Although this challenge affects all international students (Almurideef, 2016), I believe Libyan female students in international institutions will likely face significant barriers associated with the stereotypes linked to their Islamic culture.

Another negative experience occurred with one of the international students who was a second language speaker. I approached her to hang out in our free time and have fun, as I found her English fascinating. However, whenever we met, her pessimistic personality was extremely off-putting. Her bad attitude was the reason why I eventually chose not to meet with her again. Therefore, I had to go out of my way and find opportunities such as participating in class and social discussions where I could interact with English first language speakers. Other participants in this study had similar experiences in their quest to find informal language assistance, because they had to be creative to find ways to familiarize themselves with the English language. They found that they learned better when the environment was positive and friendly, rather than negative and critical.

Language/Social, Cultural, and Academic Challenges

There exists a direct relationship between language/social and academic spheres. Pursuing academic life in a new environment characterized by a new language and culture adversely affects

a learner. Therefore, in this section, I strive to explore such interlinkages while referencing the participants' experiences to illustrate the nature of the challenges.

Language and Social Barriers

Language plays a key role in relaying an individual's sense of identity to the rest of the group. Therefore, language barriers, as the literature review argues, make it challenging for individuals to fit in with a group in social and academic areas. The host country students took pride in their English language command and could converse confidently. However, the study participants acknowledged their negative experiences in social contexts due to their limited English language proficiency. For instance, I, the researcher, only very reservedly participated in class discussions or group work assignments for fear of negative judgement by my peers. With the Islamic culture imparting virtues such as observing restraint, I felt it wise to sit back as a woman instead of taking a central role in such discussions.

Another challenge and in some cases a barrier discussed by the participants was leaving their culture and family behind and going to a strange new place. The participants shared both the positive aspects and the struggles they faced, including how they coped with unpleasant feelings such as fear, anger and anxiety. I believe being a female learner from Islamic society, the participants struggles were greater compared to their male counterparts, whether from Libya or elsewhere. My first days were a nightmare, as the majority of my study peers were native Canadians, so I immediately faced challenges with making friends due to language and social barriers such as social expectations by locals and back home. For instance, locals would expect international learners to match their mastery of language and interact with them optimally, while back home, relatives expected the participants to remain careful when interacting with foreigners.

Often, the natives would treat me as a stranger, making it difficult to connect with them. I still remember a day in my first term as a graduate student when I asked my Canadian colleague to help me acquire a Canadian accent. I found that she had incredible intonation every time she engaged in a conversation. Her answer was: "I can't help you at all; you can just help yourself by yourself." I was shocked, as she was a second language teacher for international students, working with one of the Canadian institutions. I smiled at her, not showing my shock at her response. One of my international classmates then kindly offered to hang out with me.

Safa had a similar experience in that she expected friendly cooperation and instead was met with coolness and distancing. She explains: "We would find ourselves as students from different races in a group comprising host country students. You know, I found it difficult… I couldn't make bonds with them because we lacked English language proficiency, and there was no rapport." These experiences of feeling like an 'outsider' due to language and social challenges heightened the feeling of loneliness and separation from their loved ones, as expressed by the participants.

Cultural Barriers

There were also significant cultural differences between Western and Libyan cultures, with culture shock arising in the participants when they first encountered Western lifestyles and eating/cooking habits. This was very stressful for the Libyan women, who want people to appreciate them, like any other individual. For instance, they found that wearing a veil brought negative responses, with the host students always asking questions around the practice and others making negative comments concerning it. For example, during a class discussion, Rabab received negative expressions from one of her classmates who cited she would never travel by plane for

fear of the Al-Qaida. As Rabab puts it: “I was wearing a hijab, and she knew I am a Muslim. So, her message was criticizing me and attacking me with words affected me a lot.”

One day, I experienced challenges during interactions involving a food exchange with my classmates. Two instructors invited us to prepare and bring food to share with colleagues in class. I was happy to do this, but unfortunately, one of my classmates refused to eat my food, which caused me some stress at the time. Our culture embraces sharing, particularly during special occasions such as Ramadan and Eid. However, some of my international colleagues preferred remaining independent and not taking food prepared by their colleagues, mainly because they had reservations about the cooking method, which involves using ingredients that are different from each culture. Unlike my hesitant colleagues, I was delighted to try all the other flavors, mainly because our Libyan culture emphasizes a woman place in the kitchen.

Sukeina had different cultural experiences. According to her: “The mentalities of people, their currency differences (which I had to learn [in order] to deal with shopkeepers). It is unique because that time back in Libya, she was used to the Libyan Dinar (Cash) without integrated use of plastic money. It's something like a dream that came true to me.” Sukeina argues the situation is ideal in that the systems are set to operate in a certain way, so different from what she experienced in Libya. I believe the differences in Canadian and British cultures played a significant role in influencing interactions with natives. This was a challenge, because the participants’ lack of knowledge of maneuvering within the system made it difficult for them to facilitate their everyday life in the public sphere. For instance, Sukeina's difficulties with the new environment made her shopping experience a challenge because she lacked knowledge on how to use her credit card.

Rabab also misunderstood how to use her credit card for the first months she was living in the USA. She explains:

> I remember when we were at a gas station, we used our credit cards. Whenever I checked my account, [the record of the payment] was not there; it's not there; it's not there! So, I thought maybe there is something wrong, or they just have it, and it's not mentioned in my account list. One night, someone knocked at my door, and it was like a person from the gas station. He said, you had some gas for your car 4 times, and you didn't pay. My husband and I went there together, and we showed them that we used this card to pay. It wasn't the right way to use it. We did something wrong, I don't know. It wasn't only for four times. Oh my gosh, it was for like months.

It was an innocent mistake, and from it she learned the correct way of making payments using her credit card.

Safa, however, had a different kind of cultural shock experience when she first arrived. She thought that she was leaving Libya and going to a modern city, but she found herself in a city characterized by ancient buildings, which was below her expectations. She explains:

> I had kind of a culture shock. I had completely different expectations and completely different visions in mind. I thought the U.K. would be kind of those dream countries with modern Western society… from the airport immediately to Cambridge! I thought, OK, this is gloomy, and it wasn't inspiring as a start, but then I was getting after that, and I got used to it and started to fall in love with it.

All the participants agree that the new environment was a challenge to maneuver, although the degree of difficulties differed. This explains their differences in adjusting to the new environment, where some like Safa, Sukeina, and Rabab had only minimal hurdles in their adjustment journey. The fact that the participants were never exposed to orientation before transiting to the new culture explains why their never internalized what they were to face in the new cultural environment, contributing to heightened cultural shock.

Academic Barriers

The education system in my Western university was completely different from that of my home country, so I had to familiarize myself with the new system. Libyan pedagogy is teacher-oriented, giving learners little to no opportunity to interact with the instructor. However, the Western university approach expects students to shape their learning process, encouraging robust interaction between the learner and the instructor amidst a collaborative learning environment. All the other participants cited similar challenges. For instance, Safa narrates how they were required to discuss a book critically in one class, unlike in Libya, where they would break it down into smaller sections and distribute the book across an entire year. This challenge in reading volume presented a new opportunity to internalize an advanced teaching pedagogy that all participants would use to influence teaching styles back in Libya.

Also, I had to learn and adopt the new academic culture, the different teaching strategies, and coping with faculty and colleagues. For instance, I had to adopt to a collaborative classroom environment and active participation through asking questions to the instructor during lessons. My different worldview, writing styles, and culturally driven logical thinking where women are not expected to participate in group work with men, constrained my optimal academic performance in

my first days at UVic. For instance, I found it a challenge to join discussion groups where male students participated or even ask the instructor any questions.

Furthermore, the Western education system requires critical thinking and standard presentation of ideas into writing, which I found challenging, given my educational background that emphasizes reading and absorbing information for the sole purpose of passing exams. Abstract thinking, which allows for different perspectives and ideas to thrive, enriches a classroom environment (Foo, 2019). Therefore, the Western education system, which creates an environment conducive to student engagement in discussions, refines abstract thinking through collaboration with peers and active participation in class. This process prompted me to consult closely with my peers and instructors, who supported me in adjusting to the classroom environment.

While ultimately beneficial, such challenges initially exposed me to many stressful moments. I found that most instructors have high expectations of everyone concerning classroom participation and academic work performance and sometimes, but I performed relatively poorly under the (for me) new learning environment. I remember that my Canadian classmates also found one of the classes as stressful as I did, as the instructor had very high expectations of us and the topics were very complex.

During my first semester in Canada, I took a class when I knew almost nothing about the Canadian education system. This was a challenge, as I had to familiarize myself with the system, which took time. It was also disadvantageous, because I had to match the system set standards like natives who were already familiar with the learning system. To deal with our difficulties, all the students in the class held a weekly discussion group to discuss the topics we had problems with. Working in a group can present other problems, as Safa explains:

> Working with other classmates is one of the academic challenges, because the way we do work back home is all individual. But then, in the U.K., sometimes I have to work with the other students, like doing work in groups. So, as a start, I wasn't used to this. I had to work on myself. I had to learn that I have to be more patient to learn the new ways of doing things in classroom environment, you know, I was kind of independent in everything.

Speaking in front of the class presented another considerable challenge. I found it incredibly stressful to speak in front of an English native instructor and Canadian classmates for the first time, mainly due to my English language limitations and lack of experience in active class participation. My second time was better; it was with a different class, and I was more comfortable after learning that this was the norm in Canadian learning settings. Having the class focus on me, the student, was completely contrary to my experience in the Libyan teaching system. The Libyan system is completely teacher-centred, while the Western one is more student-centered. In Libya, my role as a student was to receive information and memorize the material. However, the Western university classroom environment requires equal participation, with the instructor providing all learners the opportunity to contribute to the learning experience. Although I found it strange and uncomfortable, my interaction with peers offered me a chance to learn and adapt to this new classroom culture.

Most of the lecturers are cooperative and willing to support international students in their weak academic areas, although there were a few isolated cases of instructors with a poor attitude directed at foreign learners. For instance, at one point, I understood that my previous ex-supervisor was not helping me enough. I had serious academic problems, as I was not able to understand even the main core of my research question. I requested a co-supervisor to help me get the right direction

and guide me to an in-depth understanding of my research interest, but my ex-supervisor refused to work with someone else. I was shocked at this response, as I did not have enough experience to conduct high-level research work on my own. This forced me to request my department to assign me another supervisor who was able to guide me through my research work. Such experiences can demotivate international students' pursuit of academic excellence. Qualified professors in Western universities can shape learning processes, achievements, and later student life if they are motivated. However, if assigned to a professor who is unwilling to assist, the experience adversely affects the learner's academic life both short- and long-term.

Recent research reveals an academic barrier in the rote learning technique that characterizes the Libyan education system (memorizing technique based on repetition), showing that rote learning and academic achievement are inversely related (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2017). The present research unveils women's lower educational attainment, as it highlights gaps in the educational system of developing nations and provides a platform to use the positive lessons from developed countries to advance women's learning experiences. The pedagogical approaches and poor class environment that characterize the Libyan education system are an obstacle to women intending to pursue higher education in Western universities. The disconnect between the two education systems requires extra effort for students to fill the gaps. This is a source of anxiety for learners because the new learning environment, which is different from the Libyan one, exposes them to mental strain. The participants in this study illustrate this issue through their lived experiences. For example, and as Safa puts it: "I found it really challenging… being in a collaborative classroom working with other students…. Being an autonomous learner was a nightmare for me… you know the way we were taught back in Libya where teachers only deliver information."

Higher education in the Western world significantly contrasts with higher education in developing countries such as Libya concerning lower educational attainment and dropout rates for women. According to McClendon et al. (2018), women in Muslim countries attain lower levels of education in comparison to their male counterparts. This lower educational attainment stems from preconceived negative notions about education for girls and the lack of widespread awareness about the importance of education. Such an analogy was evident in the participants' narratives. For instance, Safa argues that “coming from an Arab culture, woman are always well-supported by male partners. When I say partner, it could be a husband, it could be father, it could be brother. They feel we always needed someone to lead us”. This culture and way of thinking extends to the education system. Therefore, the education system in the Libyan context emphasizes the male child as the lead and gives women the notion that even if they work hard, they still require a man to lead the way.

The academic standards in accredited Western universities adhere to specific teaching standards, which posed challenges to some participants. For example, I found the skills I learned in Libya were only very basic; hence, they could not optimally help me complete research work successfully, requiring me to put in extra effort and learn such skills at an advanced level. Safa alludes to experiencing academic challenges where she had to adjust her approach to reading to suit the demands of the new learning environment while embracing collaboration in class discussions, something unfamiliar to her at home. Sukeina also acknowledges that her basic research skills did not match British university standards, requiring her to consult widely with instructors and colleagues to fit into the new system.

Libyan universities' research level is theory-based, resulting in the participants' academic shock upon joining Western universities. There is also a heavy emphasis on digital use in Western universities, which differs from Libyan universities. Western instructors encourage using online tools to learn and collaborate, unlike in the Libyan context, where physical learning with the teacher standing before the class is routine. Such differences are mainly due to a lack of technological resources and trained staff, and ill-equipped libraries. Conversely, students at Western universities learn how to conduct in-depth research, which is highly demanding.

Adjusting to this advanced level of study required the participants to make a complete shift regarding research. According to Sukeina:

> I had to learn the basic skills for doing research, and it was tiring and time-demanding and sort of nerve-killing, I can say, at the beginning because I had to do some work and I didn't know how to do it. So, you can say I had an academic shock at the beginning. I had to consult with the instructor and my colleagues to learn the new research skills.

She also emphasizes how she learned to access a broad knowledge base during research by consulting different resources, primarily through the Internet. These new skills she has since put to work for her and others back home in Libya. As she puts it:

> It made me confident when somebody [in Libya] asked me how to get something… how to know something. I know I know how to advise students… I know how to even advise my colleagues sometimes, those who didn't have the chance to go abroad.

A notable difference in the academic culture between Libya and the West emerged through the participants' discussions on the existence of night classes in Western institutions. In

Libyan universities, there are only morning-to-noon classes. The night classes provided time for the participants to take care of their household during the day and then attend classes in the evening. This was especially convenient for the participants who are also mothers (Rabab and I). As Rabab explained:

> I had night classes starting at 5 and ending at 9. Here in Libya, it's different: we go to morning classes, like at noon it's all done. And for me, I have all day at home studying, doing some housework, taking care of my baby, then at night I go to university. So, this is something different, but I like it actually.

Additionally, Rabab expressed that Saturday is an "off" day in the United States, while in Libya it is a working day. Rabab found the off day to be helpful, because it gave her time to complete most of her household chores with also providing her with the opportunity to concentrate on her academic work. This example illustrates how gender expectations constrain women's engagement in academic and/or career progress. Rabab expressed that the American students thought it was weird for them to go to class on a Saturday: "It was not normal for me and some of my classmates." The adjustment to a "day off" on Saturday proved beneficial for us as international students studying abroad, because it offered us an opportunity to finish some of the more demanding house chores and prepare for the week ahead.

The participants also encountered many other positive aspects of cultural differences. According to Sukeina, the locals treated her very nicely when she was pregnant. They made her feel proud to be pregnant. In her words: "They were too nice to me just being a human being who [is having] a baby." The locals offered assistance, created a comfortable atmosphere, and put her on a pedestal. Commuters gave her a seat on the bus, even though the seats were first-come, first-

served. This courtesy is different from what the participant was accustomed to in Libya, giving her a positive experience of Western culture, which helped reduce her culture shock.

Unlike Libya, Western universities implement a collaborative classroom. The students work together and share knowledge as part of the learning process. A collaborative classroom environment improves decision-making and thinking skills and boosts self-confidence. This is because it builds a learner's ability to express themselves and expound their ideas, enabling them to engage in meaningful conversations, even in their career life. The primary aim is to ensure that all learners can actively participate in class (Echeverría, 2011). In Libya, female and male students study independently, since the culture emphasizes respecting personal space, particularly between genders. This practice in Libya only reinforces patriarchal ideology and religious beliefs, giving the notion that men and women are different and for respect to thrive, they must limit their interactions. This practice is detrimental, however, because it restricts meaningful interactions that would enhance exchange of ideas while promoting gender equality.

The participants admitted feeling culture shock when they discovered that most learning in their classes would be group work or a collaborative effort. The collaborative classroom environment is beneficial, because it sidesteps the restrictions they previously experienced in Libya. These restrictions reinforce gender inequality by emphasizing learning that is heavily autonomous. Libyan women work, study, and conduct their projects independently. Even so, Safa states: "I found it challenging at the start in a collaborative classroom working with other students." Additionally, Safa argues that the Libyan education system focused on limited reading, which added another layer of academic challenges to her studies at a Western university, as she had to spend more time reading at the library. Learning in Western universities is much more intensive

than in Libyan universities, as it emphasizes reading and promotes consulting many literature sources.

I had almost the same experience as Safa concerning research issues. At the beginning of my journey, I had to overcome English language barriers. My lack of English language proficiency made it challenging to articulate my points during presentations and conversations, hindering my optimal academic performance. I remember, during the first few times we had group work, I was more a spectator due to my lack of confidence. I would watch my peers discuss a topic, each giving out their ideas. They were supportive and encouraged me to be active. Although it took time for me to adjust, I eventually did and found such interactions highly beneficial.

Safa had similar issues initially with regard to collaborative learning:

> I found it really challenging at the start being in a collaborative classroom working with other students. Being an autonomous learner was a nightmare for me, as you know the way we were taught (we are used to having information delivered from teachers). But then suddenly I find myself an important part in the educational program… it was all about me as a learner. So, I was the one who should initiate. I was the one who should ask questions. I was the one who should seek information. So, it was more about making me an autonomous and independent learner. I was not really used to this at the start, so it was very challenging.

To deal with language issues, I consulted with my ex-supervisor, who advised me to enroll in a class called “Writing as Research”. My intention in taking this class was to upgrade my research skills, such as being critical in my writing and learning how to cite credible academic

sources. The knowledge and skills I attained in this course provided a sound background that thrust me into the Western-style academic world with confidence. By building on my basic skills, my thinking and research writing skills has expanded enormously. The class also helped me connect with friends and collaborate with others. In my Ph.D. program, I worked closely with my instructor and colleagues by holding discussions on different topics and practicing "free writing" (I was incredibly good at storytelling and critical writing style), which was a factor of thorough practice motivated by the need to catch up with the demands of the new learning environment. This was helpful in mastering new avenues for participating in teamwork and approaching research work for fitting into the system. My interactions with the class and instructor allowed me to share stories involving cultural differences and share food. We exchanged stories concerning our experiences, reminding us how far we have come.

An unexpected difference between Libya and the West is that the locals generally focused on individual activities in Western countries, particularly in the urban centers, where people are busy pursuing economic activities. In a Muslim country such as Libya, most people are concerned about and involved in other people's affairs, even when they are not directly affected. However, although the natives in the Western universities are not particularly curious about other people's lives, they are still empathetic. As Rabab explains:

> And I remember one thing… a social specialist in the US medical facility visited me once a week at home just to check what's going on there, because my eldest son went to the hospital for four days, so she has to come and visit me and see how things go. [She wanted to check] like am I taking care with my baby well?... Her colleague, the physician, she

> comes and checks my son's health, his body, his movements, so it was all OK. It's like a routine, like from the hospital.

I found this cultural trait to be pervasive in Western culture. Some people were willing to intervene if one had issues in life. Rabab finds the social worker and the physician very supportive during her days in the hospital when her son was admitted. Such occurrence is rare in Libya, as Sukeina remarks: "It's hard to talk to the Arabian or Libyan people, because in some situations, they are not sympathetic or they are not in the same situation." The study participants expressed their favorable experiences with locals in their respective Western countries whenever they had a rough patch; this positively influenced their ability to adjust to their new environment.

This cultural norm of being helpful extended to the Western universities that the participants in this research attended. The institutions generously offered help and support to foreign Muslim students, such as with social and academic support programs. For instance, the university administration where each participant studied made an effort to curate programs that helped the students feel at home. "The university invited students to cafeterias to chat about academic or other challenges or anything that we wanted to talk about," said Safa. The students always found someone willing to help offset challenges that they may face. The schools also helped by creating informal settings, such as exchanging food with peers and discussing different cultural aspects, encouraging the students to chat freely about their experiences, studies, challenges, and sometimes their children and families. For example, our instructor introduced how we could prepare and develop different foods to share with colleagues in class. Safa had a personal tutor and supervisor who provided additional support in scheduling and study plans. These formal and informal interventions reveal a culture of genuine concern for the students. On many occasions, I

received support from campus resources and services, such as how to use the library (both the online and physical one), orienting international students on what to expect, and offers to seek assistance in case of difficulties.

Gendered Social Constructs Hindering Academic Pursuits of Libyan Women

Gendered roles in Libya refer to the strict demarcation of how one is to behave following their biological sex, i.e., the physical body they were born with (Leget et al., 2019). Dabby and Poore (2007) posit that gendered roles are the cultural beliefs that define the gender expectations for men and women reinforced over time across institutional, familial, and social/religious structures. In most cases, these roles stifle the development of women and reduce their opportunities in the outside world, since women are required to perform more household work, like cooking, washing dishes and clothes, attending to children and husband's needs, all while remaining submissive to patriarchal authority. Cultural barriers to gender-diverse roles are a persistent issue in the Libyan context. For example, because Libya is a highly patriarchal society, it imposes increasing restrictions on women's rights that perpetuate discrimination toward women in education, family law, and employment. This effect results in a gender gap, especially within Muslim countries such as Libya, where most women are less educated than their male counterparts. As Rabab puts it:

> [I]n Libya, our culture is, like, women [are] the ones who stay at home. Like, for most Libyans, not all of them. But even if she's a professional, working as a teacher or a banker or in an office, etc., she has a limited time, like, one hour to two hours. To evaluate what's going on now, you just go to the place where you work, sign, and then go back home.

Thus, the persistence of gendered roles in Libya causes a strain on women seeking higher education as well as on those seeking employment, since they also need to think about their household duties.

As a Libyan woman studying at a Canadian institution, I sometimes find it challenging to focus on my studies. Because I am the only female in my family here, I need to take care of my child and do all the housework, sometimes with my husband's help. I was fortunate that my husband helped with the cooking and laundry during the first nine months of my program when I took my courses. Then everything became more difficult, because my husband became more engaged in employment. In non-Muslim countries, more women can pursue careers and education and hire caretakers to take charge of household activities (McManus, 2001). Rabab also had a similar experience, as she narrates that she had to use her Saturdays to do her house chores because she was fully engaged in academic work the rest of the weekdays. As she puts it, her challenges as a mother exacerbated her academic challenges: "There are many things to do, especially [since] I'm married, and I had a baby at the time, and I have some housework, so I have to manage the house activities and still meet my academic demands."

Gendered roles steer students toward specific expectations, behaviour, and attitudes. Schools, especially at the lower level, play a pivotal role in the socialization of learners and perpetuating predefined norms (Havighurst & Davis, 1943). In Libya, societal norms prod women away from personal, educational, and career goals. However, individuals with educated parents, such as the research participants, are lucky to gain family support to pursue education. As evidenced by the participants, those who chose to go to school experienced heavy burdens, such as balancing social expectations while performing household chores and academic pursuits. Always at the back of their mind, they feel they must prioritize family and household duties over

their education. These expectations create a wider gender gap in education, as males can pursue education at an advanced level. Gender-specific expectations persist due to the cultural belief that a woman's place is in the home, so there is no need for them to pursue higher education.

Consequently, the participants expressed challenges as they strove to find a balance between gendered roles in the house such as raising children and attending university classes. They had to find a way to balance home life and work life, which became taxing for them after a while. Moreover, Western university courses are more intense than Libyan university courses. As Rabab mentioned, the class analyzed whole plays in a single day in the West. In contrast, the class analyzed one play per semester in Libya, along with differences in the teaching approaches that characterize each system (i.e., learner-focused, collaborative teaching style in the West and teacher-focused, independent teaching style in Libya). Such differences become a factor in academic expectations. Western universities tend to employ extensive reading to equip learners with a diverse knowledge base within a particular field, building their critical thinking skills, whereas Libyan universities traditionally have the instructor play a central role in knowledge dissemination.

The Libyan culture is patriarchal, which translates into a society that expects women to attend to all the household chores while the male partner plays the provider role. Although some educated male partners will support their wives to pursue higher education, their participation in household chores is limited, leaving the wife to struggle with both academic work and household demands, such as cooking, washing dishes, and taking care of the husband and children. This is evident in my earlier narration, where I cite the case of a colleague who attended a general English course with me, but who then had to discontinue her studies due to pressures associated with her

inability to balance her academic work and household chores: “She began her university studies under many pressures. The most important was her husband’s pressure demanding care of their children and the house duties.” This has implications for this study because it demonstrates some of the challenges female Libyan students have to undergo to pursue their higher learning education goals abroad.

Regarding gendered roles, the culture in Western countries is significantly different from that in Libya. Although Western nations have yet to achieve full-blown gender equality, women enjoy more independence than in Muslim countries such as Libya, where mainstream society does not accept the pursuit of women's equality. According to Javidani (2003), Libyan women who assume traditional home roles of mother, wife, and homemaker struggle to balance their responsibilities with non-traditional home roles, such as being college students. According to Javidani, only a few who overcome such tensions manage to pursue higher education. Such conflicts elicit stress and self-questioning, forcing the women to revert to traditional gender roles. As a result, many women feel compelled to forego education. I know one Libyan female student (not one of the study participants) who failed to complete her Ph.D. program due to her husband’s refusal to help with childcare and housework duties. Despite the challenges that gendered roles place on education, some Libyan women still press on, as revealed by the achievements of the participants. The participants cite motivational aspects such as the need to achieve skills that are prerequisites for professional competence in a global context, as well as the prestige that comes with a Western degree, better pedagogy style in Western universities, and learning English within native cultural settings.

An intersection between gendered roles and education exists, as it defines the participation level of both genders towards activities performed outside the household, such as employment and pursuing higher education. Caner et al. (2016) examined a gender gap in educational attainment and achievement, which revealed a pervasive cultural bias against education for girls and women, particularly in conservative societies such as Libya. The participants expressed increased pressure and judgment from home, where their families and friends in Libya would regularly call requiring an explanation about whether they still observed Islamic teachings, dressing, and acting 'appropriately.' Such incidences impose psychological trauma on students and reduce their academic performance. Safa shared that she began to feel uncomfortable passing her classes successfully after a Libyan male student and friends constantly criticized her intentions of moving abroad for higher education. Safa explains:

> I had lots of criticisms, and even Libyans (I mean students living and studying there) were always stalking me. This was one of the bad experiences of being on my own in the U.K. I remember this has affected me even psychologically, my abilities, and my program study. The only way to deal with this challenge was to reduce contact with the Libyan man who constantly criticized me.

In most cases, persistent stereotypes regarding gender roles affect the general attitude towards Libyan women's educational competence. The participants revealed that pursuing higher education abroad was difficult since most of them were married and did not want to undermine the role of their Libyan male partners. As English learners in a foreign country, the women had to portray a more dominant role, as they were the ones who had to communicate with others during the day-to-day activities and be away from the household for classes, even during the night in some

cases. Most male partners in this scenario feel undermined, as it is opposed to the cultural norm of men taking on the more dominant role. Some participants cited examples of other female students who had to return to Libya due to their husbands' opposition to their more active participation in academics than in the house chores. As Rabab puts it:

> Their husbands didn't accept the idea that the wife spends many hours outside home and the husband is at home with children. He regards it as an insult… to his dignity. [So] they went back home. This happens to many female students.

Unfortunately, many Libyan males still feel threatened when women practice and challenge traditional gender roles.

Educational attainment for women in the Muslim world is a hurdle, especially for higher education. Libyan cultural teachings expect women in their teens and early twenties to start a family and focus on domestic duties instead of academic affairs. According to McClendon (2018), data gathered from 151 countries show that Muslim women are the least educated of women in other religious groups. Safa is a good example of a Muslim woman who had to move abroad to pursue higher education on her own. She received criticism for choosing to pursue higher education, because it was a form of independence for a woman. Many people back home were scornful of her ambitions, causing her grief. However, she was determined to pursue her academic dreams, which she perceived were critical in equipping her with the necessary skills to advance her career life and contribute to changing the destiny of Libya.

According to Libyan customs and traditions, most people from Libya are unsupportive towards single women going abroad, especially alone, to pursue higher learning. The lack of

support creates a barrier, making most women afraid to seek scholarships and other higher education opportunities (Lin, 2016). This situation is unfortunate, because attaining higher education in a developed country benefits not only Muslim women, but Muslim society as a whole in the long run. It strengthens the economy because female participation contributes positively by offering skilled human capital and potentially reducing inequality.

Education serves as a vehicle to improve the social, political, and economic life of any democratic society (Kim et al., 2018). Consequently, education plays the role of a pathway towards women's empowerment and gender equality. Safa confided that she gained a higher level of independence from her experience studying abroad away from family. Within Libyan society, the men (i.e., husbands, fathers or brothers) take responsibility for providing and caring for their family's needs, while the women take on a more submissive role in family affairs. The pursuit of education provides women with the skills to depend on themselves, develop crucial life skills, and promote general development for society. For instance, the pursuit of higher education equips women with the prerequisite skills to gain entry and compete at the same level as men at a professional level. In this way, both men and women obtain the independence necessary to make informed decisions concerning family and career life.

Safa also mentioned the element of feminism as she experienced it first-hand in the West: “Feminism to me is that women can be strong and independent. They don’t really need to rely on a man.” The participants' notions of feminism shifted after their exposure to the different cultures regarding gender issues in Western universities. Cultural gender issues are a sensitive topic in Libya, since the underpinnings go against religion and the Muslim way of life where women must be submissive before men. Upholding feminism amongst peers and students can result in

arguments and contentious debates. Subsequently, the participants generally avoid conversations surrounding gender issues when they are back in their home country. The women raising such topics receive scorn and criticism for introducing foreign ideals in a Muslim society, and the reigning cultural expectations silence them. As Sukeina explains: "It is hard to face the society as a whole, since Libya is an Arab country and… always gives priority to the males, which I hate." The participants acknowledge the backward view of gender issues in Libya, but cannot freely express these sentiments at home in Libya, as people would comment that accepting a different form of culture, such as feminism, is equivalent to disobeying Muslim teachings.

Religion and Racism

A primary concern for Muslim students in Western universities is the need for accommodations that enable them to perform or exercise their religious practices. Other considerations include dietary restrictions, religious holidays, religious behaviour, and clothing. Female Muslim students often encounter men's stares in a Western context due to their practice of wearing a veil. Sukeina remembers: "I had that feeling that most of the locals in Western context do not like Muslims, and they look at Muslim females scornfully in a way that they surrendered to the demands of men, and I didn't like that". This indicates the differences the participants noted between the cultures of Libya and Western nations, with the former expecting women to remain submissive. Muslim cultural expectations and values derive from a religion based on patriarchal thinking that allows men to control their women and children, and does not allow them to treat women as independent human beings. Unfortunately, many Muslin men misunderstand the meaning of 'patriarchal' and tend to dominate the marriage context, leaving women to do domestic chores. This was evident during the interviews, where the participants expressed their concerns

about their men leaving them to attend to most of the domestic work on top of their academic work.

Libyan students who study abroad fall into the ‘people of colour’ category, which is a creation of White supremacist ideals (Sugino, 2022). The white supremacy ideals perceive other cultures as less civilized, an analogy that supports them to advance their interests. As a result, they often experience racism. All of the study participants experienced racism during their time at Western universities. For instance, as Rabab puts it: “It's like they called it racism, yeah, so in our class we discussed that...” Rabab experiences racism in the class when a peer learner references al-Qaida which was intentional move to criticize Islamic faith. This was helpful because it promoted diversity, ensuring students respected each other’s ideas. Being a Muslim woman studying in a non-Muslim community is a hard task socially, culturally, and academically. It is uncomfortable when others judge you according to your look or beliefs. This is evident from the above quote by Rabab, who experienced judgmental assertions from her classmate.

I face this issue in Canada, both on- and off-campus. I still remember the morning when my two Libyan female friends went for a stroll, enjoying our new healthy lifestyle. We walked along the road, talking and laughing, when suddenly a woman interrupted us, saying: “Go back to your home. This is not your place.” My friends were afraid, but I said to her: “Do you know who we are or are you just saying that because of our hijab. We are here in Canada, the place of peace that is accepting of others, and if you continue, I will call the police.” The individual disappeared following my confident reproach. My approach demonstrated the level of independence that I had developed in the new environment. I felt safe for being able to command my space in a foreign

land where some individuals were unwelcoming. From that point, I moved around without fear, which in turn positively impacted my academic performance.

Bias or discrimination towards Muslim students due to their religious and cultural practices negatively affects educational performance and achievement. A link exists between academic performance and religious and cultural prejudices and social pressure drawn from a specific culture such as the Libyan culture (Akanwa, 2015). The participants expressed social pressure from their families and other Libyan students who did not agree with a female moving abroad to study. In Islam, it is generally frowned upon when women, especially single women, move to another country on their own, even for educational purposes. "I faced peer pressure from the people back home from me being a female student studying on my own without Mahram," said Safa. Mahram in Islam means the safe companion of an adult male family member. They could be a father, brother, or a husband. It was not easy for people in Muslim society to digest the idea of her traveling alone. People back in Libya did not stop phoning her and asking, for example, to confirm whether she was wearing a hijab. Safa eventually decided to ignore and then break contact with people she knew from Libya to avoid the constant criticism. This decision, unfortunately, negatively impacted her in the beginning, since she lost her social connection with some people she felt were her support system.

Islam teaches Muslim women to place marriage and motherhood as their highest priorities. Since most participants were married and had more than one child, they had to balance their home and work life. One of the participants took on a more independent role in one instance, deviating from religious dictates. Safa did her M.A. when she was still single: “For me as a young girl, going abroad [meant] being completely independent and enjoying freedom for the first time,” she

confided. In most cases, women receive life-long support from the men in their lives. The males could be their fathers, husbands, brothers, or uncles. Western universities equip Muslim students with the skills and expertise to fend for themselves without needing a male counterpart, which is different from the Islamic religion. However, Muslim men often look down on Muslim women who display this confidence and ability, as it makes them feel insecure. Part of the reason for the men's insecurity is they believe independent women will not be observing Islamic and cultural teachings, which they would be under a man's command. This sense of insecurity constantly causes friction between women and their male counterparts.

I began to develop my sense of independence by attending a Western university and by exposure to the Western lifestyle. I have gained a strong sense of independence through my experience dealing with strong Western independent women who can achieve their goals even if they are single women or single mothers. I believe in psychological and personal liberation as long as it does not conflict with my religion and beliefs. However, tension exist because my Islamic culture does not advocate psychological and personal liberation, mainly so for women. Therefore, I am now motivated and empowered to take control of my destiny. To do so, I will have to fight against the persistent patriarchal system that characterizes my Libyan society. I have come to believe that no one can control me or take away my freedom as a woman as I work for a better future for my family and myself. I will discuss this second transition in detail in the next chapter.

Feminist Insights

Feminism is a movement that advocates for women's rights and equality across the sexes. This movement is associated with fewer gendered roles and values and is a liberal approach to gender (Ogletree & Padilla, 2019). The modern feminism advocates for women freedom across all

spheres for life, entailing academic and economic realms, an approach that promotes independence. The feminist approach is crucial in challenging the Islamic and Libyan cultural elements that undermine women's participation in education and economic activities. The Islamic religion contains theological interpretations that focus on males being superior, similar to other religions such as Buddhism. Qs 4:34 asserts the idea that husbands are degree above their wives:

> Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard.

Whereas Qs 2:228 explains how men are superior to women "…The women must behave towards their men in like manner as their husbands should behave toward them … but the men must have superiority over them." These interpretations create a foundation for sexism to occur if people misunderstood the essential meaning of the text. Such sexism is pervasive within social, political, and educational realms in Libya.

Safa has also embraced the freedom offered by Western perspective of women's rights and equality to men: "After I finished my studies, I had the feminism perspective in my mind when looking at different gender issues," she admits. This was an important approach for Safa, because it offered feminist-inspired insights necessary for shaping her future pursuit in academics. Studying at a Western university unveiled the beneficial nature of independence for Muslim women. The participants' views on feminism changed towards a more positive light. Such exposure was instrumental because it enhanced their understanding concerning constraining aspect of the Islamic culture that limits women ability to exercise independence. They believed that women can also be strongly independent and do not need to rely on a man for economic support

and decision making. A woman can have her own life and her own lifestyle. Sukeina affirms: “My view towards feminism and independence has grown stronger.” She shows this strength through her words:

> I also started to be more confident not just as a teacher, but as a person in society. I began to be stronger emotionally and intellectually. I started not to care about people’s criticism of me. This was new for me, and I found that it was beneficial overall. It made me feel better, it made me live better, and it made me a better teacher.

Islamophobia

All of the study participants experienced Islamophobia, which refers to the hatred or discrimination against Muslim individuals who practice Islam (Watt, 2011). In this instance, some individuals hold negative perspectives about Muslims, forming the basis of this discrimination. Islamophobia manifests itself in meaningful political and social spaces and can perpetuate consciously or unconsciously (Martín-Muñoz, 2010). This discrimination level challenges Islamic students who move abroad to pursue higher education. The obstacles and disadvantages range from viewing all Muslim people as terrorists, using hate speech, and making derogative remarks towards women who wear the hijab or niqab, leading to a blatant disrespect for the Islamic religion.

People can utilize education to counter Islamophobia, but Muslim students experience discrimination in most classrooms. Such an analogy was evident in narrations from the research participants. In contrast, in Rabab’s case, a student would use racial slurs directed at the Muslim community and target Rabab during a teamwork activity. As Rabab puts it:

> Yeah, so it was like a shock for me when the mean lady replied ‘because of those Muslims they ruined America and they killed many people.’ Actually, I was wearing a hijab and she knew that I am Muslim. So, her message is like she's criticizing me and attacking me with words, which affected me a lot.

Educators possess the platform to develop a critical understanding of Islam and the phobia against it. According to Mir and Sarroub (2019), Islamophobia is more prevalent in higher education institutions, particularly in the Western world, as these institutions attract students from Islamic cultural backgrounds. Thus, students from non-native backgrounds, such as learners from Islamic nations like Libya, face discrimination. Discrimination against Muslims in higher educational institutions points towards inadequate knowledge about Islam and generalization promoted consistently through the media. Targeted by racist individuals such as peer learners and instructors, Muslim students have a more challenging time navigating the school system, since some people treat Muslims significantly differently than students from other religions. The societal hostility towards Muslim students who pursue degrees in Western universities affects the student negatively, even demotivating some learners from wanting to study abroad.

All four of the study participants experienced direct discrimination from individuals in their host Western country. During an interview session as part of the project, an interviewee openly told Rabab that she does not like to fly when traveling because she is afraid of terrorist attacks and Muslims. The interviewee commented very scornfully towards Rabab as a Muslim student. This individual had an inherent bias towards all Muslims due to isolated events in the country. This aspect ties in with research that reveals that more than 50% of Muslims in America have found it challenging to be a Muslim since the 9/11 attacks (Pew Research Center, 2011). Muslim students,

specifically female students, face criticism and hate based on their religion. This was evident from my participants' narrations, who would face criticism due to the practice of wearing a hijab. As Rabab narrates, “I was wearing the hijab and she knew that I am Muslim. So, her message is like she's criticizing me and she's like attacking me with words, and this affected me a lot”. Rabab’s assertions correspond to Sheen et al.’s (2018) research findings that Islamic women wearing the hijab exert a considerable impact on other peoples’ perceptions of the individual wearing it. According to the author, such views are sometimes negative, and an often-discussed effect in non-Muslim Western societies is that such views attract negative comments.

In the U.K., as reported by Sukeina, some of the local people in Western universities look down on Muslim women and feel that they have surrendered entirely to the will of men. Sukeina remarks: "There are some people who don't like Muslims…. there are some people, not most people, and yes, I still remember some scornful looks at me…. but still there were just so few of them."

The participants received mean and scornful looks as they went about their day-to-day business, which is different from higher education life in Libya where the student population was homogenous. The participants felt the anti-Muslim sentiment throughout their stay in Western countries. Some of the locals in Western Universities were unfriendly, possibly because they were Muslims. In a positive sense, some locals understood and showed respect for the Islamic culture. Professors and classmates were more receptive and did not single out any participants based on religion or its outward expression through the clothes worn by participants.

Transitions Back to Libya

All participants face two transitions: one marked by moving from Libya to Western universities, and the other by moving back to their home country after completing their studies abroad. All the participants acknowledged that exposure to the Western education system helped build their new skills and knowledge that they would use to improve the missing links in Libya's education system. The new cultural experiences the participants gained from the Western world also influenced their thinking, allowing them to identify how the Libyan culture was restrictive of women's participation in decision-making and their personal and professional independence. Although the participants appreciated the new cultural and education system experiences, the environment back in Libya is not receptive to ideologies that support women's independence or participation in the decision-making process. The participants still experience resistance from the locals whenever they discuss new values that do not conform to traditional Libyan norms. This causes emotional and mental challenges, forcing them to exercise restraint when discussing any issue that is likely to become emotionally charged.

Technology and Resources

In the second transition, the participants also experienced challenges. They expressed many drawbacks about the Libyan educational system upon their return to Libya, mentioning in particular the Libyan higher educational system in their interviews and stories. Libya has inadequate materials and technology, even though such tools are necessary for learning and teaching, especially for the English language. For instance, Rabab recalls how she could not access a desktop computer, a projector, or the Internet when she was teaching back home:

> I was expecting that I would have a class with a desktop and projector and Internet access because I wanted to use the same way that I have studied in the United States. I had no access to any of it. It was like a shock for me. At least I wanted a projector, and at least I wanted a connection to the Internet so I can use some videos.

Rabab's observation demonstrates how Libyan universities are still technologically deficient and highly dependent on limited information sources to impart knowledge. Libyan institutions also fall short regarding library facilities, learning materials, and educational infrastructure. Since Libya is a developing country, the budget allocated toward education is not enough to acquire top-grade materials and facilities. Therefore, insufficient financial backing by the Libyan government adversely affects provision of higher-quality education (Abider, 2016).

Rabab further relays her experience trying to make do with inadequate teaching materials and equipment:

> I continued my work as a lecturer, [but] there were no materials like you teach with, nothing. So you have to prepare all of that and it was another shock for me, especially since I taught literary criticism and there were no books, nothing. So, I did lots of work, and I think I [even] bought books. I forgot the website, but my brother did that, because he lives in the United Kingdom, and it was easy for him to use his credit card and receive it by mail and then send it to me to Libya. So it was like a [very long] trip of collecting materials for my classes. Therefore, without ongoing connections to Western nations, access to teaching materials and resources would be impossible. Unlike in the Western university environment, where lecturers have access to teaching materials, in Libya, instructors have to employ their initiative to access teaching materials.

Limited government support also affects the number of students who benefit from government sponsorship to pursue higher education, affecting the supply of skilled labor. A small number of students, comprising a small percentage of women receive financial support (like the participants in this study) to pursue a high-quality education at Western universities, where they experience pedagogy styles that harness the greater potential of all students. The participants who have already transitioned back to Libya illustrate how they had to share their knowledge and skills with colleagues, which was essential in enriching the teaching environment. As Safa explains:

> I work as a university teacher, [so] I try to include and incorporate new teaching and learning styles that I was deprived of, back when I was a student. I try my best to transfer and share my [new Western-style] knowledge and experience with my work colleagues.

Sukeina supports this analogy by affirming that, "Having workshops concerning our teaching practices in the local universities could probably improve the teaching strategies and might change some traditional beliefs and consequently benefit the learners." The implication is that going through the Western university system is beneficial for filling the skilled human capital gap critical for introducing global education standards such as pedagogical approaches and a collaborative classroom environment.

Unequal Access to Education

Although Libya has recorded an increased number of women participating in education over the past decades, gender inequality persists in the system. For instance, compared to only 3% of boys, 14% of Libyan girls fail to finish their first years of primary education (Tayal, 2019). The country's cultural stereotypes expose girls to systematic disadvantage, and with most schools being coeducational, boys are required to sit at the front of the class, while girls sit at the back. In West

Libya, boys' schools have priority in government resources, because the system believes that boys will grow up to become more skilled workers (Tayal, 2019). Therefore, the government prioritizes boys' education over girls' education.

Another issue affecting quality of education in Libya is that poor government allocation of resources leads to inadequate staffing of skilled workforce in institutions of higher learning. This makes it a challenge for Libyans who qualify to join such institutions to benefit from advanced skills that are competitive in the global market. Research is essential to all forms of study, as it involves the systematic collection, organization, and analysis of information within any educational system (Pramodin, 2012). Research also has a long-term impact on learners, because it allows them to employ practical skills. As Sukeina reports:

> It was totally different even academically. I can say I had academic challenges because I lacked the needed skills that one has to have in order to do research. It was really hard for me at the beginning to even start doing research, and I realized that we didn't learn how to do research and compounded by language and inadequate pedagogy in Libya, it was such a challenge.

In Libyan universities, as Sukeina argues, the modes of research utilized are often theory-based, with minimal application of research mechanisms taught at most levels or throughout the learning process. Again, this drawback points to the lack of adequate financial support for higher education learning institutions in developing countries, limiting their ability to attract an adequate skilled workforce. Such a workforce is critically important for steering best teaching styles that meet global standards. Sukeina mentioned that she had to learn the basics of academic research

when attending university in the West, as research skills are a low priority in Libyan higher education institutions. She states:

> It was hard for me at the beginning to even start doing research, and I realized that we didn't learn how to do research. And everything… it was a nightmare for me at the beginning, because I only had the basic research skills, requiring extensive guidance from my instructor.

Culture

Culture defines the way of life of a group of individuals. It incorporates beliefs, behaviour, and value systems that are a rule of thumb or generally accepted practices. Western culture varies significantly from Libyan norms and practices. This is in part because the British and American cultures embrace equality among genders, giving women individual liberty. This is unlike the Libyan context, where women remain under the watchful eyes of their male counterparts. Furthermore, Canadian culture, although complex due to the heterogeneous nature of the society, allows for more women's liberty than in the Libyan context. Thus, for Muslim students traveling thousands of miles for higher education, the demand from the host nation's culture is significantly distinct, because they must make adjustments and abandon some of the Islamic values to find a fit in the new environment. In some Western cultures, like the UK and US, the emphasis is often on knowledge and enrichment of the mind (Hegarty, 2014). Safa cites learning a new way of thinking after interacting with and living in a culture and education system that values women and their independence, an ideology she takes prides in, as it continues to influence her personal life and her teaching approach back in Libya

In contrast, Islamic culture is rooted in homogenous faith, community, family, and spirituality. This stands in stark contrast to post-modern Western culture, where such aspects are diverse. Thus, Muslim students must familiarize themselves with new cultures, as elucidated by the participants, and most experience cultural shock. As Sukeina relays:

> Well, I can call it a cultural misunderstanding. I had that feeling that most of the locals do not like Muslims and they look at Muslim females scornfully in a way that they are surrendered to the will of men, and I didn't like that.

Sukeina felt that individuals in Western culture do not value women and were likely to be un-accommodative, a perception that became a source of stress for her.

As I have noted a number of times in this study, cultural expectations in Libyan culture require women to take care of their children. This demand affected me adversely when I had to answer and write the first question of my candidacy exams. At that time, my son came down with pneumonia, interfering with my schedule and prompting me to seek assistance from the department and my instructor, who offered me a new opportunity to sit for the exam. From a personal perspective, I found it challenging to balance my academic work and household chores. Rabab had a similar experience, as she narrates how she had to spend days in hospital when her eldest son got sick. According to Libyan culture, it is the mother’s responsibility to take care of the children; hence, despite Rabab’s busy academic schedule, she could not delegate the responsibility to anybody else.

However, Sukeina revealed that being more receptive and accepting of other cultures and religions could cause one to be a 'bad Muslim' in their home country. Exposure to multiple cultures

within Western universities provides a platform to understand people from different occupations and religions. This level of understanding and exposure poses a challenge when some international students return home, as most do due to financial constraints after they finish their studies and the financial support from the Libyan government ends. At this point, it is very hard to stay outside the country for people who do not have the chance to work in the host country. Therefore, most of these individuals face a conflicting choice between going back to their home nation or looking for employment opportunities in the host nation. Libya generally respects female students who have completed their studies abroad. Upon returning home, these women usually contribute positively to the much-needed human capital, boosting the country's ability to build globally competent staff (Akanwa, 2015). Although Libyan society still expects them to adhere to Muslim and other cultural demands, their informed approach to such issues provides them with the independent thinking necessary for them to command their space. Thus, the women can pursue better job opportunities, earn more respect in society, and employ individuals to attend to their domestic chores. Such changes may motivate Libyan families to allow their daughters to pursue higher education.

On the other hand, when some of the students return home, locals may not accept or understand the different points of view they bring with them regarding religions other than Islam. According to Sukeina:

> It doesn't mean when I get somebody who is not a Muslim or somebody who does not think because I hold Islamic views, that I embrace their world. I like them, but it's an issue of embracing diversity. I often face challenges explaining to people back home how values in Western countries are meaningful from a diverse point of view. People in Libya believe

> that accepting external cultural values is unacceptable, branding it defiant to the Islamic religion.

The higher education institutions in the West are multicultural and hence accept intake from individuals across the globe belonging to diverse religions. The Western universities are then keen to ensure that the students from different religions, such as Islam, receive fair and equal treatment and the freedom to express their religious values and practices within the campus. This was evident during sessions that promoted diversity in my class. The participants also obtained additional resources such as library support, technology and study material from their universities to support and enable a smooth learning process, since adjustments to the culture in a non-Muslim country are taxing. The universities put systems such as security surveillance and policies in place to ensure that the Libyan Muslim and other international students were comfortable and protected.

For instance, Rabab and I had issues adjusting to the new culture, with some of our peers extending racialized behaviour toward us. In both contexts, the respective instructors provided an opportunity in class for interaction and discussion revolving around cultural differences. I had the opportunity to cook and exchange food in a social class. Although this was a good opportunity for use to experience each other's culture and promote diversity, it came with challenges, because one of my peers refused to eat my food. With Rabab, classroom lessons promoted diversity through interactions in class discussions. However, she sometimes experienced racism during these discussions. Sukeina, on the other hand, had positive encounters during social interactions. As she puts it:

> I still remember that I used to be invited to cafes and cafeterias, like sort of students meeting together, like to chat about our academic whatever, about topics, any challenges, anything

> that we like to talk about. You always find somebody who's like you or somebody who can help you, like who can help you think how to deal with such situations.

Sharing thoughts and feelings in formal and informal gatherings allowed the participants to interact with other learners, creating an environment conducive to appreciating people from a different culture without judging them. This positively impacted academic work, as it reduced the participants' anxiety.

Overall, the participants found the Western university experience rewarding by the time they completed their studies, because it offered them the opportunity to expand their knowledge skills while enhancing their cultural competence. Sukeina revealed that learning in a multicultural environment positively impacted her teaching practice, saying: "I think it affected me as a teacher in a good way." Sukeina attributes the positive impact to exposure to a new pedagogy style characterized by student-oriented teaching and class teamwork. This approach promoted the acquisition of skills necessary to thrive in a diverse environment. The knowledge she acquired, such as computers, smartphones, and using the Internet to access resources, also enhanced her competence in a global environment. As Sukeina further explains:

> Academically, it affected me much, like having the chance to know a lot of types of resources to get information from, which I never knew, to be honest. I can say I was sort of illiterate in computers and things like that. Yes, I could type before, but my experience was so limited…. but going there getting used to the society and that I had to use, like computers, smartphones, and Internet, things like that affected my ability and my way of thinking.

For Sukeina, exposure to different cultures was also beneficial, because it instilled new values that are critical during interactions. She explains: “[I]t teaches one to be more understanding, tolerant, considerate, and selfless. Cultural diversity creates open-mindedness and the willingness to understand different perspectives”. This positive experience for Sukeina enhanced her understanding of an empowered woman's contribution to society, which she argues for promoting when she returns to Libya. Western universities' high level of diversity creates the opportunity to share and receive knowledge, such as new ways to search for academic resources and interactive teaching styles, an impossible trajectory if a person lives in an isolated cultural world such as Libya for one’s entire life.

Chapter Summary

The Libyan women’s experiences support the claim that international students are more likely to face a larger number of adjustment problems than their local compatriots (Chen et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2015; Asmar et al., 2004). The participants expressed the difficulties they faced when adapting to a foreign country that is not predominantly Muslim. The unique issues experienced ranged from societal pressure, unacquainted religious customs, and direct and indirect discrimination when carrying out Islamic practices. For instance, in my context, in my cooking, I would use ingredients that we use back home in Libya, which would be different from those used in Canada. Rabab argues that during a class discussion, an African-American student made racially motivated claims, which I believed was because she is from a different culture and religion.

Ignorance regarding Islam creates a barrier fueled by physical attire and the language spoken. Wearing a hijab led to unfriendly stares and incorrect judgment concerning female

autonomy. This was a common experience in my initial days in Canada, where I would experience unwarranted stares for wearing a hijab. Furthermore, the participants encountered false assumptions from local individuals residing in and around the Western universities. For example, Sukeina explains: “I can call it cultural misunderstanding. I felt that most of the locals do not like Muslims and look at Muslim females scornfully in a way that they are surrendered to the will of men”. In Libya, women learn to be submissive to men, a trait which is quite different from the urban Western population. Hence, every time a participant in this research studying abroad would portray submissiveness, they received negative reactions.

Preconceived notions about Islamic practices directly affected Muslim students’ educational experiences and, in so doing, negatively affected their educational attainment, with some dropping out before they complete the degrees (Chen et al., 2019). Research reveals that Islamophobia is one of the main hindrances to academic success (Chen et al., 2019). Although the participants had some negative experiences with the culture in Western universities, they were able to cope through self-learned adjustments or the few social opportunities organized by instructors to enhance student interactions. The instructors designed extracurricular activities and social activities that facilitated the students’ learning about Islam and thus the integration of the participants. This effort goes a long way to promoting an understanding of Muslim religion and to encouraging diversity. The universities, in this case, took it upon themselves to support the Muslim students and offset the challenges they faced during their tenure. Sukeina explains: “The university… did their best to make us feel at home and enjoy studying there. They listened to us and… gave us consultations whenever we needed them.” Such support systems are critical for ensuring that students from other cultural backgrounds can cope with the cultural shock of a new environment that assumes different values from those of their home nation.

The different cultures experienced in their Western universities changed the participants' opinions, behaviors, and perspectives, but these changes were not always welcome back home. The participants transformed and became more knowledgeable, skilled and culturally competent, characteristics that are an excellent fit in the global context. However, their open thinking that overcomes the patriarchal idealized society' way of thinking, only served them well in the Western world; in the Libyan world, it exposes them to friction.

In my experience, with Libyan culture, people view a female who desires advancement in her education and career as a threat to the male-dominated Libyan society. Still, I am determined to change such perceptions, which may cause discomfort among the community members. Since Libya is a patriarchal society, I intend to use my experience to shape my community's thinking around cultural gender issues. I will institute programs that target women and other stakeholders, raising awareness about the importance of women participating in education and economic activities.

Sukeina had a hard time with gender issues after her return to Libya. It was difficult for her to digest the idea that some women have the belief that they must remain submissive to men. She wonders if this is because of the mentality that prevails in Libya: "I just don't like arguing something because of their mentality. They argue based on something they believe in, and they will never try to change the ideology." Sukeina's statement illustrates the benefit of exposure to a diverse environment where individuals can segment their thinking from a single angle and assume an open mind, which is critical for interaction with people from all lifestyles. Her experiences demonstrate the challenges participants face as they strive to introduce new and informed ideologies in Libya.

During my last visit to Libya in September 2021, I had the same experience with this kind of mentality: some women have no way to explain themselves as independent members of their family or society associated with conformity to social expectations of women being submissive to men. However, pursuing education in Western universities could be one way to embrace gender equality.

From a technological point of view, learning tools such as the Internet, desktop, and projectors are lacking or inadequate in Libya, making it harder to study and prepare lectures. According to Rabab, insufficient access to technological equipment was one of the main challenges for her when she returned home. These days, however, the experience will be completely different (in a positive way) for the Libyan students who may go to study abroad. Sukeina explains: "Because of getting used to using the internet a lot, I can say [I am a] technological goddess and getting used to such aspects … I think students now who might go to the U.K. or who might go abroad will not have the same challenges I had before." The advantages gained by the next-generation students are thanks to the lessons learned by earlier students who went abroad to study. These students, such as the study participants, are in a position to develop programs that sensitize Libyan women willing to pursue higher education on the challenges they are likely to face and how to seek help from relevant departments.

Designing programs that prepare students to join the international education arena to adapt to the new environment can be critical in identifying the issues raised by students who study abroad by identifying gaps in their academic programs. Safa notes: "The authorities here in Libya who are responsible for such programs should at least set up campaigns where students could talk to students who have already traveled and studied abroad." Although such programs are yet to take

shape, I am interested in introducing the initiative to the Ministry of Higher Education in Libya. By exchanging experiences, female students could be more prepared about what to expect concerning the different challenges they might go through when they join Western universities. With such preparation, the students would be better prepared psychologically and develop coping strategies long before arriving at their respective Western universities. This reduces stress and other pressures that may impair their optimal academic work engagement.

The participants, after their return, also suggested submitting a proposal to Libyan authorities concerning various matters of importance to them, such as gender equality in education and the workplace. However, the proposal remains unsubmitted, as a certain groups within the Libyan Ministry of Higher Education monopolize the state institutions in Libya and it is difficult for anyone outside that group to break through the monopoly. The participants in this study suggest a more robust mechanism for preparing students intending to pursue higher education in Western universities. Safa stated:

> I wish students, after traveling abroad, would have more attention from the higher institution in terms of annual supervision meetings. I would say monthly meetings could be a bit difficult, but I would say at least events where all students from different parts of the same country would meet, exchange experiences, etc. The lack of such initiative from the country of origin makes such meetings impossible.

For each participant, the return to Libya was entirely different. Sukeina felt that her personality got stronger. She expressed this feeling in her words, stating: “I started to be stronger and confident …. It was four years, but it made a big difference in my personality, in my life, in my children's lives… and my children are good speakers of English now.” Other participants share

similar experiences. The wise and humble Safa benefited from both the good and bad experiences and still kept her sense of adventure and eagerness to learn. Rabab's summation was similar to Safa's:

> Now I am the one who looks at the past and thanks God for having that past, whether it's negative or positive, whether it's sad or happy, whether it's good or bad, and I feel gratitude for all those experiences because they made me. I now look at things differently from a different angle and have more knowledge, so thank God for all those past experiences that made me the one I am.

Like the rest of the participants, Safa is thankful for the experiences she gained going through the Western university education system. Such experiences would help her shape her future and other Libyan women anticipating pursuing higher education abroad. In general, they were all happy to have what they called a "golden chance" to go abroad and explore what was a different world for them. They wish to have this chance again in the future because they find it rewarding to provide them with the opportunity to learn new ways of doing things away from Islamic cultural and religious limitations and enhancing their skills sets. They expressed that they would like to utilize the insights they have gained to make Libya better by developing initiatives that enhance women's participation in educational and economic activities like men. They would also use their experience to inspire others in Libya to pursue a Western education, which will enhance their skill sets, with the determination necessary to overcome the vast challenges that characterize the journey.

The findings of this chapter correspond with the existing literature concerning the vast array of challenges that international students face when pursuing higher education in Western

universities. Although all non-native learners generally face challenges revolving around cultural, social, academic, and linguistic aspects, female learners, particularly those from Islamic nations, experience challenges to a greater degree. The psychological and emotional pressure negatively affects their academic performance and personal sense of well-being. The participants narrated their experiences in and around Western universities, producing convergent views that elucidated how such hindrances require redress through a collaborative approach between home and host nations. Engaging persons with previous knowledge and experience about specific challenges could prove beneficial to current and future students. This would produce a comprehensive framework, where female students from Islamic backgrounds such as Libya could both learn and gain support throughout their academic journey.

This chapter presented findings about the experience of the participants' journey of being Libyan female international students who travelled abroad with/without their families to achieve a higher education degree from a Western university. I arranged the findings thematically in response to the research questions. The chapter also took a narrative approach in discussing the participants' responses to these themes. First, I discussed the participants' experiences and motivations for pursing higher education in Western universities. I also explored the gender gap and its effect on limiting the chances for Libyan women to pursue higher education goals, and looked at multiple challenges these women faced. My exploration included solutions the women utilized to overcome their fear of being socially isolated and strategies they employed to deal with cultural/academic obstacles they faced while they were/are studying abroad. Second, I discussed the themes regarding religion, racism, and Islamophobia and their impact on building the students' personalities within a diverse society of nationalities, beliefs, and customs. The third and last theme of the chapter illustrated factors concerning the students' transition back to Libya. These factors

involve cultural expectations, gender issues, Islam and one's beliefs, and the acceptance of others. The chapter also included some suggestions for building a better future for Libyan students with regard to the country's study abroad program and the nation's cultural restrictions.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the various themes from this chapter in relation to the existing literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study's literature review and findings strive to synthesize the challenges Libyan female students face when attending higher education institutions in Western countries and returning home. During the interview sessions, several themes emerged concerning the challenges the participants experienced during their degree programs at Western universities. The participants explained the transitional challenges they experienced joining Western universities, how they managed challenges returning to Libya, their assimilation strategies, and the researcher's changing understandings. However, the transition back to their home country was difficult with their newly acquired knowledge, skills, and values. Libya is a predominantly patriarchal society with deeply embedded Islamic values. Libyans reject any notions they consider "foreign," and any individual attempting to introduce these notions suffers exclusion from society.

This chapter seeks to answer research questions in this study by discussing the findings from the above themes and extrapolating the deeper meanings. Furthermore, focusing on the findings will also help elucidate the research topic in light of the emerging themes, showing how their experiences motivate them to inspire change upon returning home. The themes take shape from data from participants' experiences as they transit to and from Libya and from existing literature on the topic. The participants explained their transitional challenges to and from Libya, indicating the hurdles they face when participating in higher education and the labor market. According to the participants, they had to develop assimilation strategies to fit in the different settings, which was critical in achieving set education and career goals. The literature on the topic also supports the analogy by highlighting the challenges international learners face while studying

in western universities. This will then provide insights to shape the conclusion and recommendations in the subsequent chapter.

Transitional Challenges for Women coming to Western Institutions

Women Participation in Higher Education and Labour Market in Libya

With globalization, emphasis on human rights has become a worldwide phenomenon. Women's participation in higher education and the labour market is a cornerstone of human rights (OCHA, 2017), but the rate at which different nations and cultures can ensure this fundamental right varies. According to David (2016), women's participation in higher education has increased over the last five decades, comprising almost 50% of university undergraduates across many developed nations. Despite the increased involvement of women in the labour force, as presented in the UNESCO report of 2021 on Gender Equality in Education, such statistics do not necessarily translate to equality and inclusion. In countries that lag behind on ensuring human rights to their female population, constraints associated with cultural and religious aspects hinder women's ability to pursue higher education, limiting their participation in the labour market and thus preventing them from competing at the same level as their male counterparts.

This is true in the Libyan context, as indicated by the small number of women pursuing higher education abroad. As the researcher, I interviewed a small sample population of only four participants. Although I would have wished to achieve a higher sample population, Libya's cultural and religious aspect deters the number of women willing to pursue higher education. Even where they are willing, the same restrictions hinder them from travelling abroad alone to pursue higher education because such pursuit would go against religious and cultural expectations.

In the 1980s, Gaddafi introduced measures to improve women's access to education and the labour market. Women's political representation took effect in 1997, growing to 8% of elected political leaders in the 2009 parliament. Although this infers progress, the move to involve women in the political process bolstered support for Gadaffi while simultaneously helping to subjugate the Islamic political opposition and Libyan tribal leaders. In a UNDP report released this year (2022), the Libyan Gender Inequality Index value on a scale of 0 to 1 is 0.172. The country ranked 41st out of 162 nations in 2018, and the empowerment indicators show women's representation in parliament has climbed to 16%. The country also records more females attending secondary schools (69.4%) than males (45.0%). However, in the labour market, male participation is 79%, compared with just 25.7% for females (St. John, 2017), indicating how cultural traditions in Libyan society still favor men over women.

As stated in the UNESCO report (2021), sub-Saharan African nations face disparities concerning female teachers' participation in primary and secondary schools and higher learning institutions. The report also indicates that women in developing countries experience low participation in higher education in technology, science, engineering, and mathematics (Yousefy & Baratali, 2011). The existing literature argues that women with degrees at a higher educational level had higher participation in labour markets and that these women successfully competed with their male peers for job openings. Their study also asserts that higher educational attainment influences the employment and promotion of women in their career life (Yousefy & Baratali, 2011; Abdulla, 2015; Varghese & Khare, 2021).

Additionally, David (2016) argues that the participation of females in tertiary education has grown almost twice as fast as males over the past four decades. This trajectory moves largely by international pressures to narrow the gender gap and enhance earning potential and social

mobility. Despite such progress, the author argues that access to higher education does not always translate into enhanced career opportunities or the graduate's ability to leverage the opportunity to utilize their doctorate in the research field (David, 2016). Hence, the increase in participation in higher education only registers low numbers in tertiary enrolment and master's levels but vanishes when it comes to PhDs and careers in research (UNESCO, 2021). Such disappointing outcomes correspond to the limited number of female Libyan students pursuing higher education abroad. The body of knowledge from this study will offer critical insights for engaging Libyan female students in ways that highlight the challenges they face and encourage their participation in higher education beyond college degree levels. This approach will be critical in increasing a pool of highly educated women who will stand as an example to the rest of Libyan women. With such a pool, Libyan women can work together to overcome institutionalized patriarchal ideologies.

The study reveals that Libyan education system's has sponsorship program, which provides financial support to qualified Libyan female students (such as the participants in this study). This is a good starting point for enabling women's higher education aspirations. However, with only a small number of female students benefiting from the program, it is necessary for other stakeholders interested in promoting women's education in Libya to intervene and increase women's chances. Suppose the participants in this study, upon their return to Libya, could work in institutions with a high percentage of female colleagues. In that case, they might be able to network with their peers to create the desired changes in the education system. The current low level of women's participation in advanced education outside Libya could contribute to the continued enhancement of gendered roles within the education system that favours males over females while at the same time denying the country the opportunity to benefit from women's contributions to decision-making processes.

The argument that higher education leads to higher incomes is not universally applicable, and women often require more education qualifications for specific job categories (Nguyen, 2013). This is partly because women continue to face discrimination in the labour market and disparities in political representation, power, and legislation that are prejudicial and based on gender. Such inequalities hinder women's ability to secure jobs that utilize their full potential. Women in Islamic countries, in particular (Nguyen, 2013), continue to experience widespread gender-based discrimination. Despite international pressure to accommodate more women in the education system, the Libyan culture hinders their optimal participation. Often, cultural expectations steer women to roles that emphasize household chores. Although the Libyan education policy is open to the participation of both women and men in the education system, structural aspects that assume patriarchal dominance hinder women's optimal involvement, with the result being that the education and career field remain predominantly a male preserve (Madsen, 2012). Such structural aspects include the application of education curricula that emphasize the role of male roles in society and assign males specific jobs while denying women the same opportunities.

Moreover, heavy workloads associated with social expectations that demand women to participate in multiple roles can lead to challenges in their educational journey and career progress. Similar to the participants in this study, women generally remain disadvantaged compared to men at the same educational level because they are required to participate in household activities such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare. In contrast, their male counterparts have no such expectations placed on them. Even as they advance in the academic world, women are encouraged to marry and have children, limiting their ability to engage in academics full-time. According to Nguyen (2013), Morley (2014), and Madsen (2012), women lecturers and administrators face additional academic demands and increased workloads over and above their household chores.

Women's inability to participate fully in the education system has a spiraling effect on those pursuing higher education in Western nations. As a participant in this research, I realized that the Libyan education system fails to benchmark international standards, requiring me to employ significant effort to catch up with fellow students in research work and class participation. This is because, as a participant in this study, the research skills I acquired through the Libyan system could not help me meet the demands of research work in western universities, prompting me to engage my instructor and peers to learn and expand such skills. Although aspects such as differences in pedagogical approaches contribute to such challenges, Libyan females pursuing higher education at Western universities are likely to face more challenges than their Libyan male counterparts, in part because traditional Islamic gender roles limit their ability to engage in academic activities at the same level as their male peers.

As female Libyan females strive to balance social expectations and educational work, they have only limited time to assign to their academic work. This causes stress and anxiety for them, adversely affecting their academic work. According to Waheeda and Nishan (2018), society expects women to perform multiple roles as working daughters, mothers, and women while still requiring them to remain respectful, humble, understanding, attentive, and discreet. These expectations are prevalent in the Islamic world, including in Libya. The participants in this study discuss that their experiences hindered their optimal transition from Libya to the Western education system, as they were forced to take on routine household duties at the expense of their academic work. For instance, I had to take care of my sick child, affecting my academic schedule and ability to complete my research work. Rabab also explains how she had to balance her housework and academic work, which she says was a struggle. She says, "I have so much to do now that I am married and have a baby to take care of."

Furthermore, experiencing the Western education system firsthand and interacting with Western culture allowed the participants to understand how Libyan culture was restrictive to women's development. These experiences have helped the study participants internalize a different worldview concerning a woman's place in society. As empowered women, they plan to use their new thinking to make Libya's education system a better place for women and men by introducing strategies corresponding to international education standards.

When the country experienced turmoil during the revolution during Qaddafi's reign, girls, women, and youth faced substantial difficulties (Ragrag, 2021). According to St. John (2017), women have actively participated in the struggle to retain and grow their rights and responsibilities in post-Qaddafi Libya. Many thought these rights would come quickly after the revolution, but the conservative backlash is still pervasive, threatening to limit or deny women their freedom. Such a scenario thrusts Libyan women into a revolution within a revolution, fighting for their rights within the political, socioeconomic, and gender equality spheres. Therefore, increased women's participation in leadership positions is necessary to help convey the perspectives of the adverse circumstances Libya experiences. Women's leadership can significantly drive the desired change to fight inequality from a different (i.e. female) perspective. The participants in this study indicate their willingness to use their newly gained knowledge and skills to impart change back in Libya.

During the revolt against Gaddafi, women from different generations and socioeconomic backgrounds actively participated in activism. Libyan women appeared to rise above the traditional beliefs that have dominated society's way of doing things to claim agency. They all rallied around the "dignity" and "enough" slogans; both men and women during the revolution appeared to act towards a standard clarion call (Johansson-Nogués, 2013). Generations of entrenched social taboos concerning women and men mixing in public places took a back seat, and gender roles were re-

examined. There was unity among protestors irrespective of gender, prompting the Libyan women to echo the words of Nawal EL Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist who had also participated in the Egyptian revolution: “I felt at last for once in my life that women had equal rights to men.” Libyan women contributed a significant role in supporting logistic operations to supply the anti-Gaddafi rebel lines with essential services on the home front. This has implications for this study because it highlights the pivotal role women are willing to contribute to change in the country. The participants in this study express similar willingness towards contributing in their different small ways to influence the Libyan education system, mainly ensuring it favours female students equally as their male counterparts.

Despite the high percentage of females acquiring education to at least the secondary level, male numbers during the Gaddafi regime still surpassed their representation in the political, social, and economic spheres. Women were mainly under male guardianship, subjected to legal discrimination and stricter moral codes in a conservative society characterized by patriarchal ideology. Independent women’s civil society groups were illegal, and participation in those groups was punishable by death (Langohr & Jamal, 2013). With the unclear and inconsistent legal framework, coupled with traditional social attitudes toward the female gender, Libyan women faced obstacles in consolidating their rights.

This is probably why so many Libyan women had such high expectations that the incoming government would offer an environment conducive to recognizing their dignity in legal, socioeconomic, and political rights after the revolution. However, the transition never achieved such ends, managing instead to unleash a barrage of mixed messages and continued violations of women’s rights. As of 2012, about 600 Libyan women contested for elective seats, but only 33 made it through. These gains were only possible due to parity safeguards facilitated by the electoral

law. However, the new government accommodated just two female ministers in a 40-member cabinet (St. John, 2017). This progress has implications for this study because it inspires Libyan women to spearhead change, acknowledging that although such an end may not come easy, their participation in the course is necessary. The participants in this study indicate the challenges they face in bringing change in the education system, challenging them to keep the momentum through their different small ways and collaborating with relevant departments, mainly those that have gained women's progress to promote their course.

The small numbers in representation have been a cause of disagreement among women parliamentarians who feel that women's issues may face opposition from the male-dominated legislative arm of the government, leading to inadequate safeguards for women's equality. The trend observed in both Gaddafi and post-Gaddafi regimes illustrates Libyan society's profoundly entrenched patriarchal ideology. Reversing such a trend requires women's collectives to mobilize like-minded entities to push for the expansion of women's rights. The discursive struggles between feminine and masculine hegemony may offer an escape route from restrictive patriarchal laws. Women's movements can tap into the new environment to consolidate the gains made in the post-Gadaffi era by advancing activism activities that would raise social awareness of the significance of women's contribution to community progress. The more women across a diverse spectrum press for their rights on different platforms such as in the streets and political or social spheres, the greater the possibility that the currently emphasized femininity will take root in Islamic strongholds like Libya (Langohr & Jamal, 2013). Participants in this study discuss the challenges they have faced when striving to introduce any policy changes in the education system, forcing them to settle for small personal contributions. This highlights their need for a collaborative approach with like-minded stakeholders to achieve the desired change in the education system.

The emphasis in this context is not whether secular and Islamic Libyan women speak in one voice but whether their combined efforts will exert sufficient feminine sociopolitical pressure to instigate change within the corridors of power and social structures dominated by male groups. Such a scenario would potentially create an open-ended form of embedded femininity that will advance broader liberties in role performance. This trajectory explains why it has been a challenge for the participants in this study to gain progress in their attempt to suggest policy changes within the education system. Their male counterparts, who dominate the higher ranks of the institutions that govern the education system, analyze their contributions from a stereotypical viewpoint. The participants in this study can leverage the feminine sociopolitical pressures to drive change in the education system, which will help them sidestep the challenges they face when acting singly in their push for change.

As the participants transitioned back to Libya after completing their studies abroad, they found their integration into Libyan society more difficult than anticipated. As Safa argues, she tried to inspire policy changes in Libya but faced resistance from leaders keen to maintain the status quo. The inflexible, male-dominated belief system predominating in Libya, perpetuated by historical and structural patterns, constantly exposes the participants to friction with the rest of society, challenging their new values. It seems to the participants that they and the locals are reading from two different scripts, with the locals deeming the participants' ideas to be "progressive" interference with their culture. Libyan society expects their female students to advocate for traditional Islamic values, not foreign ones. Perhaps this explains why Libyan society generally does not support the idea of women existing independently without the guidance of a male guardian or family member keeping watch over them. Such an arrangement reinforces Libyan Islamic values while at the same time ensuring that the male-dominated way of thinking prevails.

Empowerment through foreign interaction is evident in this study's participants' comments. They strive to find a balance between the good and the bad of both Western and Islamic cultural norms, highlighting through their lived experience how traditional Islamic beliefs hinder women's progress and their ability to compete with men due to a lack of level playing ground. Feminism is crucial in addressing social, political, and economic gaps between men and women. The feminist movements in developed nations across countries such as Canada, the United States, and some other Western nations took shape through three waves, encompassing class and politics, social and political inequalities, and the continued push for equality (Ogletree & Padilla, 2019). The Libyan participants in this study missed all three waves due to historical structures perpetuated by a male-dominated system and embedded in a conservative Islamic culture and religion.

The participants who returned to Libya after completing their studies yearn to improve the current and future opportunities for women in their country. Still, they acknowledge that they have a narrow space to do it. Safa, a university lecturer, asserts her efforts and initiatives to incorporate new teaching and learning styles, which she feels will change the narrative and benefit her students. Such changes, she admits, would have been impossible during her days at Libyan universities. She is willing to share her earned skills and knowledge with her colleagues. Even so, Safa acknowledges that, although she would like to see an overhaul of the entire education system through the introduction of new policies within the Libyan context, specific stakeholders within the system who own the process as the sole decision-makers thwart any efforts toward change that does not reflect the traditional status quo. She argues that she does not anticipate an overall change in the education system soon due to the centralization of decision-making by the current leadership in the education sector.

Rabab also asserts her intention to apply the knowledge she gained from Western universities to influence the Libyan education system by introducing several initiatives. These include incorporating the Western teaching style, such as employing student-centered teaching approaches, introducing engaging activities to stimulate learning, and employing structured teaching with clear objectives at the beginning of the course to enhance the classroom experience for her students. However, such initiatives are at an individual level and not widespread, meaning they only benefit students within the institution where she works.

Sukeina argues for employing a renewed attitude, different from the one her teachers portrayed during her days in Libya as a student, towards her students by being flexible in the teaching approach and open to sharing ideas. Despite her opinion that the Libyan education status requires an overhaul, she only offers to share suggestions with relevant stakeholders towards improving the current education system in Libya.

As a study participant, I also support the need for a significant policy change within the Libyan system. When I return to Libya, I plan to spearhead policy changes that create a conducive environment for equal participation of males and females in leadership while taking the initiative to introduce new teaching approaches that will enhance the classroom experience. All the participants agree on the need to change the education system, an analogy that prevails within the existing literature. For example, Sukeina feels that the Libyan education policy requires changes toward developing a learner-oriented system. Rabab also thinks that the pedagogy approaches require changes towards adopting a learner-oriented approach. Safa supports the idea of a system that inspires knowledge sharing among colleagues.

The participants' arguments are consistent with the findings of the UNIGOV Consortium report sponsored by the European Union in 2016, which found that the Libyan education system

suffers from an outdated legal framework for higher education and a lack of interlinkages between Libyan society's needs, the public and private sectors, and civil society. The report observes several areas that require improvement within the higher education circles in Libya. These include increased demand for quality enhancements, promoting the quality of graduates, increasing the use of information technology, improving the accreditation and quality assurance processes, and strengthening scientific research (Alzain et al., 2014). This illustrates a convergence between the previous research on Libyan universities' challenges and the participants' lived experiences when interacting with the education system.

Participants' efforts to influence policy changes have been mainly unsuccessful thus far, illustrating how leaders in the Libyan education sector and other policymakers are keen to maintain the status quo. Sukeina met obstacles when she tried to introduce policy changes in the education system. At the same time, Safa and Rabab have taken a personal initiative to influence change at the individual level because their attempts for nationwide changes were impossible due to structural impediments. This persists despite studies such as that of Elzalitni (2015), arguing for the need for a comprehensive and critical evaluation of higher education towards enhancing understanding of its current status and contribution to modern Libyan society. The conservative nature of Libyan Islamic culture hinders information flow from foreign countries, leading to stagnation in areas identified within the UNIGOV report of 2016. Therefore, regardless of the zeal of the participants in this research to acquire higher education in Western universities, the transition journey back to Libyan society has, in some ways, been as challenging as the journey to Western universities.

Cultural Norms and Social Restrictions

My research shows that cultural norms and social restrictions influence individual behaviour and thoughts; these findings uphold the existing body of knowledge from other studies. Although not always clearly delineated, norms offer a social reference point for appropriate and inappropriate behaviours, informing what is acceptable during human interactions (Quagliariello, 2017). Education and culture are inseparable yet complementary through diverse interaction points because they both serve as a pathway to acquiring the other. Culture creates pathways for education, while education flavors cultural values. In this way, the two interweave to develop a common whole. The participants in this study have internalized several cultural norms that reflect the highly Islamic values that characterize Libyan society and are embedded in the education system. The cultural norms they have learned throughout their life influenced their ability to assimilate to a new culture in Western university settings, adversely affecting their academic work. As a participant in this study, I found the conservatist nature inspired by Islamic teachings incompatible with the western university education system that required constant interaction with peers and instructors.

All individuals' positive perceptions of self and others' identities form their culture, leading to a sense of cohesiveness that manifests throughout every stage of life (Quagliariello, 2017). According to Rigg and Ford (2014), young children model cultural behaviors from their closest relatives, which constitutes primary education and is something they internalize and practice throughout their lives unless a more superior cultural aspect overrides the old one. This is typical of Islamic culture, which is conservative and socializes its followers in ways that define their thoughts and behavior for a lifetime. Approximately 50 Muslim-majority nations have laws referencing Sharia, and Libya is no exception. Such countries have laws that support harsh criminal punishments as deterrents for breaking the laws and place unprecedented restrictions on the lives

of minority groups and women (Weiner, 2020). This is typical of the participants in this study who have a strong connection with their Islamic background, finding it challenging to accommodate Western cultural values in their early days. For example, in the Libyan culture, I learned the value of being respectful to those in authority. This value system was restrictive because it was influenced by the inability to interrupt an instructor to ask for clarification or contribute to a topic during classroom learning.

According to the Quran, men and women are morally and spiritually equal, but mothers and wives have specific societal and family roles. Some governments in the Islamic world have instituted such teachings by setting structures that restrict women's rights, dictate dress codes, and bar women from specific spaces. For example, these governments require women to wear veils and only visit public places in the company of male guardians. In Libya, society has internalized all the Quran teachings, with parents requiring their children to abide by Quranic norms. This creates an intergenerational trend where individuals of all generations seek to secure a sense of identity from the shared culture. Such a trajectory influences Libyan women's perceptions, affecting their ability to integrate seamlessly with other cultures when they travel abroad for higher education. For instance, Sukeina argued that she felt that most people in the UK never liked Muslims, mainly due to their perceived submissiveness. Safa also thinks that studying alone in the UK without a male guardian was a challenge she had to overcome, exposing her to anxiety. This is because she was constantly worried about the perception her relatives back home have of her for disobeying a strictly embraced culture in Libya.

Islamic society uses a reward and punishment approach to ensure members abide by all the favoured social norms. Females who refuse to wear a veil are alienated for allegedly embracing 'foreign' behaviors. This serves as a lesson to other women, ensuring their behaviors adhere to

social expectations. Libyan society praises women who adhere to the prevailing social norms as a form of reward system, setting them as worthy examples to emulate (Manan, 2020). Critics of such regulations, however, argue that they create inequality, including restricting women from competing with male peers in education and employment spheres. Other social norms inhibit divorce and marriage, contributing to early marriages and gender-based violence (Abdul-Latif, 2013). Even when some strict sexist laws are eventually abolished, practices and attitudes are either slow to change or face resistance. For example, most of the participants in this study had a veil on their heads as they attended higher education in foreign nations, illustrating how their long-held traditions shaped their behaviours as women even when away from their home country. Rabab argues how a classmate made negative comments concerning Muslims during a class discussion which targeted her because she was wearing a hijab. Wearing a hijab is a long-held tradition in Libya that symbolizes women's submissiveness to Allah (God). As an internalized social value, wearing a hijab for Rabab exposed her to ridicule in a western university setting, causing her anxiety and negatively affecting her study experience.

In his study, Watson (2014) reveals that social norms are critical for influencing education opportunities. The school dropout rate among the female population is high in countries such as Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda, and Vietnam, a trend associated with early pregnancies or marriages, lack of accessible secondary schools, and parental reluctance to invest in higher education for girls. In these communities, parents remain unconvinced that an educated girl makes a better marriage partner, contributes to economic growth, or can make independent decisions to raise a family in the absence of a husband. The communities under Watson's (2014) study argue that cultivating such spaces for girls through education threatens their social norms and leads to increased divorce rates or single families. Similar trends occur in Libya, where principles of kinship that take the

form of a unilinear system characterize patriarchal authority structures, propagating male chauvinism and domination. Thus, women in these societies are valued only as partners in the decision-making process, not as decision-makers in themselves. This standpoint corresponds to the experience of the study participants, who find it challenging to institute policy changes in the education system.

The cultural and social norms create an environment that accommodates the unequal educational treatment of men and women. According to Elazhari (2021), Libyan social norms instill the belief that women are inferior to men and must work to satisfy them. Despite the country's progress in addressing human rights issues such as domestic violence and increased women's participation in the labour market, Libyan culture assumes a vast array of Islamic law tenets. These create systemic disadvantages against women.

Elazhari (2021) argues that education is a social process through which individuals acquire knowledge, facilitating civilization changes at the global level while shaping their personality, which is a development resource. The education process either evolves from a nation's cultural norms or is instituted top-down by authorities. Different countries embrace different educational systems. Most of these systems assume standard features concerning the duration of schooling and levels, translating into study programs and teaching contents. The dominant culture highly influences these education models in different countries.

In Libya, considering the social environment over the past decade that predominantly assumes women's inferiority to men, traditional culture has hurt women's education. Thus, it is plausible to argue that cultures equally serve as drivers for change and resistance to it. Resistance is a factor of religion, habit, and integrations and interdependencies of cultural aspects. Although men and women play complementary roles in many cultures, this is not currently the case in Libya.

Hence, females who demand change, particularly those exposed to Western culture, present a threat to the social order (Anwar, 2018). Yet such changes are crucial despite being unwelcome by mainstream Libyan society because even Western culture would not have changed were it not for women's mobilization in the second half of the 20th century.

Language use is part of social life because norms govern it. Children acquire language norms from a very young age, internalizing them as their first language in everyday communication (Kaveifard & Allami, 2011). Historically, native language norms precede the norms of any standard language, and in societies without a written language, they add up as the only norms available (Abbasi & Mirzakhmedova, 2021). Such naturally occurring norms for linguistic description serve as the basis for grammatical description (Kauhanen, 2016). Participants in the study found it challenging to learn and use the English language due to the influence of their mother tongue. The limited use of the English language in Libya affected their ability to integrate with peers in higher education institutions abroad, causing a psychological challenge. For example, as a participant in the study, I had difficulties with the English language, prompting me to go out of my way to learn and use it appropriately in class and social settings.

Arabic is the primary language in Libya and influences social interaction (Piippo, 2021). The participants in this study assert that the language barrier was a challenge that exposed them to limitations during their interaction with students and foreigners in general during their studies in Western universities. During their conversations with peers, their intonation would always brand them as foreigners, with some of them narrating how the mother tongue influence made communication a challenge. This impacted the learners' ability to adjust to the new environment because of anxiety, adversely affecting their academic performance. For instance, students in the host nation sometimes find it challenging to understand some of my explanations during a

discussion, making communication difficult for all parties involved. Safa narrates a friend who had to discontinue her studies due to her husband's inability to use English Language, making it hard for her to concentrate on academic work when she ran all other errands at home. Sukeina argues that sociocultural factors such as culture, language, religion, level of education, learning preferences, and society's attitude toward international students exposed her to culture shock. She further argues that the community in which we live firmly influences our learning process. Her arguments imply that being a Libyan student, growing up in settings where the Arabic language was the norm affected her ability to learn in a new environment where the English language was native. Therefore, growing up in a dominant Arabic language, even in the Libyan classroom, adversely influenced the participants' ability to use English in academic settings, which hindered optimal academic performance in western universities.

As demonstrated by some participants, language issues interfered with their confidence level, limiting their ability to engage in social interactions or even group work discussions in class. For example, I could not participate in class discussions during my early days due to a lack of confidence in the English language. Some agree that their motivation to join international universities grew from their need to experience English firsthand. They felt such an environment would offer them an added advantage by shaping their inadequately developed English language capacities. As English language teachers, they saw this as an opportunity to gain global competence in a dominant foreign language, enabling them to contribute positively to the inadequate human capital back in Libya. Therefore, although the participants' native language was a hindrance to optimal transition to Western universities, their interaction with the native English speakers ultimately built their confidence, skills, and knowledge to levels where they felt

competent. For example, Safa narrates how it was a challenge at first to interact with natives, but through her interaction with them, she was able to master the English language.

According to Dowman et al. (2006), cultural evolution models demonstrate that the process of cultural transmission can blur the connection between individual biases and population-level phenomena. In their study, Smith, and Thompson (2012) build on this argument to demonstrate that learners cannot acquire linguistic variations or diversity if they maintain a single social interaction. Roberts et al. (2014) argue that the privileges associated with some social interaction promote evolution routes to linguistic diversity. This is because social interaction influences the kind of biases that evolve to support language while also controlling the effect of such biases on the linguistic system. Still, the nature of a population's social interactions influences the evolution of preferences for language learning and the distribution of linguistic variations. Such assertions correspond with the participant's wish to study in foreign countries and interact with native English speakers. For example, Sukeina, Rabab, Safa, and myself, we attribute our choice of a foreign university to the opportunity to interact with natives and learn the English language.

The participants in this study demonstrate the applicability of the above suggestions because their interaction with native English speakers was instrumental in developing their English language skills, suppressing the biases associated with Arabic language use. For example, Safa argues that most university staff members and tutors were attentive, approachable, and friendly. They were always arranging social events outside the campus to celebrate holidays and social occasions. Although she acknowledges that this did not always translate to a positive experience due to some misunderstanding or feeling left out due to cultural differences, she feels this was normal for anyone in any new social setting. She had learned to live with it by the end of the course.

I had the opportunity to participate in multicultural classes where the instructor required us to share our food. However, I found it challenging when one of my peers refused to share my offering, exposing me to cultural and psychic harm. The requirement to adjust to an unfamiliar culture and education system thrust me into culture shock without the benefit of many years of gradual socialization that the indigenous members of the host country enjoy.

The participants in this research narrate their experiences with Islamic law. They agree that they have known and practiced the Islamic cultural dictates throughout their lives. Initially, they had embraced every teaching according to the Quran, internalizing even the most oppressive norms. Their beliefs and behaviors were a source of a challenge when transitioning to Western culture. They faced culture shock in Western countries that practiced liberal and individualistic social norms, a complete opposite of their lived experience back in Libya, which embraces conservatist culture.

While the existing literature cites cultural shock as a common experience for international students studying in Western universities, being an Islamic female student creates even greater challenges (Akanwa, 2015). Some participants had to develop coping mechanisms to fit into the new system, while others used the Western university's support systems to overcome their culture shock. Safa was lucky to live with a family that had lived in the UK for some time, allowing her to interact with their neighbors and visit diverse social places. This helped her learn and assimilate to the new culture with ease. Rabab also argues that she assumed a positive attitude that psychologically prepared her to fit in the new system. Despite some negative experiences during her studies at the Western university, which she paints as a non-issue, she was generally comfortable interacting with locals. However, my experience was different because I had no

people to help me bridge the cultural gap, extending my adjustment journey in the new environment. This created a psychological burden, which affected my academic performance.

Sukeina narrates her negative experiences with the foreign culture, citing aspects such as culture, language, religion, level of education, learning preferences, and society's attitude towards international students. She views such elements as a hindrance to optimal academic performance. As her children and husband were initially unable to speak English, she had to assume the responsibility of accompanying them everywhere. This eventuality caused her stress because she had to balance her social life and academic demands.

I faced similar challenges with my new cultural experiences, mainly due to my deep beliefs concerning relations with peers and academic staff, which made me feel insecure and constantly under pressure to fit in the new environment. My participation in multicultural classes was instrumental in providing opportunities for interaction, allowing me to learn ways to adapt and appreciate new cultures. Indeed, my sincerely held religious and cultural taboos concerning social rules, behavior, and lifestyle constantly led to inner conflict, resulting in anxiety. Initially, I lost my confidence in my abilities because of my religious beliefs (emphasis on respecting those in authority, such as instructors), making participating in casual conversations or class discussions challenging. To this end, I could not ask questions during lessons for fear of breaking such deeply held beliefs.

This led to my isolation, bewilderment, alienation, and confusion. I had this strong sense of attachment to my culture, always portraying my peer students in the Western university as "foreigners" when responding to their nation's ignorance concerning my Libyan culture. Such an approach would then create confusion, positioning me as neither an insider nor an outsider. This limited my ability to make relationships with Canadian-born students to avoid the discomfort of

cultural conflict. I explained my frustrations to my husband and a few Libyan friends, who encouraged me to remain strong and focused. Although their encouragement did not eliminate the loneliness, it did help me push on with my studies.

All the participants of this research agree that Western culture, which supports women's independence, is key to individual success and the entire community. However, transitioning from a conservatism culture caused the participants stress, confusion, and anxiety. Restrictive social norms constrain one's thinking, enclosing them in social cocoons that only benefit the male gender. The restrictive standards of Islamic cultures teach women to be submissive and passive information consumers by demonizing non-Islamic cultures. The power of globalization has made it possible for people across the globe to go far and wide in search of education (Aydin, 2020). This allows Libyan women to interact with people from different cultures that are more open to women's rights. Despite the tensions the participants experienced during their transition to a new culture, such exposure made them understand what they have been missing in their life.

Although the participants cited that they initially perceived the foreign culture as intrusive, their objective perceptions placed their thinking at a level playing ground with their peers from the host country. Furthermore, the host nation students tend to be ethnocentric, often judging the Libyan women's practices, such as wearing a veil or lack of fluency in English, as "foreign." This judgment may be a blessing in disguise because it offers the research participants an opening to re-evaluate their stand concerning some of the restrictive norms back home. For instance, although the participants perceived wearing the hijab as a celebrated and religious practice back home, some others (non-Muslims) think that it symbolizes oppression against women associated with restrictive cultural practices such as submissiveness to men, which limits their independence. Thus, their initial standpoint on wearing a hijab created tensions with the host country students' views.

Still, the Libyan female students had renewed thinking before the end of their academic journey abroad by accepting others' perspectives without losing their Libya-Muslim identity.

This argument corresponds to Beukeboom and Burger's (2017) ideas that social stereotypes and categorization play a fundamental and pervasive role in social judgment, perceptions, and interactions. The authors acknowledge that although stereotypes are functional in ways that allow individuals to make sense of their complex social environment, they produce prejudices and discrimination when the victims are treated based on stereotypic expectancies. For instance, Safa, who admits that her culture demands that women remain under the watchful eye of a male guardian, refused to be subject to such a restrictive rule when a Libyan male student constantly stalked her, prompting her to report him to authorities. My intention is not to glorify ethnocentrism, but to highlight its positive contribution to Libyan female students during their interaction with their new environment.

On the flip side, ethnocentrism contributed to the Libyan students' anxiety associated with culture shock. Thankfully, the Western university faculties anticipated such a scenario, prompting them to create events and spaces that would promote cultural relativism and diversity. Such environments contributed to the psychological well-being of the Libyan female learners, supporting them to remain confident as they sought to achieve a balance between their culture and the host one. With such environments, they could adjust and adopt a positive attitude towards their academic work as they learned new social norms. This striving for a balance between the known and the new is evident in the participants' narrations, in which they pinpoint some aspects of Libyan culture they feel are restrictive and require change if their country is to remain competitive in the global sphere. For instance, all the participants agree that the social expectation that places household chores on women limits their ability to focus on their academic work. The participants

learned and adjusted to the new culture while discerning some of their conservatism cultural teachings, achieving a balance amidst competing demands.

Managing challenges when returning to Libya

The acquisition of new cultural values during their study at an international university created tensions with the participants' native social norms, making their transition back to Libya challenging. Some participants, such as Sukeina and Rabab, found themselves engaged in a heated debate with their colleagues and students in their attempt to introduce foreign cultural ideals. Such instances would elicit difficult conversations, exposing the participants to humiliation and forcing them to withhold their ideas. For example, Sukeina narrates the challenges she encountered when explaining the importance of incorporating Western values and leaving behind some of the more retrogressive Libyan social norms. During such discussions, her Libyan colleagues would perceive her ideas as foreign and misplaced, prompting her to avoid similar debate in future. This indicates the need for more opportunities for the exposure of Libyan girls to the global space, which will create sufficient numbers to drive the agenda for change in Libyan social norms that are restrictive to women's progress. Safa also faced resistance when she suggested policy changes that would promote changes in the Libyan education system. locking out women's participation in decision-making.

Current Libyan legislation allows for some degree of independence and autonomy for women. However, with the historical authoritarian nature of the Libyan state that accommodates Islamic values, both men and women experience limitations on their freedoms. Women experience additional restrictions associated with social pressures that limit their ability to act independently. Women also suffer abuse and violence that often goes unreported mainly due to the social stigma attached to making independent decisions beyond the confines of social and family structures

(United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022). Women who chooses to act unilaterally tend to become social outcasts, subjected to humiliation for being disloyal. For instance, the requirement that males occupy leadership positions limits women's decision-making participation. This explains why Sukeina's efforts to challenge the status quo were unsuccessful because the male-dominated leadership structure in the education system perceived her as a woman.

Pursuing higher education without getting married exposes Libyan women to suspicion and disapproval from society, making it a challenge for them to search for a spouse. In Libya, the man is the head of the household; hence, staying single after attaining marriageable age is taboo (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022), while those who marry younger men are scorned by society. This trajectory explains why most participants traveled abroad for higher education with their husbands and children. This decision to take their family with them was critical in cushioning the participants against potential stereotypical judgments back at home associated with changes in gender relations.

Moreover, with the Islamic culture perpetuating men's roles in a family structure as the providers, most Libyan women do not see the importance of pursuing higher education beyond the college degree level. After all, they grow up believing that even with a higher level of education and financial independence, society expects them to remain humble and answerable as a mother and a wife under a man's rule (Aydin, 2020). Although pursuing a master's or doctoral degree would enhance Libyan women in their careers and help them evolve society (as exemplified by the participants in this study), not many Libyan women accept this idea yet. This is unfortunate, as higher education qualifications would help women engage in human rights protection and gender equality while embracing racial, cultural, and religious solidarity at the same time.

Libyan female students with children face increased challenges in their efforts to undertake higher education. The dual role of student and mother adds complexities, as they are required to balance their roles as scholars, parents, wives, and professionals. Pursuing higher education abroad adds to the complexity for these women, because they lack a support system. For instance, the participants in this study have only their husbands as a support, meaning that if their partners are engaged in a career elsewhere, no one else could take responsibility for household chores. Only a few husbands would be willing to offer support with household chores even when not engaged with career. Perhaps, if they were studying in Libya, some of their relatives would come to support them with child care and other family chores such as cooking and washing clothes and dishes. The lack of support is a source of mental and physical exhaustion for Libyan female students, potentially affecting their academic work in scheduling and performance. The respondents in this study acknowledge that they received some support from their spouses. Nevertheless, such supportive assistance may not always be available, and not every Libyan female student is able to travel abroad for higher education accompanied by a spouse. As a participant in this study, I had to travel with my husband, which helped me overcome the challenge of criticism back home.

Furthermore, the idea that women graduate students must undergo these complexities and then return to work in a society that does not recognize their efforts can be quite discouraging. The strict Libyan cultural and Islamic rules do not welcome women's independence, and an attempt to skirt such laws would expose an individual to isolation. Such circumstances are a demotivating source for female learners. What is required is an enabling environment created through instituting programs that target female learners after college to encourage them to continue their education beyond the average level. This approach would create a large pool of Libyan female scholars who

could then successfully challenge some of the cultural norms that hinder women's participation in decision-making in Libyan institutions.

The respondents in this study acknowledge that they received some support from their spouses. Nevertheless, such supportive assistance may not always be available, and not every Libyan female student is able to travel abroad for higher education accompanied by a spouse. These restrictions force married female Libyan students to make the choice between separating from their families (when it is impossible for their families to travel with them) or becoming temporary single parents. Neither of these options would be acceptable to most Libyan students, their families, or society. Safa acknowledges facing criticism back home because people could not accept the notion of a Muslim woman traveling abroad alone without a Mahram. Neither did the Libyan students she met at the British universities condone her idea of traveling alone; she admits such issues affected her psychologically.

Even worse, Libyan women who travel abroad through a scholarship have to bear the cost of childcare services not covered in the program. These services can be expensive. This forces female learners to use their savings or to work extra hours to pay the bills. It would be helpful for Western universities, Libyan authorities, or the host countries to design integrated approaches to fill this childcare gap. For example, Western universities' policies and procedures could be friendlier towards student mothers. Although some of the participants acknowledged that the lecturers and supervisors were empathetic and understood the dual role of student mothers, there are no set policies and procedures in the universities to support the idea. For instance, my instructor extended my timeline to complete my dissertation after my child fell sick, an adjustment I found helpful because, without such consideration, it would have been impossible for me to meet the academic deadline for the final submission. The Libyan authorities and scholarship providers

should engage with the program's beneficiaries to delineate some of these challenges. Such engagement would prompt them to cover childcare services by including an allowance in the sponsorship deal and/or subsidized childcare services. They may consider formulating standard and inclusive policies to reduce the cost of childcare, health services, and schools. This would not only promote inclusivity, but would also encourage more Libyan women to pursue higher education abroad.

Assimilation strategies adopted by women

Libyan females typically face masculine hegemony and patriarchy in their workplaces, including schools. This relegates them to an uneven playing field with their male peers, who perceive suggestions of equality as a threat to their position. Allowing women to introduce new policies that favor a female child's progress might adversely affect male children, which male authorities deem inconsistent with their culture (Chase, 2015). Despite all the participants in this research agreeing that they gained significant insights through their experience in the Western university education system, the environment when they return home to Libya inhibits their ability to introduce their learned lessons within the education system. For instance, Sukeina makes attempts on the issue of introducing policy changes in the education system in Libya. She argues that she will offer the relevant stakeholders' suggestions to improve the Libyan universities' current situation by encouraging workshops and seminars to drive knowledge sharing among colleagues.

Safa adopts a similar tone to Sukeina's. She argues that as a university teacher, she strives to incorporate new teaching and learning styles that she never had the opportunity to experience during her days as a student. She also takes the initiative to share her knowledge and experience with colleagues. Her suggestions illustrate her inability to impact the system significantly, because

her actions are only confined to her own institution and her own classes. Safa's efforts would offer a benchmark point for other institutions of higher learning, initiating the change process. Rabab takes the same route in expressing how she will contribute to improving the education system in Libya. She suggests introducing changes in the classroom setting concerning the teaching approach. These participants' suggestions would be more beneficial if relevant stakeholders in the education sector picked them up and instituted structural and policy changes, cultivating and sustaining the changes for the benefit of the entire nation.

I plan to inspire policy changes when I return to Libya by revising outdated pedagogical strategies. I pledge to make changes in the education policy in Libya to adopt international standards, but I am not certain whether I will overcome the challenges faced by my peer participants in this research. With families in Libya regarding families with daughters and sons who have acquired Western-level education as heroes in their society, increased female leadership can tap into such a wave to increase the number of females pursuing higher education. This will help change the current social narrative by providing Libyan society with a reference point away from the traditional social relationships dominated by patriarchal ideologies, which is what the participants in this study are striving to achieve.

The study participants voiced their understanding that classifications of men vs. women dominate Libyan social systems, encompassing all control of collective authority, sexual access, and access to the public, political, economic, social spaces, and subjectivity, as well as the production of knowledge within inter-subjective relations. By perceiving gender from a social lens deconstruction, inequality connects to systems of male dominance where patriarchal ideologies control cognitive constructs of the masses, including, but not limited to, social relations. Libyans often use Islamic religion to reinforce social order, like gender, which is a function of the status

quo across the state. This culminates in the institutionalization of women's societal role (Abrahanyan et al., 2019).

It is observable from the participant narrations that patriarchy and gender inequality are mutually reinforcing systems of dominance. For instance, Sukeina, Rabab, and Safa face challenges with their efforts to initiate policy changes within the education system, mainly due to patriarchal ideologies that reinforce male dominance. Members who deviate from the gender order face suppression. In this context, hegemonic masculinity prevails as the norm, and any other form of gender expression and relations are suspect, foreign, other, abnormal, and subject to delineation. According to Vinkenburg et al. (2011), society views women as emotional but men as objective and rational, making it difficult for people to entrust women with leadership. These perceptions undermine women's leadership characteristics such as emotional tone, awareness of patterns, interdependence, wholes and contexts, synthesizing, intuition and personalistic perception, which depict women as relational in their leadership approaches. Instead, the Libyan society seems to relate to domination and power in men's leadership. The Libyan female students' experiences with the patriarchal ideologies challenge their transition back to Libya. Therefore, the participants promote the conviction that women must work to neutralize gender inequalities and transform the historical structures in the society that have worked against Libyan women; the participants in this study cannot overlook the dominance of patriarchy and its intersection with gender inequality.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Next Steps in Libyan Higher Education

The gaps in the Libyan education system pinpoint the need for renewed thinking away from the Islamic laws that reinforce patriarchal ideologies. The Libyan educational system requires global thinkers shaped by external learning environments such as those described by the participants in this study. I included gained from exposure in western universities. With my new perceptions, my next steps are as discussed below.

I believe that this opportunity has renewed my aspirations. I position myself as a global thinker, setting aside the norms I experienced and believed earlier in my life to accommodate an open mind that contextualizes every issue affecting humanity against international standards, particularly within the education sector where my career aspirations are. For instance, I feel that the Libyan education system should benchmark global standards. I also perceive some traditional norms as detrimental to Libya's progress. This is because such cultural norms, which assume patriarchal patterns, have hindered women's progress and the country at large for the longest time. The predominantly patriarchal environment limits the country's potential to benefit from women's economic contributions.

With my skills and knowledge, I am optimistic that I will positively contribute to the Libyan nation's progress by shaping policies that will change the historical and structural inadequacies that have seen the country lag behind, mainly on women's issues. The vast challenges I faced in my journey to attain higher education qualifications from Western universities were learning experiences. I now have the opportunity to initiate changes in the education sector that

will help minimize the possibility of similar experiences for women wishing to earn advanced education from abroad while also increasing their participation in every sector of Libyan society.

By leveraging the knowledge and concepts I have gained, I can inspire policy changes in my country. For instance, I will actively participate in educational programs and engage the Ministry of Education to change outdated pedagogical strategies for improving education and student success. I anticipate assuming the role of an expert to ensure the education policy in my home country adopts international best practices. I will use my experience to work collaboratively with the Ministry of Education to improve the support services for students, particularly female learners, attending Western universities. This will be critical in creating responsive support services that reflect the situation on the ground, helping the learners adjust easily and enhancing their academic performance. Such services will also help ensure that the students complete their studies, avoiding cases of dropout due to frustrations. I will also strive to create platforms where my home country will collaborate with Western universities to identify gaps in their support services and develop mechanisms that will compensate for them.

Additionally, I aim to foster global awareness and international collaboration in Libyan classrooms. I will organize international trips to help students gain exposure to different cultures. I will also invite foreign language assistants to bring their experiences into Libyan classrooms. I can confidently use modern technology, such as social networks and video conferencing, to expose learners to foreign cultures. I will employ the knowledge and teaching approaches I experienced at my Western university to impart knowledge to my students. For instance, I will utilize student-centered strategies to facilitate student engagement and ensure they participate in the learning process. I would never have thought of such a strategy were it not for my interaction with the

Western university education system. To this end, I believe my transition to Libya from my Western university will ultimately benefit my country.

The views of my peer participants who have already transitioned to Libya indicate that their journey has not been an easy one. Therefore, I intend to collaborate with like-minded individuals, institutions, and stakeholders to realize incremental gains. Indeed, I believe that with concerted and sustained efforts from feminist groups, Libya will realize progress, creating a conducive environment that affords equality for all.

The participants in this research who have transitioned back to Libya acknowledge the systems back home requires change. However, they express their reservation about the realization of this change anytime soon. Their comments concerning their experience with the system demonstrate the persistence of a deeply embedded patriarchal ideology in the education system. Such a scenario has forced them to retract to self-proclaimed approaches that harbor limited impact in the social, educational, and political spheres. Without despising their efforts in genuinely striving to empower other learners and improve their educational experiences, the gender gap is a challenge for all of them (Lagdaf & Zoubir, 2018). The male-dominated environment and cultural beliefs that favor males over females is the most significant contributor to this scenario.

The participants in this research articulate the difference between Western education and Libyan pedagogies through narrations focusing on their lived experiences. Sukeina acknowledges that the Libyan teaching style fails to adopt mechanisms necessary to challenge students' critical thinking skills. For example, she cites a traditional reading comprehension class where teachers expose students to a text reading and pose subsequent questions to test their understanding. According to Sukeina, such an approach only focuses on understanding word meaning and answering specific questions, something that students can still achieve without actually reading

and understanding the corresponding text. She also pinpoints the aspect of teacher attitude and perceptions as influencing the teaching process outcome. Using ineffective teaching strategies contributes to poor learning outcomes because they demotivate learners. This is because my experience with Libyan pedagogy, similar to Sukeina's, did not offer us adequate skills that would have been helpful when transiting to higher education abroad.

Rabab asserts a similar analogy by highlighting the student-oriented education style in the university she attended which offers learners an opportunity to discover and learn more. She also highlights the importance of an optimal teacher-student ratio in enhancing the classroom environment. As well, Rabab notes that the Libyan teaching process is lecture-oriented, with students sitting before their teachers, listening and typing notes. Classroom collaboration is something she only witnessed in Western universities they attended.

By painting the Western educational system as a benchmark point for the best student experience, Safa takes it a notch higher. She argues that Western university pedagogy is diverse, autonomous, active, and well equipped, with exciting and motivating learning environments, unlike the Libyan education system. She also notes the Western university student-centeredness, with classes being well equipped amidst an environment conducive to active learning. International students from different cultural backgrounds make up a large percentage of students in Western universities, creating diversity in the learning environment. With globalization, students must remain culturally competent, enabling them to fit into and work in any situation. Thus, the multicultural classroom exposes learners to an experience they are likely to face in the real world, enhancing their employability in the international arena.

Safa also acknowledges how instructors are very cooperative and willing to support and help students. She makes note of the university board regulations and policies requiring induction

for International Students' Days before the academic program starts. Staff members and course coordinators are available for inquiries in such programs. Course goals, objectives, outlines, assessment methods, and assignment deadlines are transparent and open online through the digital blackboard system for day one of the course.

In her critique of the Libyan education system, Safa argues that Libyan universities still follow traditional teaching styles. Learning classes are teacher-centered, where students are primarily passive learners seated in neat rows and rarely taking part in the lesson. Classes and buildings lack facilities, and even essentials like toilets and cafes are in deplorable condition. The learning environment is generally unhealthy, rooms are without heating or air conditioning, and most of the chairs and desks are uncomfortable. Staff members are very unapproachable. The library overflows with dusty old books that are not classified, so it usually takes time to find a specific book. Even worse, course goals are not generally clear for most students, who are also unaware of university policies and regulations.

I also confirm the assertions of all the other participants by arguing that the pedagogical approaches of Western universities more often assume a student-centered model, where the instructors engage learners in teaching and learning that focus on theory and research-based practices. Such a strategy can accompany any instructional format, including but not limited to online learning, blended classrooms, and residential instructions. Western pedagogical approaches also offer instructors distinct justifications for considering posters and other technologies to facilitate student learning. In my observation, the Libyan education pedagogy strategy radically differs from that of Western universities. Specifically, the Libyan pedagogical approach adheres to centralized decisions and curriculum patterns that pre-determine teaching designs. The

departmental heads take the lead in these strategies and emphasize the need to follow set teaching policies, which often harbor flaws and are detached from classroom reality.

Libya's lack of adequate facilities limits the teachers' ability to exercise flexibility in their pedagogy. For example, they lecture in crowded halls, making it challenging to develop mutual relationships with the students. The learning environment becomes a battle for the survival of the fittest, where only the most competent students can grasp the teaching content. Therefore, students pursue their education, treating each course as a requirement for passing the end-of-semester exam instead of a critical activity for building their personal and professional path.

I also observed that, unlike in Western universities, the teaching approach in Libyan universities is teacher-centered. The teachers take control of the process, with students only assuming a passive role. The question section takes only a few minutes at the end of the lectures, and sometimes it does not happen at all. Student engagement is minimal, which generally causes them to develop a minimal interest in the teaching process. Similarly, group work and peer collaboration are minimal, with the instructors not factoring such elements as part of their mentoring and modelling. Therefore, student interaction occurs only by default, where learners may take the initiative to organize themselves into groups to discuss some topics during their free time.

I note that using posters and other technologies is minimal in Libya, with teaching following the traditional approach of the instructor disseminating content before the class. The students then have to follow through with the lecture and handouts covering areas the instructor did not cover in class. Thus, the Libyan pedagogical experience comprises traditional teaching strategies and embraces little by way of technological input. It also limits interaction between the instructor and students and the students themselves.

All the participants in this research made similar observations concerning the differences between the pedagogical approaches of Western and Libyan universities. Such experiences changed their perception concerning what effective teaching entails, influencing the participants' approach to teaching for those who have already transited back home. The differences in teaching styles challenged the participants in their initial days when they joined the Western university system. Still, they could tap into the different resources available, such as the availability of instructors with a positive attitude, the library and technology, while adhering to set course objectives and goals to match their skills with the required standards. However, by the time they finished their Western university education, they identified the Western pedagogical approaches as a must-have in class, informing their interaction with the students and peers in Libya. They wish that the Libyan education system could allow a policy change to accommodate some of these experiences on a large scale. Despite the prevailing challenges that limit their ability to introduce such policy changes, they still employ personal initiative to improve the classroom experience for their students.

The participants in this study affirm how they share their earned knowledge and skills with their colleagues in Libya during their interactions and personal levels. Such assertions illustrate the missing links in the teacher training curriculums that differ from the Western education systems. A teacher education curriculum equips teachers with adequate skills on how best to handle each student for optimal learning experiences. Thus, their application of such skills is evident in the classroom environment. In contrast, Libyan instructors use deficient teaching approaches, such as teacher-oriented presentation style, exam-focused learning limited to theory, and a less practical approach, a perspective all participants in this study hold. All of this indicates training deficiencies that require a total overhaul. All of this indicates training deficiencies that

require a total overhaul because all the participants required additional training to match their skills with those of peers in Western universities.

In their entirety, the participants' arguments portray a case of transformed Libyan females who are ready to challenge the status quo. Their newly acquired knowledge, skills, and cultural values prepare them to question the many obstacles presented by Libyan Islamic values and other structural impediments characterized by male dominance. They acknowledge that if the Libyan education system met international standards, they would have fewer challenges with their academic work in Western universities. They also argue that if Libyan culture was more open to accommodating women in society, they would not have so many challenges integrating into their new learning environment in Western universities because the Libyan women would assume similar ideals to those in Western culture, making the transition less challenging. With a new worldview, the participants are keen to note such impediments and promise to change the education system and people's way of thinking. What they had not anticipated was the strong degree of opposition to their suggestions.

The leadership in the institutions they manage to secure employment are the most significant obstacles to their proposals. These institutions strive to maintain the status quo at all costs towards reinforcing patriarchal ideology, forcing the participants to confine their proposals to a personal initiative circle, adopting changes they introduce at the individual level. Such approaches will have spiral and incremental effect in the long run, influencing the direction education system in Libya assumes going into the future. This is a case of the underutilization of human capital and, more so, women's participation in Libyan progress. The male-dominated institutional leadership perceives enlightened women as a threat to their survival, motivating them to work harder to maintain the status quo.

The Libyan education system would benefit from a return on investment by creating structures accommodating Libyan female students and their peers pursuing higher education in Western universities. Such arrangements would tap into their knowledge, skills, and cultural competence to lay the groundwork for overcoming structural and historical obstacles. With the current state of affairs, where the participants allude to facing challenges in their effort to introduce changes in the education system, Libya does not optimally benefit from the resources they have invested in the female students through the sponsorship program because the educational structures restrict their participation in key policy making processes. The policy proposal that instituted the sponsorship program was a move in the right direction. However, stakeholders must evaluate the benefits they accrue from the program and learn from any identified gaps towards making changes on how best they can set objectives to address any hindrances to utilizing the labour capital of these women.

Briefly, these participants understand that women's participation in public life, as is the case in the stable and prosperous societies they lived firsthand when studying in Western universities, is an investment. The challenges they experience as they transit back to Libya imply that society is not prepared to offer women the voice they never had. This trajectory is not a reflection of the many promises the politicians made after the fall of Gaddafi, when they vowed to establish a state that respects human rights (Lagdaf & Zoubir, 2018).

It is worth noting that the challenges the Libyan women currently face are much more significant than those they witnessed during the Gaddafi era, mainly due to the growing influence of Islamist currents that require women to abide by their principles (Ashour, 2016). I seek to demonstrate this situation through the words of an international education consultant, Sheherazade Kablan, who deplored the Libyan women's condition. She stated: “The intrusion of the Muslim

Brotherhood onto the Libyan revolutionary journey is a major reason for the deterioration of the economic and political situation in the country" (Muacati & Salah, 2020). The first instance demonstrating how the Muslim Brotherhood was branding its authority across the movement occurred in a ceremony celebrating the transfer of power in Tripoli in 2012. During the event, a young woman, Serah Meslati, a TV presenter, had to step down from the podium because she wore no headscarf; another presenter with a *hijab* on her head replaced her (Muacati & Salah, 2020). This scenario illustrates how the veil perpetuates gender inequality in Libya; it has a connotation as a form of women's submission to men. Requesting the TV presenter to step down from the podium because of failing to put on a veil demonstrates how certain religious requests impede women's dignity and rights, with many Libyan men equating the wearing of the veil to religious rights (Howard, 2014). The context illustrates how the veil symbolizes female oppression as a political tool, with women who refuse to wear it publicly humiliated. The TV presenter is a symbol of change in this contest. Although not saying it loudly, she had taken the bold step to exercise her freedom of expression through a dress code that the patriarch forces have for the longest time used to assert their dominance over women.

The participants in this study faced various forms of discrimination in the Western world as they pursued higher education abroad. Some participants, like Rabab and Sukeina, argue that wearing the veil exposed them to scornful looks, with others had to endure racial slurs due to their symbolic clothing that associates them with Islam. Therefore, the veil can obstruct Libyan women's freedom and independence abroad. Being a form of identity that the participants have internalized, putting on a veil is a religious practice that they embrace to conform to cultural and religious expectations. They feel it makes them complete women, since that is what they have been socialized to believe (Krivenko, 2012). However, wearing the veil exposes them to judgments in

a foreign land, which is a source of psychological pressure that increases their anxiety, adversely affecting their academic performance. Even with their open mind after exposure to Western world values that give them the will to think independently, failing to put on a veil once they return to Libya would expose them to judgment similar to the one experienced by the TV presenter. Therefore, the participants in this research have to put on two personalities upon returning to Libya: one that externally resonates with Libyan society, and another that internally resonates with women's freedom, which is associated with the Western world. A resolution to these two personalities is for the participants in this study to join hands with like-minded stakeholders to drive small and incremental policy changes to support the course, creating a conducive environment where Libyan women can occupy equal spaces like their male counterparts.

However, putting on two personalities is a conflict because, at some point one must choose which belief system to fully adopt. With the Libyan social environment being intolerant of foreign values, the participants often have to comply with such expectations upon returning to Libya, which they deem essential to find peace within themselves. Although institutions of higher learning should be at the forefront in disapproving some of the retrogressive social values, the Libyan Islamic and cultural values are so entrenched that they brand themselves into every aspect of life, making it difficult to challenge the status quo. Programs that raise awareness of the Islamic religion would significantly improve the Western university environment for Libyan women. I believe it is high time they viewed the veil with an open mind and analyzed it from the gender equality perspective. This would thrust them to disembarking from the too much attachment they have with the veil, giving them the independence they require to act autonomously.

In a different scene illustrating violence against women, Salwa Bugaighis, a Libyan human rights and political rights activist, was assassinated in 2014, and her husband, Issam al-Qallal,

kidnapped. During the same period, four other women also died at the hands of assassins, imposing fear among women. Such incidences illustrate the opposing forces keen to use Islamic principles to silence any women's voice that seeks to destabilize the status quo. Thus far, and amid such a fragmented political scene in the country, most women do not expect their opinions to be sought or heard, or for women's rights to lead the conversation in the nation's political corridors (Muacati & Salah, 2020). This explains why women participating in this research choose to enclose themselves in a self-made cocoon where they tend to get out of the way to devise their ways of influencing the process at a personal level and within their limited spaces. Libyan women are often caught in a difficult situation, as they constantly struggle to gain recognition in the public sphere regardless of their qualifications and ambition (Lagdaf & Zoubir, 2018). The men leading the institutions tend to view them as second-class citizens, reflecting the systematic structures and policies that keep females "in their place" according to Islamic tradition.

According to Carlisle (2018), although some women hail from family backgrounds that are open and supportive, they still face a myriad of obstacles to their aspirations to influence change by introducing feminism in Libya. In a society where patriarchal ideologies persist, decision-makers only attempt to push women's issues to win global sympathy and United Nations funding. The participants in this study are typical examples of women from open and supportive families. Despite their willingness to initiate change in society, the hurdles are more potent than the opportunities for change. Safa affirms that her efforts to make policy changes in some institutions never attracted adequate support, illustrating how decision-makers in Libyan institutions fail to appreciate women's input. She argues that centralization in the decision-making process is a major issue in the education system in Libya that will likely persist for years. Her argument illustrates how the historical patriarchal structures still dominate the scene.

Sukeina, in her approach, commits to adopting a positive attitude in handling students. Although she appreciates the current program in the university called “Lunch and Learn”, which allows Ph.D. candidates and professors to discuss their research papers in-depth, this initiative still has limited impact on the process. With the Libyan education system lagging concerning their approach to pedagogical styles, a total overhaul of the system would achieve significant improvements. As Sukeina argues, similar workshops can positively influence the process. However, this can only happen if like-minded individuals who have identified gaps employ concerted efforts to introduce policy changes that challenge traditional beliefs that have characterized the process.

Although Rabab admits that she uses plenty of initiatives to enhance the teaching environment by adopting a student-centred approach, she was reluctant to suggest potential efforts towards an overall system change, illustrating her thoughts concerning the hurdles that face such attempts. Although female instructors who have attained higher education from Western universities are willing to offer their input to revitalize the system to levels that correspond to international standards, their efforts are restricted to individual initiatives that lie within their reach in a system that is largely constrained by patriarchal ideologies that remain resistant to change.

The patriarchal system propagates another invisible aspect, which is most Libyan women's perception of discrimination, or lack thereof. In their study, White and Ozkanli (2011) found that women fail to perceive any bias in their workplaces. These researchers discovered two significant themes: *resistance discourse*, which entails explicit gender discrimination and female competencies, and *essentialist discourse*, which involves denial of gender discrimination and female competencies. The authors argue that essentialist discourse prevails when women do not want to create the impression that they are fragile or incompetent, thus acknowledging

discrimination. Such a view reinforces the patriarchal system, denouncing a feminine category in the workplace and exposing women to a complex dilemma that forces them to remain true to their femininity by never striving to attain leadership roles. This is typical of the study participants who, since returning to Libya, have resorted to silence for fear of judgement by the male leadership.

All the participants who have already returned to Libya have had similar experiences at both the personal and academic levels. At the individual level, they all acknowledge that they have an open mind that stands way beyond their cultural traditions and beliefs that characterized their thinking before experiencing the Western culture. Their interaction with Western culture during their education journey allowed them to experience the benefits of existing in an open society where women can independently exercise their will without men's control. This is contrary to Libya's cultural norms, which dictate that a male guardian must always accompany them or seek advice before making a decision. With their newfound understanding of freedom, they are motivated to intervene and influence the process, a personal conviction that would never have been possible had they not sought higher education abroad.

The study participants are also willing to lead from the front and occupy spaces initially reserved for men in Libya. For instance, I feel empowered to engage different stakeholders and assume a leadership position in steering policy change. I must acknowledge that this would have been impossible if I had remained in Libya throughout my education journey. Although she has been unsuccessful in achieving her goals to change the education system in Libya, Safa affirms having a similar motivation. She argues that her attempts thus far to facilitate policy changes in the education system have been met with resistance.

Consequently, the participants' acquisition of English language competence was a source of confidence, empowering them to communicate and interact with diverse individuals across the

globe. The language barrier is a source of anxiety during interaction (Akanwa, 2015). Individuals in institutions of higher learning often use the English language to communicate, mainly due to the diverse student and workforce diversity. Thus, female students who have acquired higher education accreditation from Western universities are well versed in English. Such a skill enhances their ability to articulate their ideas better than their peers, providing them with the opportunity to command respect and appreciation. For instance, Sukeina narrates her experience with the "Lunch and Learn" program, where the university invites qualified professors to interact with university staff and students during workshops and seminars. The effectiveness of these interactions depends on the participants' ability to communicate effectively. Sukeina feels such opportunities are essential in pinpointing gaps in the presenter's research proposals. She can confidently participate in such conversations because her English command enables her to articulate each point well. I also feel empowered to expose my students to international cultures through foreign trips and invite foreign language assistants to bring their experiences to Libyan classrooms. I can affirm that without my English language proficiency, I would never have the confidence to introduce such initiatives, even when I know they would benefit the students. Therefore, exposure to the international education system is an advantage to the participants in this research because it boosts their confidence, which helps them overcome possible anxiety during interactions, a situation that enhances their well-being. Personal progress is at the heart of a person's adventure in new experiences and cultural competence, with the acquisition of a new language being the key to such growth.

Academically, the participants are empowered with knowledge and skills that benchmark international standards. In his research, Hegarty (2014) reinforces the argument that global learners' study in foreign nations because it offers them the confidence of being better than peers

upon returning home. Given this argument, universities in the Western world have for decades embraced international learners who meet their admission and tuition criteria and other considerations. International students find solace in their quest for international education, knowing that their investment would culminate in the acquisition of competent education and training. All participants acknowledge that the Libyan education system is deficient and does not adequately prepare students for a global market. The pedagogy, curriculum content, and lack of resources contribute to the deficiencies. Students in the higher education system in Libya lack technological access and facilities such as fully equipped libraries, which limits their ability to access information from diverse sources. This adversely affects their critical thinking skills and knowledge to compare different information sources and learning materials to determine which are most valid and authentic.

Furthermore, the pedagogical approach in Libya is teacher-centered and directive, a learning environment that limits learner engagement. With their new knowledge and skills, each participant is willing to go out of their way to change the old analogy. Sukeina argues that she is motivated to influence the classroom environment to assume a student-centered approach by being tolerant, selfless, and considerate. She is open to sharing her knowledge and ideas on new teaching methods. Rabab argues that she would influence the teaching environment positively by allowing learners to lead the process, making teaching and learning fun, and setting clear instructions and goals while introducing extra-curricular activities and games. Safa asserts that she will use her new academic qualifications to make a difference in society. As a university teacher, she commits to including unique teaching and learning styles unknown to her during her days as a student. She also offers to share her knowledge and experience with my work colleagues. I, as both researcher

and participant in this study, believe my academic qualifications empower me with global competency, which boosts my confidence for career growth.

Although the participants in this study only propose policy changes without a specific emphasis on the issue of teacher education, it would be imperative for Libyan authorities to consider this area. This is because even if the policy changes suggest a change in teaching style without a change in the teacher education curriculums that include refresher courses for those already in teaching practice, poor pedagogical approaches would persist. Without despising the participants' efforts to employ personal initiatives to share knowledge and skills with colleagues, such an approach would only make minimal impact on the entire education system because their efforts are limited within their teaching institutions. It would only benefit the few instructors with a positive attitude towards change. Therefore, the lack of a structured mechanism the participants can utilize to influence the teaching environment is an obstacle that affects professional learning.

The gender system in Libya benefits patriarchy by connecting to inequality and suppression of women's voices. It is not enough to view gender as an interpretation of an individual's biological sex, which is how gender has been presented historically in Libyan women's rights circles and elsewhere across the globe (Abrahanyan et al., 2019). In articulating how gender relates to inequality in education, employment, and other social spheres, gender is not a noun but instead a "doing" uncontrollably linked to political and cultural intersections (Abrahamyan et al., 2019). In the context of inequality in education circles, gender evolves through historical structural patterns traceable within society, family, culture, politics, and the economy. The binary perception of gender inequality and women's education therefore must deconstruct from a social structure lens.

Networking is a critical element that can help overcome transitional challenges for Libyan female students after their education abroad. As an influential factor in increasing social capital,

the lack of a social network hinders the likelihood of promotion and increased authority (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). The participants in this study never alluded to any social network, which restricts their chances of promotion and authority. Although they avidly wish to change Libyan education policies to facilitate an equal playing field for both genders, they lack mentors to help them overcome the structural hindrances. This trend is associated with few women at the helm of leadership and men's unwillingness to identify with women and their issues. In their experiences within the institutions where they work, the participants who have already transited to Libya assert a workplace where leadership is gendered, exposing them to a gendered career context. Given the gendered bias, the male peers perceive participants in this study based on their gender instead of their leadership qualities. Such perceptions are a factor of patriarchal ideologies that have, through Libyan history, misconceived women's leadership by delianating them from participating in decision making process.

My changing understandings

Through my study, I have seen that a vast array of challenges the female Libyan students face are associated with Islamic ideology that reinforces patriarchy. Therefore, I resolve to use such insights to change my views on my long-held believes and attitudes while preserving my Islamic identity and the religious rules stipulated in the Holy Quran. This will help me to act and institutionalize actions that will revolutionize Libya towards global standards.

Different "I"

I acknowledge that the transition from Libya to the Western world in pursuit of higher education has not been easy. However, I have managed the hurdles to realize my dreams. When I

reflect on my efforts and achievements, the benefits of earning a Western university degree and my experiences with a new culture were greater than the challenges. These experiences were eye-opening, allowing me to benchmark the "old me" as a Libyan female in my home country and the "new me" with more Western values. I now understand why Libyan society treats families with daughters or sons who have attained Western education with respect and why such individuals are a success. I can now declare the education standards in my country as severely wanting amidst the backdrop of patriarchal ideologies and structures that permeate it. I feel proud to have overcome the vast challenges to achieve my goals of attending a Western university.

Many different reasons motivated my quest to pursue higher education in the West, but the high value of a Western university education was my primary motivating factor. My choice to study overseas has offered me the opportunity to achieve career goals while at the same time vastly improve my English, which is critical for global competence. With an internationally accredited education certification from a Western university, I enjoy the flexibility of working anywhere in the world, as this certification equips me with skills that meet international standards and thus enhances my confidence necessary for career growth. Studying at a Western university also offered me the opportunity to participate in the Global and Intercultural Engagement Honor program, offered by the university and which recognizes my experiences and engagement in academic and extra curriculum activities at home nation and abroad. This allows for the international learning experience to appear on academic transcripts upon graduation, which is an additional competency recognized internationally. Acquiring international certification in the teaching profession will be a significant advantage for me over peers who have only local accreditation.

Another motivating factor for me to study abroad was the lack of adequate skilled human capital in Libya. I now feel well qualified to weigh in and fill the gap Libya has been experiencing

for decades due to the chronic shortage of teaching staff at its universities. I am part of the country's change towards eliminating the dependence of higher learning institutions on foreign skilled expertise. Although our numbers are still low, I am more than ever motivated to influence the process while facilitating an environment that encourages Libyan women to pursue higher education in order to become appropriately equipped to teach their fellow Libyans.

This trajectory will have a cumulative effect by encouraging more and more Libyans to study at Western universities. In the long run, it will create a locally skilled workforce that will allow Libyans to learn locally without the need to go abroad to acquire Western-style education. This would be one way to sidestep the challenges of pursuing higher education in overseas universities. For instance, as a Libyan lecturer, I understand students' needs with regard to cultural expectations and social aspects. So, I would be able to better tailor my teaching to meet international standards while at the same time leveraging local structures to achieve set curriculum objectives. Therefore, by acquiring an international education, Libyans can eventually help fill the teaching gap at home so that future students will not need a scholarship to obtain the same level of education offered in the West. In the interim, studying overseas can provide an opportunity for career and professional growth for Libyans in the teaching profession.

Of particular note for my career aspirations, acquiring a Western university education positions me to earn the prestige and recognition that comes with such an academic achievement. Individuals in Libya who have higher education certifications from Western universities are respected and held in high esteem, whether at the community level or work environment. My pursuit of an international education makes me an asset within my family, because my skills and knowledge position me well in my career progress. This will help my family gain recognition and status in the society.

My parents always encouraged me to emulate other individuals who had sought a Western University education, which has inspired my ambition to be educated abroad. I feel like a conqueror for having walked the journey to the very end. Furthermore, coming from a collectivist culture where my achievement reflects on the entire community, I can stand tall to assert that I have something of precious value to take home. This makes me different from other individuals in Libya who, for one reason or another, had no opportunity to pursue an education path. Some female learners failed to complete their studies because they were discouraged from starting the journey due to the fear of experiencing a foreign culture, ostracization back home, or financial challenges.

By studying at a Western university, I have had the opportunity to attend the programs offered, which would not have happened if I had chosen to complete my studies in Libya. My choice has been instrumental in equipping me with the knowledge and skills required in the teaching field that corresponds to international standards. Also, a Western education prepares me to visit high-profile events such as academic conferences on challenges facing Libyan students in western universities; and institutions to meet with high-caliber professionals as a representative of my country or institution. I am confident that those I meet would appreciate my contributions to enhancing Libya's teaching profession and advancing it to the next level. Therefore, pursuing higher education at a Western university allows me to make a difference locally and internationally. My qualifications will help me access the necessary connections to bring resources to those who require them. I would never have envisaged such a scenario had I not decided to pursue higher education in the West.

I believe I have fulfilled my aims in attending a Western university, although I plan to leverage the knowledge and skills to gain additional training in leadership in future. Given the exposure I have achieved in a different environment away from home, I can attest that such an

experience has been a revelation, allowing me to view the world from a different perspective. My ascription to traditional cultural values in Libya often made me internalize even the harmful norms that have historically denied female children the opportunity to compete at the same level as their male counterparts. When I left Libya, I confined my thoughts to achieving personal and national goals. Now, as I near the completion of my studies, I feel that I have not only achieved these goals, but surpassed them because I never imagined coming out with a new perspective concerning the restrictive Libyan culture on women.

Power hierarchies characterize the structures and institutions that promote gender inequality, contributing to deepening divides within Libyan society. I believe that the participants in this study can work with other like-minded stakeholders towards implementing a values-based approach where gender inequality disappears from all spheres of life, including education. Such an approach would elicit progressive resistance against the notions of gender and patriarchy and how such structures impact values, behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes.

I will leverage opportunities such as the Libyan Minister of Foreign Affairs' current announcement concerning adopting a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). I acknowledge how challenging it has been to feminize the Libyan political infrastructure and to consider adopting feminism even at the foreign policy level. However, the new proposal is a move in the right direction. The feminist foreign policy aims to interact with other states, movements, and non-state actors in ways that promote peace, environmental integrity, and gender equality. The policy also seeks to enshrine, protect and promote human rights and disenfranchise racist, colonial, patriarchal, and male-dominated power structures (Martini, 2014). Additionally, it promises to allocate substantial resources to achieve set objectives. The FFP approach corresponds to the push

across all levers of influence by the exercise of those values in Libya and elsewhere, co-championed by feminist groups, activists, and similar movements in Libya and abroad.

Rethinking Obstacles and Next Steps

The traditional Libyan woman thinks differently from the enlightened woman who has traveled far and wide outside the country. The cognitive constructs and perceptions concerning the issues facing Libyan women differ significantly between the segment of the population exposed to Western culture and the segment that has yet to be exposed. Those who have not yet interacted with Western culture willingly embrace their cultural norms and religious values and treat them as part of their life's routine. Patriarchal ideologies colonized their minds through deeply entrenched patterns linked to their nature of socialization associated with Islamic teachings and concerning what entails being a typical Libyan woman. The participants in this study initially assumed these characteristics until they experienced Western culture firsthand, providing them with a different impression that empowered their thinking. This motivated them to want to change the Libyan education system and challenge the patriarchal ideologies that have made women's decision-making a challenge.

However, prior to leaving for Western universities, the participants, similar to their peers back in Libya, remained disconnected from feminist theory. They felt that the feminist framework delineates women from the rest of society. Given their socialization in Libya, they internalize the feeling that feminist theory labels women as haters of men and pursuers of unattainable rights. They are unsure which Libyan women would identify with or belong to it. The few who have managed to advance academically within the Libyan education system only see it as a mere scholarly concept that women use to justify their rights. They fail to view the model as an empowering tool, even when they know it worked elsewhere across the globe.

The Libyan cultural and religious norms often obscure the line that the feminist ideology does not speak for them. All too often, Libyan women associate feminism with liberation away from culture and religious circles; hence, they are scared because they secure a strong identity with their culture, community, and religion. Indeed, the traditional Libyan woman feels that feminism is alien and does not serve their needs. In a culture and religion that advocates for conservatism and shunning foreign cultural values, feminism equates to White Western feminism. The feminist models' discussion concerning oppression, equality, and marginalization is different for a Libyan Muslim woman socialized to reject everything from a foreign culture.

The above thinking patterns can explain why participants in this study find themselves in isolation whenever they attempt to influence the traditional structures in the education sector. At no point has any of them found adequate support, implying that their newly acquired experiences from the Western world will remain feministic and fail to resonate with anyone in their working environment. Thus, the female and male colleagues have the same reasoning: decision-making is not a place for a Libyan woman. The only opportunities they gain to influence the system are during interaction with colleagues who feel they would benefit from the female Libyan colleagues with experience with Western world pedagogy.

I challenge the single-sided view of feminism from the Western world lens; it would be critical for female Libyan students to employ feminism concerning identity, culture, religion, and community in Libya, which is unique to Libyan context and that resonates to both women and men. This approach is essential because feminism is not monolithic; hence, Islamic women can utilize it to judge their surroundings through Hadith and Quran. Moreover, Religious texts and interpretations influence part of feminist theory. Thus, perceiving it from the Quran's perspective

would be a revelation and help Libyan women find a footing in the Western world while also preserving a place in their traditional culture.

In my future projects, I will seek to examine how such an approach would have been helpful to equip the participants in this study with knowledge and gain a better understanding of their agency. Although the patriarchal ideology paints Islam as a male domain, a closer look at the Quran depicts Islam as a feminist religion. A Muslim woman cannot find a better place to represent equity, social justice, and rights than in the Quran, where Allah instructs women that they are equal to men and that men are not superior, and the only measure of superiority is our good deeds. According to Al Quran; 33:35: "the Muslim Men and women, the obedient men and women, the truthful men and women, the believing men and women…, Allah would forgive and reward them." Moreover, in the Quran, Allah never forces a woman to be married unwillingly but instructs father figures to accept a woman's permission before they marry. According to Al Quran; 4:19: "for those who believe, you are discouraged from inheriting women against their will, nor should you treat them with cruelty…". This demonstrates how Libyan men have used religion for their own advantage against the foundational precepts of Islam as a means to reinforce patriarchal ideology. Finally, although I searched the Quran, I could find no verse instructing women to serve men, or to cook, clean, and do all the household chores. Instead, the prophet (PBUH) asks men to help with housework and to treat women with humility, care, and virtue. Thus, in authentic Islam, women are neither marginalized nor oppressed. That they have been is an outcome of patriarchal attitudes that, through force, cement into cultural tradition. With my feminism, I can inspire the use of the Quran to challenge status quo in the Libyan society.

My feminism blossoms through the above readings of theory and the Quran, motivating me to understand feminism from my cultural and religious perspective. This approach helps me to

understand other forms of feminism and acknowledge them for what they are in their own form. It allows me to explore religion with open-mindedness and make plausible decisions accordingly. Such understanding motivates me to position my feminine view within the Libyan community. Although my approach to feminism may not resonate with most other Libyan woman, it offers me the tool to find my feminism and to understand perspectives of equality, oppression, marginality, and power.

I define my feminism as an empowering tool that advances women by making sense of their experiences concerning the Libyan religion, culture, and community. By employing this form of feminism, I believe I will be able to steer by anticipated changes in Libyan educational policy. It will also enhance my participation in educational programs and collaborate with the Libyan Ministry of Education to create a supportive plan for students seeking opportunities to pursue higher education in Western universities. As well, I will employ this feminist thinking to develop and steer programs that foster global awareness and international collaboration in Libyan classrooms.

My approach gains motivation from my fellow participants in this study, who have found it challenging to implement changes at a large-scale level. I believe influencing change in Libya requires mental preparation that factors in the root course of persistent patriarchal ideologies and finding gaps within their thinking to overcome the hurdles. By practicing feminism that perceives issues from the Quran, culture, religion, and community, I can find my identity within a society that is predisposed to reject foreign ideologies. This would help me fit in nicely without feeling a sense of guilt or even caving in to pressure from patriarchal forces keen to dismiss women's participation in decision-making. I choose to employ my approach because the bottom line is that the Libyan education system requires change, and it would take a courageous individual to

overcome the barriers. The changes would be necessary to prepare a better future for female Libyan students wanting to pursue higher education at Western universities, ensuring they do not meet as many challenges as the participants in this study have met.

With support from the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (PDF) 2020 adopted the Libyan-led forum (Ragrag, 2022). These developments are crucial to advancing feminist analogy in the Libyan context. I plan to engage with like-minded entities to realize progress in policy changes that would accommodate women in the decision-making process in the education sector. However, although the advocacy for a feminist policy approach is rife with potential, I must acknowledge that the journey to achieving full-blown Libyan feminism is far from complete. Recent attempts to launch feminist programs attracted anti-feminist protests in November 2021 in the capital of Tripoli. The protesters were against a Memorandum of understanding signed with the UN towards promoting a Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. In the memorandum, Libya must adhere to the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), but the protesters saw CEDAW as disregarding Islamic principles and values. The media joined the protest campaign by spreading the narrative that CEDAW, FFP, and WPS were at odds with Islamic sharia law. Meanwhile, the foreign minister, Elmangoush, who was advocating for FFP, has been facing exclusionary tactics from the presidential council, such as a ban from traveling and citations for alleged administrative violations (Ragrag, 2022).

Such developments illustrate a worrying trend where the political players are subjecting women to marginalization by using Sharia law to reinforce patriarchal ideology in Libya. Although the Libyan political system has had some improvements concerning the elevation of women to leadership positions, such as the foreign minister being female, the system still expects them to

conform to and preserve Libya's long-held patriarchal values. Society perceives anything contrary to Sharia laws as disrespecting the nation's founders. As a form of punishment, the current foreign minister is facing limitations to travel outside the country to frustrate her efforts of spearheading feminism. Such intimidations are likely to intimidate her to the point where she will be unable to further the feminist agenda; they also serve as a lesson and a warning to other female leaders who might be planning similar pursuits. The Libyan community historically accommodates women in the political sphere, so there is hope that someday feminism will fully take root in Libya.

Gaps in Knowledge

A vast array of research exists on international students' challenges during their academic journey in Western universities. The findings from these studies establish convergence on the diverse challenges that international students experience. However, previous research on the topic fails to consider such challenges from the perspective of Libyan female students. Although some studies such as the Chen & Tabassum, (2019) seek to understand such challenges from an Arabic viewpoint, researchers can only use these revelations to establish a correlation to their own findings. Still, they cannot offer a full picture of the experiences of Libyan female students pursuing higher education in Western universities. Such a gap in the literature makes it challenging for stakeholders to offer responsive solutions to all students, forcing them to use a one-fits-all approach when addressing international students' issues.

A student's country and culture of origin, as well as their gender, influence the degree to which the social and academic challenges impact their coping ability and academic performance. This argument highlights gaps in the existing literature. The results of this research offer insight that contribute to existing literature concerning the challenges international students experience abroad and provide a culture- and gender-specific approach to the topic. This then offers an avenue

to design and tailor solutions suitable to the Libyan female student's context. It also elicits a debate on the need for researchers to focus their work on the topic towards understanding how students from each specific culture are likely to experience challenges in the international environment. Such an understanding would ensure that the programs developed by relevant institutions are specific to the needs of each student category.

This research study included an evaluation of the transition experiences back to Libya, an approach that is unique to this study. Previous research on the topic rested their case after establishing the challenges international students face when attending Western universities. Although students from nations assuming individualistic cultures similar to those characterizing the Western world may experience limited challenges transiting back to their nation, the Libyan context is different. Libyan female students, whose world views come from patriarchal ideologies, have only limited space to exercise their independent minds. My approach was instrumental in highlighting the challenges from the Libyan society context, providing the opportunity to understand how the country's culture has hindered women's progress even after they have gained adequate knowledge and skills necessary for improving the education system. This explains how Libya as a country is yet to close the gender gap, making the country lag behind in tapping women's input in their society and the economy. With such understanding, stakeholders can use these insights to find ways to improve women's participation in Libya's progress toward cultural globalization.

This study reveals a convergence between the existing literature and the participants' themes concerning socio-cultural norms, values, and beliefs that hinder Libyan women's progress. As we have seen, deeply embedded patriarchal ideologies affect the women's personal, which then subsequently affects national progress. This explains why Libyan female students are constrained

by cultural traditions when transiting to Western culture and back to Libya. The key issues influencing whether a Libyan female will progress with education and how well she utilizes the knowledge and skills to contribute to the nation's progress are patriarchal ideologies and cultural norms and traditions.

Libyan society is in large part characterized by historical structural and systematic patterns, with women growing up in an environment that normalizes male dominance. Thus, women enclose in socially made cocoons that define where they should be at what time, age, and conduct in public spheres. Such social patterns persist mostly for the benefit of the males, giving them an advantage over their female peers. The participants in this study agree that it is essential to challenge the status quo in Libya and strive to change the policies, particularly in the education sector, in order to eliminate structures that contribute to the lack of an equal playing ground between men and women.

The study also acknowledges the link between culture and education, whereby the latter serves as a platform to perpetuate the former. In Libya, the education system provides a structural foundation to establish and uphold patriarchal ideologies. In this context, males learn to perceive females as passive entities who should consume the cultural information without questioning the status quo. Moreover, the Libyan education system suffers from a lack of adequate resources and technology in the classroom settings, leading to inadequate knowledge and skills for graduates, even at advanced levels.

Despite such obvious shortcomings, Libyan female students who have benefited from Western university education find it challenging to contribute to policy changes that would enhance the learning environment for all learners. Perhaps, if Libya were an open society, the country would embrace the new knowledge brought back to Libya by the female students who

transit back from Western universities. However, the country's culture is resistant to change, presenting a challenge even when these women are willing to help.

Hence, the question arises: Why does Libya invest heavily in female students by sponsoring them to pursue higher education, if the country is then unwilling to fully utilize these students' potential when they return home? This study acknowledges that in other countries that have registered progress in accommodating women in all spheres of life, feminism took root and transited through different stages to realize change. Libyan women's input would be critical in creating a favorable environment that accommodates their input and will leverage their skills and feminist approaches to overcome the cultural norms and patriarchal ideologies impeding their progress.

Libyan women have a long way to go, given the vast constraints that limit their ability to voice their concerns. Even when willing to forge ahead on their own, they face political, economic, and social constraints that favor male ideologies. This disenfranchises them in ways that demotivate most of them from participating in pursuits that enhance their independent decision-making. The Libyan institutions, similar to social settings, appear to promote the misunderstanding that women have no autonomous space and that they always have to seek men's approval in everything. Attempts to change the status quo has so far ultimately failed, making women feel out of place and out of line for even thinking of trying.

With gendered roles, and where cultural beliefs and norms emphasize segmented relations between men and women, the latter remain disadvantaged. This context prompts the need to promote programs that strive to change Libyan women's thinking within such confines while offering them the opportunity to pursue higher education beyond the college degree level. The approach will create an adequate pool of knowledge for women who can substantially challenge

male dominance. If more Libyan women could participate in decision-making, Libya would benefit significantly from its human capital, mainly in the education sector, where historically inadequacy of human capital has been rife. Allowing women to participate in political spheres will also be critical in creating a force that would support policies that advocate for Libyan women's issues, progressively developing a level playing ground for both genders.

Implications

In this study, the participants reported relatively significant challenges both when transiting to Western universities and back to Libya. The study establishes a correspondence between the participants' experiences and the evidence in the literature. Differences between the conservative nature of Libyan culture and the individualist nature of the Western culture was the most predominant contributor to such challenges. Although the existing literature revealed that all international students pursuing higher education in Western universities face similar challenges, the study establishes that Libyan female students experience such challenges to a higher degree. This highlights a gap in the literature that the findings of this research sought to fill.

Furthermore, the participants in this study affirm that their challenges are unique compared to any other student category, whether at home or abroad. This pinpoints the need for stakeholders from the Libyan and Western worlds to rethink the existing solutions they propose to help this group of students adjust to their host countries. Although the Libyan authorities have taken the initiative to sponsor female learners to pursue higher education in Western universities, the participants reveal that they lack support from Libya concerning their adjustment to the new environment. The Libyan actors at the Ministry of Education can offer learners orientation programs that facilitate the ease of transition, because they understand the differences between Libyan and Western cultures.

Moreover, the Libyan Ministry of Education's initiative to sponsor female students to pursue Western education is an indication of the understanding that such a move would contribute to the nation's growth. However, the challenges the participants face during their transition back to Libya illustrate the case of a segmented policy. The government should be keen to invest its resources in an environment where the structures facilitate optimal tapping of returns from such an investment. In the Libyan context, it appears that the actors at the Ministry of Education have allowed the cultural norms and patriarchal ideology to permeate the system so profoundly, that even the existing policies' influences on directing actions and informing decisions are limited.

The increasing globalization requires nations around the world to enhance the competency of their population, and education is key to increasing competencies. The present study unveiled inadequacies in the Libyan education system, which still paints itself as highly patriarchal. The study findings offer insights to elicit conversation among relevant stakeholders in Libya towards changing the educational policy framework, which will inform changes in the current structural arrangements that hinder progress in women's education. The findings will also be helpful to Libyan and Western university administrations in identifying unique challenges female Libyan students face. This will inform the strategies the administrators from both countries implement towards helping them to maneuver the system seamlessly.

With only four women participating in this study as the sample population, the implication is that only a few women from Libya have managed to advance their education in the Western world. Such a trend is attributable to the vast challenges Libyan women have to face in their transition journey to Western universities, mainly because Libya is a conservative nation that perpetuates patriarchal ideologies that gain reinforcement from the Islamic religion. The two aspects – conservatism and Islam – work together to institutionalize gender roles in order to

prevent Libyan women from enjoying optimal participation in all spheres of life. With strict social expectations for a Libyan woman to start a family early, take care of most (if not all) household chores, travel only in the company of a male guardian, and remain submissive to men, it has been difficult for these women to find any sense of identity outside their cultural norms. This includes finding the initiative to pursue personal interests, such as traveling outside the country for higher education.

Moreover, even after acquiring higher education at a Western institution, Libyan women must conform to the same social expectations, or else society will ostracize them. The Libyan social system has been constructed to inspire fear in women who want to challenge the status quo, thus forcing them to remain within the confines of social expectations to fit in the community and Libyan society at large. Such a social environment explains why the participants in this study had challenges transiting to Western universities. They had to find leverage in a new environment whose social values vastly differed from those at home. After assimilating the new social values, the "different" Libyan female students find it difficult to fit back into Libyan society. Their mental liberation enables them to view the world from a new perspective that is contrary in many regards to the beliefs that limit Libyan women's progress and characterize the Libyan social systems. Although their knowledge and skills qualify them to improve the Libyan education system to meet global standards, structural impediments motivated by patriarchal thinking hinder the returned female students' ability to participate in decision-making.

Therefore, the study findings would be helpful to the current and future body of female Libyan students anticipating pursuing higher education at Western universities. This is because they will access information on the likely challenges they might experience when transitioning to

Western universities and then back home. Knowing of the challenges in advance will enhance their psychological preparedness, ultimately facilitating their ease of adjustment.

Despite the limitations noted in this study, its findings significantly contribute to the literature concerning the challenges Libyan female students face in a globalized world. Its robust data concerning the experiential world of these learners, who have not been a focus of many qualitative researchers in the past, establishes a vital foundation for future research of female Libyan students using other contexts, cohorts, and frameworks.

Recommendations

The participants' experiences in their Western learning environment are similar. They all acknowledge that despite the vast challenges they had to cope with, the experience was insightful in providing them with the opportunity to identify the deficiencies in the Libyan education system. The key themes in their interviews were the lack of proper pedagogy approaches, learning resources, and content that characterizes the Libyan educational system at all levels. The participants concur that the knowledge and skills they have gained in the West enhanced their ability to improve the learning environment in Libya, ensuring that their students and colleagues will benefit from the experience.

At the same time, all of the participants agree that transiting to a Western university environment was difficult due to extreme differences in their cultural orientation. They had to overcome language and other cultural barriers associated with Islamic norms. Although some participants, such as Rabab and Safa, feel they did not experience many challenges in adjusting to the new environment, the rest of the participants attest to many obstacles they had to deal with before settling down. The challenges the participants faced during their transition journey are

typical of those faced by other female Libyan students who have never experienced Western culture firsthand.

As well, the pedagogical approaches in Western universities are more pronounced and impactful to students compared to those in Libya, mainly because the approaches embrace student-centeredness, collaboration, and advanced content analysis. This facilitates critical thinking and immerses learners in problem-solving thinking necessary to tackle real-world issues. Back in Libya, the participants found that the learning environment remained the same, with stakeholders holding similar perceptions as was the case during the participants' days. The policy framework and the structural patterns impede women's participation in decision-making amidst inadequate pedagogical approaches, human capital, and learning resources. The decision-makers have remained rigid and resistant to change, forcing the Western university graduates participating in this research to use personal initiatives to make even minor improvements.

In their sociocultural experiences, the participants narrate mixed reactions. The two participants (Sukeina and I) who were completely new to a Western university environment registered challenges that exposed them to culture shock. This affected the participants' academic performance and their ability to interact with host students and the rest of society. However, their participation in various events designed by their respective universities helped build their coping strengths, ultimately enabling them to appreciate their worth in the new environment. The other two participants were fortunate to have social support systems that allowed them to fit quickly into their new environment.

Libyan cultural norms are substantially different from those of the Western world, causing the female Libyan students to face adjustment challenges. The tension between the two cultures exposed the students to culture shock, mainly due to language barriers, religious practices, and

social beliefs that make the host students perceive them as different. With their newly acquired sociocultural values that assume a Western and Libyan cultural blend, the participants in this study also face challenges in striving to fit into the Libyan culture. This is because the Libyan sociocultural environment is closed; it does not borrow from foreign cultures, making it a challenge for the participants who have internalized new cultural values to fit in a society that still believes in the old ways of doing things. Any attempt to introduce new concepts from the 'outside world' is met with resistance, making the participants avoid similar conversations in the future.

Inspiring changes in the Libyan education system upon graduation is a crucial goal for all participants. Their experience with the Western education system allowed them to identify critical deficiencies in the Libyan system. They acknowledge that, despite their English language shortcomings, the participants had the opportunity to benefit from a student-oriented teaching style and a collaborative classroom environment that allowed them to tap the strengths of other learners. The in-depth content was also essential in enhancing their research approaches, and the technological advancements and learning resources were vital in supporting their learning environment. Overall, their interactions with the new environment allowed participants to identify gaps in the Libyan education system while inspiring them to look for strategies to fill the gaps.

Some participants acknowledge that policy changes in Libya would have a widespread impact beyond the confines of educational institutions. However, they associate their inability to make policy changes with the deeply entrenched patriarchal ideologies that undervalue women's participation in decision-making. The system ensures that decision-making is centralized and pegged in the hands of a few people who are keen to reinforce the status quo by clinging to historical structural and system trends that perpetrate male dominance. Despite such challenges, each participant narrates how she has employed personal initiative to bring change to the classroom

setting. They have adjusted their pedagogy approaches and embraced student-centered policies encouraging student participation. They feel that their colleagues would benefit from their knowledge and skills; therefore, the participants are open to sharing their knowledge with their peers, which has been key to improving the learning environment in Libya. The participants in this study chose to go out of their way and devise mechanisms that would ensure the learners in Libya benefit from teaching approaches that borrow heavily from international standards.

The patriarchal ideology persists in ways that challenge women's participation in decision-making. Such an environment complicates the life of Libyan women who would wish to steer changes in not only the education system, but elsewhere in society. It is worth noting that the Libyan society's cultural norms that make female Libyan students experience heightened challenges during their transition to Western universities. Thus far, research to propose the need for programs responsive to the Libyan female students has run up against the same norms that challenge the participants during their transition back to Libya. Even when a woman assumes a leadership position in Libya, she must play by social expectations or she will face resistance and marginalization for introducing ‘foreign’ values. This indicates a patriarchal ideology so embedded, that Libyan males perceive any attempt to introduce femininity and gender equality ideologies as a threat to their power.

It also explains why it has been a challenge for the participants in this study to push pedagogical changes in the education system upon their return from Western universities. The fear of isolation in a society they call home and in which they need to secure a sense of belonging makes it difficult for them to pursue their aspirations. Moreover, the participants' fear of repression indicates how challenging it is to fix a broken system in a society unwilling to accommodate an alternative view. Although the participants benefit from exposure to Western education and can

contribute to the skilled human capital in Libya, they will likely not be able to reach or offer their full potential. This is due to structural impediments that force them to employ individual initiatives that are not loud enough to push for an overall education system change.

For their part, the male-dominated leadership in Libya does not question the current state of affairs, nor does it tolerate women's contribution to changing the country's pedagogical approaches. Yet these approaches, coupled with inadequate learning resources at the university level, will consistently hinder efforts to equip Libyan graduates with globally desirable competencies. Although the Libyan sponsorship initiative is an excellent place to boost the quality of the nation's human capital, the stakeholders participating in the program must think of ways to optimally tap the beneficiaries' potential once they are back in the country. Such trajectories can only prevail if they create a conducive environment accommodating to a new world of ideas.

Given the interconnection between education and culture, Libyan institutions of higher learning should stay in the lead in helping the nation catch up with global trends. As institutions where research on diverse topics abounds, scholars must be keen to delve into purposeful research work that seeks to benchmark the country's educational system against global standards while challenging the historical structures that have been limiting Libyan women's participation in the decision-making process. Such an approach will promote gender equality, creating grounds for improvements across society.

The Ministry of Education in Libya should use English as the teaching language across all levels of education to equip learners with English skills. This will enhance students' competency in the English language, making their transition to the international arena, whether in pursuit of higher education or employment, smoother. Further, the Ministry of Education in Libya should

also increase the number of hours allotted to teaching English. This approach has a spiraling effect on a teacher of English training.

At the same time, the Ministry of Education in Libya should benchmark its teaching models and curriculum content against global standards. Such a move is crucial to providing learners with skills and knowledge that enhance their competency in a globalized space. It will also smooth the transition to international institutions of higher learning, as it will give students the opportunity to increase their analytical and critical abilities and boost their research initiative. Aspects such as requiring long pieces of academic writing such as undergraduate and master's dissertations and exposing students to research methodology modules should characterize the new curriculum, providing learners with skills necessary for empirical investigation at an early stage in their academic work.

To demonstrate the best pedagogy practices, the Libyan Ministry of Education should invite educational staff from Western universities to lead and teach English courses to students at higher levels of education. This would be critical in providing leadership of such courses and orienting the institution toward the standards demanded of each level of education, such as research approaches, thesis writing, and academic articles.

As well, the Ministry of Education in Libya should increase opportunities for scholarship recipients by offering intensive acculturation courses focusing on Western universities. These courses could encompass the expectations of undergraduate, master's and PhD levels while emphasizing the potential clashes they may experience due to their culture and traditions. Such an opportunity would impress upon learners the need for commitment and responsibility for their studies.

On the other hand, Canadian institutions could also take action to better aid the transition of academic newcomers. First, each department could provide professionally-conducted tours of the relevant areas within the institution (libraries, seminar rooms, etc.) to help international students orientate themselves within their new environment. Second, when arranging their curricula, instructors could take into consideration the variety of cultures and different learning styles of the students in the class. Most international students have to deal with culture shock as well as heavy academic loads, so acknowledging the backgrounds of the students and giving them time to learn the Western-style classroom approach is imperative if the aim is to encourage rather than overwhelm and alienate the learners. Finally, the departments need to make sure that instructors, when grading international students in their first few semesters, consider the above factors and do not initially place high expectations on those who may be strugging to fit into their new learning and living environments. Again, the aim should be to help international students achieve academic excellence, not to discourage them and make them feel "out of place".

Although the participants in this research appear to embrace feminism by striving to sidestep the challenges that limit their independent minds towards asserting changes within the Libyan education system, structural restrictions in a male-dominated system are prominent. Thus, the participants should mobilize like-minded entities to advocate for structural changes and policy frameworks in the education sector, ensuring that more women pursue higher education in Western universities to increase their participation in the push to change the status quo. Working independently to strive for change achieves only limited results and will take longer to realize significant progress.

Recommendations for Future Research

I make several recommendations concerning future research. The study sought to evaluate the transition experiences of a select cohort of female Libyan learners as they transited to Western universities and back to Libya after completing their studies. It would be essential for future research on the topic to use a higher number of participants attending different universities abroad. This will help capture diverse views on the experiences of female Libyan students, providing rich grounds for establishing convergence or divergence on the different issues identified in this research that negatively affect optimal academic engagement in overseas universities or those they face when transiting back to Libya. This would also increase the generalizability of the study results, while at the same time authentically contributing to the existing literature on the topic and informing the policy framework.

As well, future research should engage broader stakeholder groups in gathering data. They may consider university staff, government representatives, and ordinary community members from the Libyan authorities and Western nations to offer their insights concerning their experiences with the students and their take on the issues raised in this study. This approach would enrich the information concerning Libyan female students' challenges by providing multiple perspectives on the issues while eliciting their views on what they feel are their roles, facilitating an informed conclusion.

This research pinpoints that patriarchal ideology characterizes and permeates the Libyan education milieu, a factor that inhibits the assimilation of women's ideas in the system. Future research should evaluate the contribution of Libyan male students who have benefited from the Western education system. This is because, with such exposure, it is highly likely that they will

shun the most conservative ideologies that favor men over women. This will help establish any points of connection that feminist groups can tap towards increasing the possibility of the proposed changes in the education system gaining footing. Furthermore, the approach would help understand how male graduates from Western universities can work together with their female counterparts to realize change.

Future research can focus on Libyan feminism to understand how its incorporation in the fight for women's rights could assimilate into the educational system to promote women's voices. This would contribute to existing literature concerning how Libyan female students returning to Libya from abroad can participate fully in the nation’s decision-making processes.

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