



Self-Esteem, Education, and Girls' Dreams

Context Overview: Adolescent Girls in Lebanon

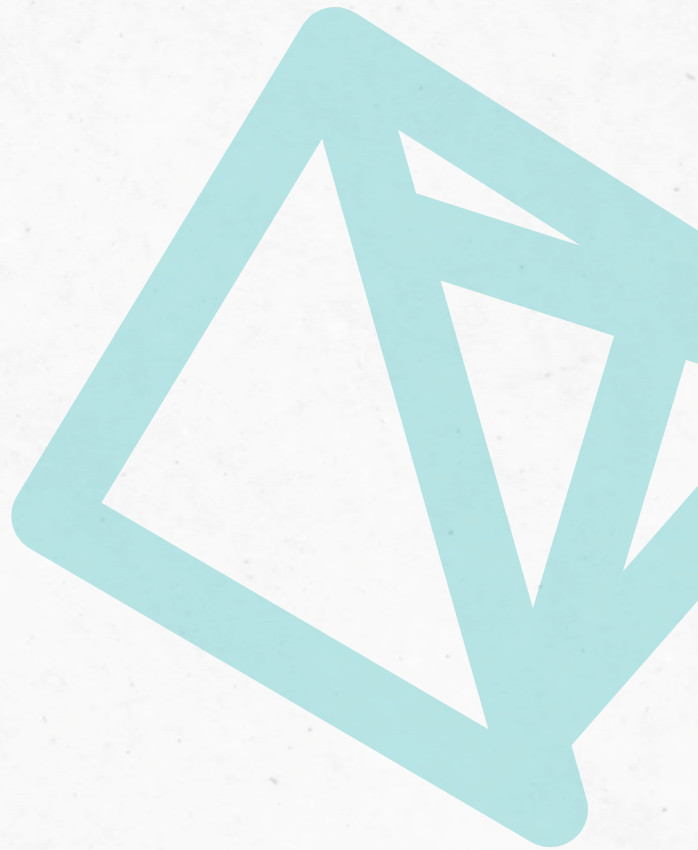
Since 2019, Lebanon has been facing a complex economic crisis, characterized by a series of inter-connected challenges. The consequences of this crisis have been extensive, manifesting in the devaluation of the local currency, the closure of both private and public schools, a scarcity of social security services, a constriction of civic space, and a political impasse.

This crisis has impacted both men and women; however, the consequences have been particularly harsh on women, leading to a regressive shift in the status of gender equality. This gendered impact highlights the urgency of addressing not only the economic aspects but also working towards reinstating and advancing gender equality to mitigate the disparate effects on women.

In 2017, GAGE (Gender Adolescence Global Evidence) published a report detailing their situation analysis of adolescent girls in Lebanon. Their analysis focused on the educational status, psycho-social well-being, physical health and nutrition, bodily integrity and freedom of violence, voice and agency, and economic empowerment of Lebanese adolescent girls, Palestinian refugee girls, Syrian refugee girls, and Palestinian refugee girls displaced from Syria. Their findings show that adolescent girls in Lebanon are more likely to suffer from anxiety and depression, with mental health issues affecting girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds disproportionately, emphasizing the pivotal role of self-esteem.

Research Aim:

The aim of this research is to examine the factors influencing adolescent girls' self-esteem and how they relate to education, including learning experience, career choices, and ambitions. The focus is on self-perception and emotional well-being, evaluating how external factors like family, friends, and social media influence self-esteem. The study also delves into the impact of the learning experience on girls' self-perception and aspirations, seeking to understand the factors that enable them to dream about their futures. This study takes an unexplored approach by positioning self-esteem as a central aspect of girls' education, particularly among adolescent girls in Lebanon. The research addresses the literature gap on girls' dreams and ambitions, emphasizing the lack of data on the role of self-esteem in shaping future aspirations.



Theoretical Framework & Methodology

To conduct this research, the Indivisible Self theory, and the Capabilities approach were employed to explore human identity, well-being, and individuals' abilities to lead fulfilling lives. Seven focus groups involving 28-25 adolescent girls across various locations in Lebanon were conducted using qualitative data collection methods. Thematic content analysis of the obtained qualitative data helped identify recurring patterns and themes in participants' narratives, providing comprehensive insights into their experiences.



Analysis & Findings

Self-Esteem

The available data indicates that adolescent girls, as discussed in focus group sessions, generally exhibit moderate to high levels of self-esteem. They articulate key aspects of self-worth, including self-acceptance, kindness to oneself and others, resilience in facing challenges, ambition, and the confidence to pursue one's goals.

However, participants frequently highlight the negative role of society in shaping their self-perception, emphasizing the detrimental impact of comparisons, competition, and societal pressure to conform to unrealistic standards.

Additionally, the discussion shows a correlation between negative comments received and the lack of self-acceptance in the individuals making those comments. This observation underscores the importance of kindness in shaping self-esteem. The discussion also touches on stress management as a critical factor in self-esteem, with negative emotions such as anxiety and sadness being linked to external factors like societal judgment and living circumstances.

Notably, participants express a reluctance to show vulnerability, considering negative emotions as perceived weaknesses in society. This highlights the participants' wariness of societal judgment, a theme further explored in later sections addressing the impact of patriarchal factors on self-esteem.



The Role of External Factors: Family, Friends, Social Media, School and Community



Throughout the focus group discussions, participants stress the impact of society on self-esteem. For the purposes of this research, “society” is broken down as family, friends, social media, school, and community.

Parents

This section explores the role of family and its impact on girls’ self-esteem. The discussion begins by focusing on the relationship between self-esteem and parents, highlighting the distinction between positive and negative parenting methods. Positive parenting is characterized by support, empowerment, trust, understanding, love, and acceptance of daughters’ right to make mistakes and learn from them. Conversely, negative parenting, is marked by comparison, neglect, abuse, over-protectiveness, distrust, and reinforcement of patriarchal norms. Negative parenting can lead to feelings of inadequacy, a reluctance to confide in parents, and instances of abuse, showing a clear correlation between such parenting styles and lower self-esteem among girls. An important aspect concerning the source of self-esteem was observed: it originates within the home environment, where girls equip themselves to navigate the external world.

Friends

This section explores the impact of friendship on adolescent girls’ self-esteem. Participants highlight the significance of friendships and peer relationships in shaping their self-esteem, emphasizing that adolescent girls in Lebanon often feel a greater sense of safety and support from friends compared to family. Participants emphasize the positive aspects of friendship such as support, positive influence, motivation, and trustworthiness. Some participants express a preference for a smaller circle of friends and exercise caution in sharing personal information with potentially un-trustworthy individuals. The overall observation is that friends play a substantial role in shaping the self-perception of adolescent girls, with the potential for positive behaviors, thought patterns, and a strong self-image to be transferred among them through mirroring.

Social Media

This section explores both the pros and cons of social media, and their impact on self-esteem and self-image. Participants identified several advantages, such as becoming more open-minded, gaining exposure to global cultures, and accessing educational and practical content. For many participants, social media is a tool for learning about various professions and fostering community engagement through volunteering. Additionally, it provides a platform for self-expression, showcasing creative accomplishments. On the other hand, participants highlighted disadvantages, including wasting time, lack of privacy, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content, and the dissemination of fake information. They particularly emphasize the negative impact on self-esteem, citing influencer accounts that set unrealistic beauty standards and promote a misleading image of life. The desire for popularity was acknowledged, but many participants raised about the detrimental effects of influencer content on mental and physical well-being, ultimately lowering self-esteem among adolescent girls.

Learning Experience & Future Plans: Education & Dreams

Education

This section explores the connection between self-esteem and the learning experience of adolescent girls.


Participants distinguish between positive and negative learning experiences, with positive experiences involving interactive and creative learning methods, practical skills acquisition, supportive peers, and encouraging teachers. Many participants noted that positive educational accomplishments contribute to enhanced self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Conversely, negative learning experiences are characterized by authoritarian teachers, traditional lecturing, collective punishment, quizzes, excessive supervision, lack of trust, comparison, favoritism, neglect, and bullying.

The relationship with teachers plays a crucial role, with neglectful or discriminatory behaviors adversely affecting students' self-esteem. Many participants emphasize the role of teachers as mentors and role models. Moreover, participants identify bullying as a factor impacting self-esteem negatively. Participants express frustrations, particularly in the context of public education during economic crises, strikes, and disruptions, leading some to seek alternative learning centers to continue their education. The participants also draw comparisons between private and public schools, with public schools perceived as lacking essential elements for a positive learning experience, contributing to emotional distress and reduced self-esteem among adolescent girls. Participants also express the lack of, and need for, psychological counseling and career guidance at schools.

Dreams

This section explores the factors influencing adolescent girls' dreams and ambitions. According to the participants, a good education enhances self-esteem, confidence, and the ability to envision a future. They note that diversified learning through conventional and non-conventional channels, like social media and Youtube, contributes to the development of various important skills. Participants also noted that support from caregivers, role models, and peers fosters ambition, with community involvement playing a significant role. Moreover, material conditions, particularly the socio-economic climate in Lebanon, impact girls' ambitions. Participants express the need for knowledge about the job market in order to make informed decisions about their respective career choices. Participants also discuss the gendered aspect of ambition, highlighting societal expectations that discourage girls from pursuing traditionally masculine jobs, and steering them towards more traditionally feminine roles like teaching or nursing.





Discussion:

Key Findings

This section delves into the interactions between **self-esteem**, **learning experiences**, and **dreams** among adolescent girls in Lebanon.

01 Self-Esteem as a Coping Mechanism:

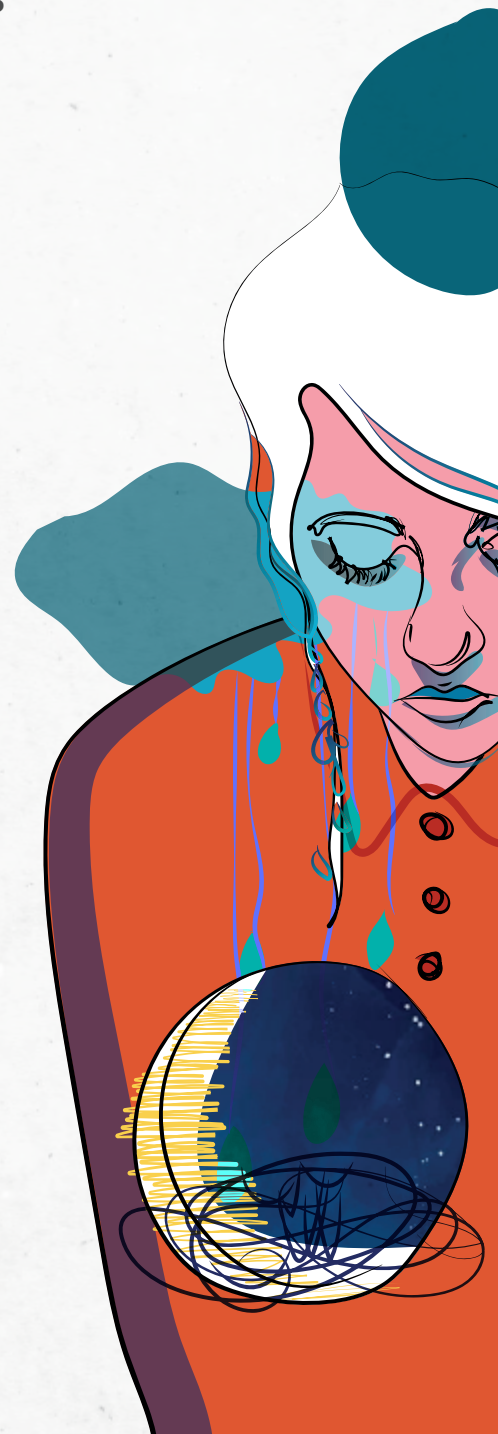
- 1 Self-esteem functions as a tool against patriarchal expectations, encompassing self-acceptance, kindness, resilience, and self-efficacy.

These components are influenced by cultural and social contexts.

- 1 Within the Indivisible Self-model, the Coping Self emphasizes self-esteem and self-perception's critical role in patriarchal societies.

- 1 Emotional well-being is closely linked to self-esteem, where lower self-esteem leads to higher anxiety and depression.

- 1 Societal pressures push girls to hide negative emotions, viewing them as weaknesses.



02 Social Influences on Self-Esteem:

- 1 Family, friends, and social media significantly impact self-esteem.
- 1 Positive impacts include supportive parents, safe friendships, and responsible media consumption.
- 1 Negative influences stem from patriarchal attitudes like overprotectiveness and unrealistic expectations.
- 1 The interaction between coping mechanisms and social factors illustrates how internal and external aspects affect self-esteem.



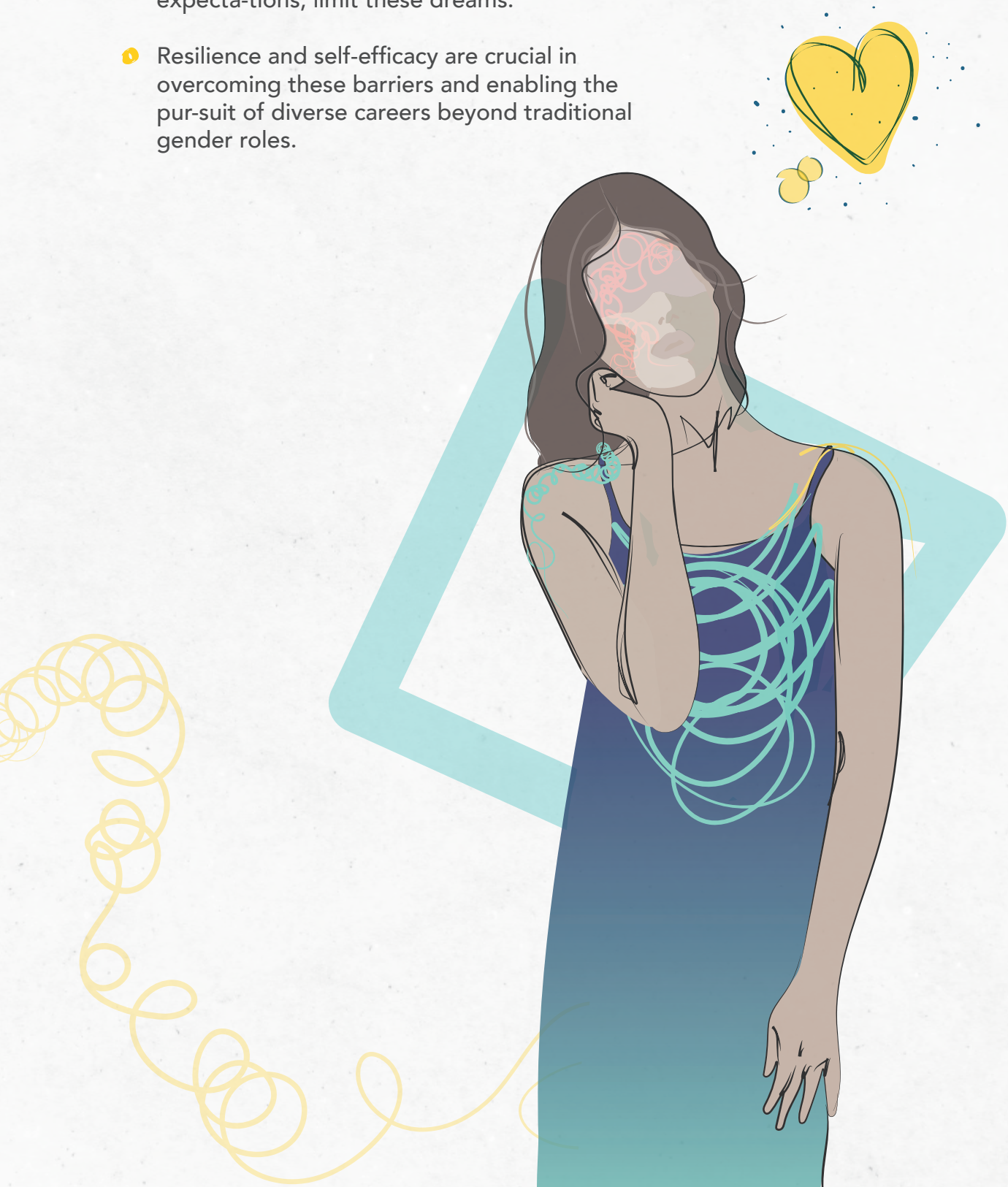
03 Learning Experience Insights:

- 1 The learning experience is defined by learning how to learn, be, be with others, and do, guided by the Capabilities approach.
- 1 A preference for practical, diverse learning methods enhances skill development and the capacity to perform tasks.
- 1 Positive relationships with peers and educators provide emotional and technical support, highlighting the importance of learning how to be with others.
- 1 The lack of psychological counseling and career guidance at schools is a gap affecting the holistic learning experience.
- 1 A comprehensive learning experience influences self-perception, interactions, and pro-spects, fostering resilience against patriarchal norms.



04 Dreams and Aspirations:

- A rich learning experience, community involvement, and support networks empower girls to envision their futures.
- Economic and social constraints, such as socioeconomic status and patriarchal expectations, limit these dreams.
- Resilience and self-efficacy are crucial in overcoming these barriers and enabling the pursuit of diverse careers beyond traditional gender roles.





Recommendations:

Based on the research findings, to strengthen the self-esteem of adolescent girls in Lebanon, it is recommended to:

- 01** **Encourage** adolescent girls' self-expression through creating supportive spaces.
- 02** **Advance** feminist awareness via positive parenting initiatives.
- 03** **Develop** social media content promoting self-acceptance and self-efficacy.
- 04** **Foster** safe and productive social media use among adolescent girls.
- 05** **Encourage** girls to create content on topics of personal interest for self-development.
- 06** **Offer** psychological support at schools.
- 07** **Foster** feminist awareness among students and staff.
- 08** **Provide** in-school career guidance for adolescent girls.
- 09** **Encourage** girls to create content on topics of personal interest for self-development.
- 10** **Adapt** lacking curricula to include feminist perspectives.
- 11** **Encourage** participation in extra-curricular activities.
- 12** **Varied** and comprehensive learning experiences enhance self-esteem.
- 13** Emotional and social **support** aids in resisting patriarchal norms.

