



“PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS”: EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN DOCTORAL STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This study amplifies the voices of international women doctoral students through their shared experiences in their doctoral program. Although studies acknowledge the significance of exploring the experiences of women doctoral students, there remains a dearth of literature documenting the experiences of international women doctoral students in China. Participants were made up of purposefully sampled international women in their PhD program in a public university in Northeast China. Using open-ended questions, in-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with the participants. The findings indicate that although participants perceived their experience at this university as being transformative, they however also expressed their personal struggles of learning as women in a PhD program. The implication of this study for future research and policy is further discussed.

Keywords: women, doctoral, postgraduate, students, international

1. Introduction

“I’m pursuing a PhD not just for myself but my family, for our tomorrow. It’s challenging but I believe that eventually this will turn out for good and for society . . . I can in some way say it’s a pursuit of happiness”

These words expressed by Zoey, a participant during an interview for the present study provides insight into the experiences of international women doctoral student. It is the voices of women like Zoey this research aims to amplify, but first we

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take a brief look at internationalization of higher education and what it means for women today.

The internationalization of higher education within the last decade has been characterized by an unprecedented increase in the migration of students. This migration is largely driven 'differentials in education capacity', which include cost of education, reputation of educational institution and economic performance of the host country. Additionally, political stability, religious and cultural proximity between origin and host countries also serves as major determinants (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2017).

The OECD refers to foreign students as 'those who are not citizens of the country in which they are enrolled... Although they are counted as internationally mobile, they may be long-term residents or even be born in the "host" country' (OECD, 2017, p. 296), and defines international students as "*students who are not permanent or usual residents of their country of study*" (OECD, 2017, p. 297). As a result of the interchangeable use of the above definitions in existing literature, the researchers considered and included all definitions in the search criteria. The present research however adopted the term 'international student'.

Whereas top host countries for international students are English-speaking countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2017), new competitors especially within Asia such as China, Singapore, Malaysia have also risen (Ding, 2016). Statistics reveal a yearly increase in the number of international students who choose to study in China for a master's or Ph.D. degree across a widening range of disciplines. In 2017, for example, 489,200 international students furthered their studies in China, marking an increase of over 10% for the second consecutive year. Graduate and doctoral students numbered 75,800 an increase of 18.62% compared to 2016. Furthermore, China hosted international students from 204 countries in 2017; top source countries being South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, the United States, India, Russia, and Japan. Students from 'Belt and Road' countries accounted for over 60% of all international students in China, with top host provinces being Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2018).

Most of the studies on international students homogenise their needs and thus portray them in a gender-neutral way, focusing mostly on undergraduates (Ding, 2013; Kosheleva, Amarnor & Chernobilsky, 2015), with few studies examining international women in doctoral programs.

Although many countries are today experiencing massification in higher education, women still lag behind in enrollment (Grants & Simmons, 2008). This is partly due to the rising cost of higher education, cultural perceptions, societal demands and limited learning opportunities. Existing literature shows that balancing family and academic life - the role of being a wife, a mother and student - financial concerns, time pressure and the uncertainty of securing a future employment are great sources of stress for female doctoral students (Brown & Watson, 2010). In Sweden, Schmidt & Umans (2014) found that female PhD students "*experience their well-being as being torn*

between their own values, perceptions, and priorities, on one hand, and, on the other, the external sources by which they are influenced and/or on which they depend".

Our aim, therefore, is to voice the unique stories of these women - what they make of their world in their academic pursuit. These stories are valuable as they will allow us gain perspective into the struggles, fears and victories of these postgraduate women, who have defied the master narratives that today confine women in many societies. Hence, this study contributes to a small but growing body of literature on the experiences of women pursuing doctoral research abroad. The main research question of this study is, *what are the experiences of married international women doctoral students and how do they interpret these experiences?*

After briefly considering literature on challenges at doctoral level, this article will provide a discussion of the experiences of five international women doctoral students in a public university in Northeast China.

2. Challenges at Doctoral Level

According to Kenway & Bullen (2003), research focused on international women students can be differentiated into two types. Firstly, there is the research that discusses issues facing women international students as 'supplementary to the general work that has been done'. Secondly, there is the research that has risen out of liberal feminism and explores the issues facing women postgraduate students in general and, thereby, includes international women students in the analysis. Although some of this body of literature is founded on empirical research, Kenway & Bullen (2003) assert that much of it is the product of a synthesis of existing literatures. However, the present study is based on empirical data on the experiences of these women.

In the United States, although statistics show that for almost two decades the percentage of women who enroll in graduate programs has been above 50%, women nonetheless account for only 44% of PhDs awarded (Monroe et al., 2008). In Sweden, 'the number of female doctoral students increased from 23% in 1977 to 49% in 2010, dominating in research fields such as humanities, law, social science, and medicine' (Schmidt & Umans, 2014).

Despite outstanding strides made in the push for gender equality and more opportunities for women, they continue to face under-representation at most advanced levels of education (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2002). Carter, Blumenstein & Cook (2013) found that "*family and relationship commitments, female identity, time involvement and coping with trauma history*" posed as challenges for doctoral student women in New Zealand.

Doctoral studies can be daunting for any international student, but these challenges are more pronounced for women. Although domestic students could face challenges similar to their international counterparts such as academic stress, international students do not however possess similar resources to tackle these challenges (Desa, Yusooff & Kadir, 2012).

For example, research shows that marital relationships of women doctoral students can be adversely affected due to decreased 'emotional, sexual, and social availability.' Some women with a trauma history who choose research areas deeply related to a previous painful experience they've become survivors of may find themselves emotionally unstable, when their writing is criticised (Carter, Blumenstein & Cook, 2013). Researchers have also explored the experiences of postgraduate women in relation to race (Magano, 2011; Rasheem, Alleman, Mushonga, Anderson & Vakalahi, 2018), mentoring of women doctoral students, and the challenges associated with the pursuit of careers in higher education (Pope & Edwards, 2016; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Price-Sharps et al, 2014). Nonetheless, there is a paucity of research particularly in English publications that amplify the voices of international women doctoral students in China.

3. Research Design

This research adopted a qualitative approach. More specifically, it uses a phenomenological approach which is regarded as the philosophical basis for all qualitative research. The underlying assumption here is that there are 'multiple ways of experiencing and interpreting the same event, and that the meaning of the phenomena to each person is what constitutes reality' (Mcmillan & Wergin, 2006). Therefore, the focus of this research is the participants' perspective. We therefore aimed at exploring the common meaning of the experiences of these international women doctoral students.

Purposeful sampling technique was used to select participants in order to allow for information rich cases. Initially, potential participants were approached by the researchers and presented a letter of consent and recruitment detailing the research objective, significance and criteria for participation. Prior to interviewing the five doctoral students who agreed to participate in the study, the main questions were first forwarded to them so as to allow for deep reflection and better recall of situations in line with the research question. In order to allow participants express themselves freely, the interviews were relatively informal with open-ended questions. Furthermore, they were assured of anonymity. Interviews lasted from thirty-five to forty minutes. Permission was sought from each participant for the recording of the interview sessions.

The participants were five international women doctoral students from different faculties studying full-time in a public university in Northeast China, whose assigned pseudonyms are Sheela, Isabella, Ashante, Zorah and Zoey. The main criterion of being a married international female doctoral student was met by the selected participants. Individual interviews for all participants were scheduled at their convenience and conducted in a comfortable environment on participants' university campus. A profile of participants is as follows:

- Sheela, 32, Yemeni, married with two children;
- Isabella, 36, Kenyan, married with a child;

- Ashante, 34, Tanzanian, married;
- Zorah, 29, Pakistani, married with a child;
- Zoey, 30, Tanzanian, married with two children.

3.1 Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were later transcribed verbatim by the researchers. In order to demonstrate the validity of the analysis, member checking and peer review was carried out. Transcripts of the interviews were given to participants to ensure their voices have been documented accurately. Furthermore, we solicited the assistance of peers in reviewing the research. Descriptive coding was used to generate a set of codes that are words or phrases that seem to stand out as significant. The coding system was influenced by the problem and purpose of the research (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). Next, codes were grouped into categories, which in turn were analyzed and formulated into major themes.

4. Findings

The transcript analysis showed five central themes that reflect the struggles and victories which characterize the experiences of these women. These themes are presented as follows: (a) stimulus (b) domestic support (c) cultural perception (d) economic influence (e) supervisory relationship (f) reframing experiences.

4.1 Theme 1: Stimulus

The theme of stimulus captures the motivations of these women. To fully voice their stories, this theme was later subcategorized into three sub-themes, namely: self-will; job requirement; and role model. These various elements propel these doctoral students to stay focused on achieving their goals.

4.1.1 Self-will

Participants demonstrated self-motivation in their academic pursuit. Against the odds of societal pressure and gendered perception, they resolved to apply for a postgraduate degree - a common trait that characterized their shared experiences. These women show that they possess some internal drive which propelled them to apply to study abroad. Zoey shared her experience when she applied to study in China:

"Somehow my husband is supportive but maybe it is because I'm aggressive that's why, because if I had been soft and said 'hey, what do you say, should I go?' he'll say 'no, stay here, you can do it here', but when I insisted, - not that I'm begging that I should go there - I am going..."

Zorah had this to share,

"I have always wanted to study abroad, you know, get a sense of what it feels like. It wasn't easy initially. I remember one of my family friends asked me 'why would a woman need to study for a PhD when her husband doesn't even have one.' I wasn't shocked I only determined in myself that nothing would stop me."

4.1.2 Job Requirement

Three except two of the participants work as teachers in their home countries. For Ashante, Sheela and Isabella who work in a tertiary institution, getting a PhD was a requirement to retain their jobs and climb the ladder. Ashante expressed,

"According to the university policy in my country, when you're working in a university you have to upgrade yourself after every three years."

Sheela mirroring Ashante's statement said,

"At the office the progress is monitored and you have to fill the progress report forms after every six months, and you have to show in which stage you're studying so they keep monitoring you..."

Isabella also mentioned that one of the reasons she had to apply for a doctoral program was the requirement of her teaching profession.

"Well, this is one of the requirements for me to meet my job requirements."

4.1.3 Role Model

These women believed their academic pursuit positioned them as role models to their children. This belief further strengthened their resolve to complete their program regardless of whatever difficulties surfaced. Isabella described her motivation to continue her studies:

"If you study only one year and quit, it will look like you have failed to finish your program, so I think that it might be a bit of a discouragement for my kids. What will you say to them when you're encouraging them about school and working hard, if you couldn't even do it."

Sheela, a mother of two, expressed that being a mother should be a motivation to work hard and be a positive model:

"You know once you have dependants, your life will not be the same because the future of those children depends on you. For you to secure their future, you really have to work hard. One of the ways to work hard is to advance your studies to get a better job ... having children is a motivation for you to work and also be a role model to them."

4.2 Theme 2: Family Issues

Participants shared stories of how they needed to convince relatives and friends about their decision to study abroad. It is vital to note that these women view support from their husbands as strong motivation to continue in the program.

Isabella spoke about the continued support she receives from her husband:

"Actually he was the one who was even telling me 'no you shouldn't even apply to study in the country, because it will take a long time to graduate, and he was even citing some relatives that had spent further time like 4 years and were not even able to defend their proposal."

Zoey recounts discussing her interest in a doctoral study several times with her husband before he could fully acquiesce to it:

"... I have applied but I don't know if I'll be selected then I'll go, he didn't take it serious at first; maybe he felt that I won't be selected. After I got the admission later, I went to him again, I said "remember that I told you about my application to China, I've been selected". He asked "for how many years?" For 4 years. "So all 4 years you'll be staying in China, you're not coming back?". I said no, I don't know how the program is, but I think there might be some holidays, I'll be coming back home. Of course he didn't agree or disagree at first, but he had to agree."

Evidently, for these women support from their families was vital, and they were able to eventually win the support of some relatives who initially didn't agree to their studying abroad. They also considered this to be a victory for them in their academic pursuit. Although they found solace in knowing their husbands and relatives were taking care of the kids, they expressed concerns about longing to embrace their children. However, they expressed optimism that this was a hurdle they would overcome. Zoey describes her experience:

"Actually it is sad but I have to talk to them, they have to understand, and thanks to technology we communicate every day, and they'll say 'mum we miss you' and actually it feels pain and all, and I say 'why do I have to stay away from my family?' but then I'm doing this and actually I think it's also for their benefit"

Sheela reveals her internal fears and present struggle:

"I think the program keeps me very far from my kids...because I only travel home at the end of semesters, and when I do I don't stay at home permanently, because I have to visit my sick mother living in a different region."

As other studies show, students who encounter marital or family problems during their doctoral studies often experience considerable additional duress, although

this can be doctoral students experience regardless of gender. Hence, emotional support from family members is often regarded as a strong encouragement needed to thrive in a doctoral study (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004).

4.3 Theme 3: Cultural Perception

Cultural perceptions and master narratives in many societies sometimes place females in a disadvantaged position when compared to males. Participants opined that although cultural expectations of gender roles are not all totally wrong, some expectations limit women from pursuing graduate studies and even accomplishing other ambitions. Ashante shared her experience:

"Not everyone is happy with my studying here. We have different societies, for instance at the place where I live, we have some people who have not gone to school, they are surrounding me; we have housewives...Many African women think that a woman should only stay at home, take care of the family. My going to work in the morning and coming back home I think was ok with them, but travelling abroad and staying for five months and return for two months, I know people say a lot."

Sheela expressed,

"You know most people ... have the notion that when you're going out of the country, most people do bad things. I normally tell them that it's how you keep yourself and of course trust is very important between couples."

This was clearly a reflection of societal perceptions and expectations which participants encountered. Furthermore, it paints a picture of the struggles and victories women doctoral students experience as they pursue 'happiness'.

"But some of my friends would say instead of having one more kid, you're just going to study, do you want to become professional student now; but they didn't even bother me because they are not part of my family." (Zorah)

Zoey, a high school teacher in her country described her experience in her workplace:

"...My principal...told me you are just still young, why the hurry? You should wait. A friend of mine said 'wait until the kids are little bit grown'...Then one of my male colleagues said 'oh that decision is a bit risky, pity your husband, for me I can't stay one month without my woman."

When asked about her feelings and reaction to this experience, Zoey had this to say:

"Actually it didn't bother me. Okay, you say they are friends but sometimes life is how you choose and make it. You can't just stay there waiting for comments from someone who is not even impacting you in a direct way."

4.4 Theme 4: Economic Influence

All participants expressed economic reasons as a factor influencing their coming to study in China. They were all recipients of the Chinese Government scholarship, covering tuition, accommodation, health insurance and a monthly stipend. These women expressed concerns over the high cost of applying for a PhD in the universities in their countries. Hence applying for a scholarship was an opportunity for them to pursue their dreams.

Zoey, a mother of two, sheds light on this:

"I told my husband my reasons for choosing to study abroad because even if I stayed, who is going to pay for my study? I'm going because I have my scholarship and so it will help us and we don't have all that money."

Isabella narrated:

"I could have applied for a PhD in my country but the fees were too high...so this scholarship was the best for me"

"Things are difficult at home and to study takes a long time and is expensive and the facilities are not always available" (Zorah)

Securing a scholarship played a major factor in determining if they could study not only for a PhD but also in a foreign country. The rising cost of higher education is a global phenomenon and women are most affected.

4.5 Theme 5: Supervisory Relationship

Although some studies suggest that gender impacts supervisory relationship (Kurtz-Costes, Helmke, & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006); this is however not supported in all studies (Brown & Watson, 2010). Nonetheless, mentoring allows for the freedom of expression and builds relationship between supervisors and their postgraduate students. As Ashante explains,

"My supervisor takes all students he supervises to eat out together. Usually it's at the end of the semester. It kind of helps us bond and discuss personal matters."

Isabella expressed the need for quality guidance on projects, and that students can actually seek assistance when necessary from the faculty or even other students,

"Although I understand my supervisor is a really busy person, I feel it affects my project negatively. I feel I'm not receiving as much guidance as I should, but I try to reach out to other postgraduate students in the faculty and one of my professors."

"I was pregnant during my first year and I had to return home for a few months. My supervisor was really supportive. Once, she surprisingly called my phone number and I was really glad." (Sheela)

4.6 Theme 6: Reframing Experiences

Interestingly these women all expressed a positive outlook on the challenges they have encountered. Participants spoke about learning valuable lessons from difficult situations. This phenomenon can be seen as reframing experiences, a mindset of looking on the bright side of things. Isabella described her feelings about her daughter, but also spoke about her optimism to set things right if need be:

"I sometimes feel my daughter misses my guidance. You know sometimes as a mother I need to guide her, but after graduating ... it will be the time for me to make things right even if anything has gone wrong. Sometimes it depends on how you take things. I have taken this program in a positive side; if you have peace of mind you'll see things go smoothly."

Ashante described her motivation and outlook:

"What is happening now I just consider them as moments. I know things are bright ahead. Anything you do, you have to sacrifice...you'll have to endure something. Just like in the bible it's always darkest before dawn."

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of international women doctoral students. We sought to understand how these women make meaning of their reality. The researchers believe that amplifying participants' voices is of utmost significance and therefore fills a lacuna in the body of literature regarding women's higher education. Themes of stimulus, domestic support, cultural perception, economic influence and reframing experiences emerged as central to understanding how these women perceive and construct their reality.

Participants spoke about their motivation which was described in the stimulus theme. This motivation or stimulus is both internal (self-will) and external (job requirement and role model). The inward drive and belief that attaining a PhD abroad is possible and the demands of a job especially for women in academic career serve as strong motivation to pursue a doctoral degree. These women also reflected on their positions as mothers to be role models to their kids and be able to inspire their families.

The totality of these elements fortified their resolve to study abroad and also remain in the program.

A common thread in participants' experiences is the support they receive from family members (especially their husbands and children). This support network served as a source of encouragement right from the onset of their academic pursuit. A clear understanding of the benefits of having a PhD was communicated by the participants to their families.

The third theme, cultural perceptions in society discourages females especially married women from attaining a postgraduate education abroad. When confronted with such issues from friends and colleagues at work, participants considered the opinion and support from their nuclear family more important. This imbued mental doggedness to apply and ultimately travel to China.

The fourth theme, economic influence, reveals how access and tuition for a doctoral program can be burdensome, coupled with the rising cost of higher education makes it increasingly difficult to apply for a PhD in many countries. Securing a scholarship has in no small measure been helpful in meeting basic needs and keeping financial concerns at bay. We clearly see that creating more scholarship opportunities will encourage more women especially from developing countries to pursue higher education. According to Altbach (2006), an increasing number of graduates are *"burdened with massive debts after graduation, and higher costs have led to a growing dropout problem and diminishing access. For higher education to be more affordable there will be need for a philosophical and ideological change, a change many have argued is not likely to occur due to the political and economic conditions that exists in the world today"*.

The fifth theme of supervisory relationship shows that participants were generally satisfied with the relationship they have with their supervisors. They desire supervisors who gave attention and direction to their projects, and had considerable interest in their personal lives. As Brown & Watson (2010) note, *"supervision is an important developmental process in the acculturation of becoming a researcher: important components are acceptance, counselling, emotional support and role modelling"*.

The theme of reframing experiences connotes maintaining a positive outlook towards life experiences, being able to draw meaning and lessons from painful or tough circumstances. In the face of societal expectations and discouragement from even well-meaning friends, participants weighed these circumstances from other perspectives, deciding this was the right time and opportunity to pursue a PhD degree. Although international students in China encounter several challenges, they overtime can shift from being overwhelmed by the rigor of academic study present in a new environment to acculturating or positioning themselves in an identity shift (Tian & Lowe, 2014).

Participants in this study also encouraged other women to apply for postgraduate degrees and seize scholarship opportunities:

"I'll encourage women to go for it, and they need to talk things through with their spouse, so they need to discuss first. But if it is just a fear of not being able to achieve it, I encourage every woman who desires to study more to pursue it." (Isabella)

6. Conclusion

It is hoped that the understanding gained from the stories of these women will help inform policy planning in universities that admit international doctoral students, especially married women. Educational institutions must realize that 'educating women means more than admitting and graduating them. It means being willing to learn from the scholarly efforts of women to build new conceptual frameworks that include women's experiences. It means questioning the values that prevent women from attaining their full potential. It means reshaping organizational structure, policies, and procedures, and basic assumptions about the roles of men and women in society' (Kathleen, 2000). This research further underscores the importance of education for social mobility; and can be a guide for doctoral women in gaining awareness of the struggles and victories that come with pursuing a doctorate. Further studies are needed to explore the experiences of gender-mixed international doctoral students in Chinese universities.

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We want to specially thank the women who shared their rich experiences in this research. We feel honoured to have listened and gained from the insight you have wholeheartedly shared and hope that this will inspire more women to achieve their goals and become the women they aspire to be.

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