

*Journal of International Students*  
Volume 14, Issue 1 (2024), pp. 367-385  
ISSN: 2162-3104 (Print), 2166-3750 (Online)  
jistudents.org

## **Social Exclusion and Conversion Factors: The Case of Married International Graduate Students at One US University**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Scholarship on international students shows that despite university policies designed to create a welcoming atmosphere, international students still face social challenges. This paper applies the capabilities approach to reveal mechanisms that facilitate or constrain the social inclusion of married international graduate students. For married international graduate students, the personal factors (their level of study and marital status) bring with structural factors (e.g., visa policies, healthcare policies, cultural and linguistic barriers), which in combination lead to social exclusion. With one university case study, including original survey and interview data, we unpack these intertwined processes and find that married graduate students' social relation and network patterns significantly differ from single graduate students and undergraduate students. They are less likely to attend campus events, interact with their colleagues, and interact with friends from other countries. As such, we challenge the conventional wisdom that access to higher education alone leads to social inclusion.*

**Keywords:** capabilities approach, conversion factors, higher education, married international graduate students, social exclusion

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## INTRODUCTION

The number of international students enrolled in US higher education institutions is rising rapidly and universities are increasingly paying attention to the needs of international students (Department of Homeland Security, 2018). Nevertheless, university policies designed to create a welcoming atmosphere often fail to facilitate the social inclusion of international students (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007). Past research has shown that a wide range of challenges could lead to students' social exclusion, including language difficulties, financial limitations, a new education system, participation of in-class conversations, different norms of communication, eating options, living arrangements, and friends making (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Hagedorn & Ren, 2012; Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Sherry et al., 2010; Trice, 2004). However, the ways in which personal factors (e.g., level of study and marital status) interact with structural mechanisms that underlie social exclusion, such as visa policies, deskilling (i.e., devaluation of the credentials and work experience accumulated in other countries), and institutional invisibility (e.g., lack of university policies that address social needs of married international graduate students) remain unknown.

To address this scholarly gap, we use the capabilities approach and unpack the personal, structural, and social factors that constrain or facilitate social inclusion for married international graduate students at one US university. For this group of population, we conceptualize social inclusion as participation in the university community and benefiting fully from the experience of being a student. As a normative theoretical framework, capabilities approach is very helpful in revealing the interactions of personal and structural factors, and their collective impact on people's well-beings and social inclusion (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Sen, 1999, 2005). By focusing on personal factors such as the level of study (i.e., graduate or undergraduate) and marital status, we show the social experiences of married international graduate students differ immensely from those of undergraduate international students (undergraduates for short) or single international graduate students. The majority of undergraduates are single, supported by parents, and able to enjoy university organizations with social opportunities. In contrast, for married international graduate students, coming to the US typically means leaving a prior career, becoming financially independent in a foreign country, diving into an intensive academic program, and dealing with the structural social exclusion mechanisms imposed on their spouses. We focus on married international graduate students mainly because these specific dynamics that intertwine structural, social, and personal factors affect their capability to form social relations in a particular way.

In so doing, this study makes three contributions to the study of capabilities approach. First, we argue marital status and level of study are significant personal conversion factors for higher education students, although they are not well studied. Second, we reveal the structural arrangements accompanying the marital status, which can collectively undermine social inclusion of married international graduate students. Thus, we highlight the interactions between personal and

structural conversion factors in shaping higher education students' capabilities. Third, we unpack the social relations and network capability of married international graduate students by looking at different social groups and activities.

The study conducts original survey (N = 289) and interview (N = 20) analyses at one US university. We found that structural factors that accompany marital status, influence the frequency to which international student attend campus events, the groups they mostly interact with, and the extent to which financial concerns affect participation in social events. By extending the focus from access to higher education institutions to social exclusion processes after admission, we argue that "increasing participation (more enrollment) and widening participation (more enrollment from previously under-represented groups)" are insufficient for the social inclusion of married international graduate students in the absence of specific institutional support (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p.144).

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CAPABILITIES APPROACH AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

The capabilities approach, or the human development approach, is a normative theoretical framework that focuses on individual opportunities and social arrangements, collectively determining people's freedom to achieve their desired well-beings (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Sen, 1999, 2005). This approach has been increasingly applied in higher education scholarship in recent years (Calitz et al., 2016; Harrison et al., 2018; Mutanga & Walker, 2015; Walker, 2019; Wang, 2011; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2017). Studies not only examined access to higher education, but also the well-being of students after their admission (Harrison et al., 2018; Walker, 2006; Mutanga & Walker, 2015). The capabilities that ensure students' well-being include cognitive freedoms, such as practical reason to make well-reasoned career choices, academic grounding to gain knowledge on selected subjects, and learning disposition. Furthermore, emotional and social capabilities such as voice, self-respect as well as respect from others, language confidence, and emotional health by being free from anxieties or fear are also considered as key capabilities for students (Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 131). In the absence of additional support, scholars have pointed out that personal (e.g., race, gender, and ability status) and structural factors (e.g., the socio-economic status) can hinder students from fulfilling these capabilities (Calitz et al., 2016; Mutanga & Walker, 2015; Wilson-Strydom, 2015; Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2017). These personal and structural factors, that are collectively referred to as conversion factors, interact to shape the capabilities of higher education students. For instance, in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, lack of institutional and pedagogical arrangements to redress historical injustices and social segregation constrained the working class, black, and female students' capability to participate in the college life fully and to flourish (Calitz et al., 2016, p.61). In reverse, certain institutional arrangements, that is, structural factors, can positively impact students' well-being. A study on two English universities, for example, demonstrated that bursaries increased student capability to form social relations (Harrison et al., 2018).

Scholars of the capabilities approach agree that being able to live with others, engage in various social interactions, participate in groups of friendships, form relationships of mutual trust, and respond to the need for social belonging are fundamental (Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). In the context of higher education, this capability not only ensures group learning and cultivating collective problem-solving skills, but also overcoming challenges particularly during the transition into the academic program (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Furthermore, the capability to form social relations and networks is vital for students to see themselves as peers or equal interlocutors and to feel included (Walker, 2006, p.128-129; Walker, 2019; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). In the absence of inclusive conditions, students can feel left out and their capability to take full advantage of the university experience can diminish. Ensuring inclusive education based on the recognition of individual differences fall within the realm of university arrangements. (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016, p. 128).

The conversion factors encompass these individual differences, and they provide an analytical tool to understand why a good or resource (e.g., access to a higher education institution) is insufficient for exercising capabilities (e.g., freedom to fully and equally participate in the university experience) (Calitz et al., 2016; Harrison et al., 2018; Loots et al., 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Conversion factors are not inequalities per se, but without specific resources, they can limit a student's ability to convert opportunities into achievements (Wang, 2011; Wilson-Strydom, 2015). For example, consider two international graduate students enrolled in the same department of the same American university with similar socio-economic backgrounds, English fluency, and educational qualifications. They are both research assistants and have the same amount of stipend, student A living close to campus with a roommate, whereas student B is married with two children and cannot split the rent with a roommate. Thus, she cannot afford apartments close to campus and relies on public transportation, which circulates very rarely and has a highly unpredictable schedule. Although she wants to interact with her friends, there are limited activities that she can make the time for and participate with her family. Although both students have access to the same university and equal stipends, student A is more able to participate and form social relations than student B.

Capabilities and social inclusion scholarships mostly focus on personal factors that are associated with historical and systemic discrimination mechanisms such as gender (Loots et al., 2016; Ngabaza et al., 2018), race (Calitz et al., 2016; Mwangi et al., 2019), citizenship status (Hämäläinen & Matikainen, 2018), and the ability status (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016; Hall et al., 2004; Mutanga & Walker, 2015). However, the seemingly neutral differences, such as marital status, remain understudied despite their significant impact in unique social and institutional arrangements. In the example above, the living distance to campus or marital status are not inequalities themselves. Nevertheless, they influence participation in higher education because of the absence of additional resources and institutional support. The next section focuses on married international graduate students to explore the how their marital status and the

accompanying structural factors imposed on their spouses impact the students' social inclusion.

### **CAPABILITIES AND SOCIAL INCLUSION OF MARRIED INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS**

Extant research on the social experiences of international students clearly shows issues with adjustment, participation, and belonging (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2017; Click, 2017; Mwangi et al., 2019; Misra et al., 2003). Few studies that unpacked international students find that the marital status can significantly influence capability to form social relations. Some studies show that married international graduate students experience lower levels of social adjustment strain because of the buffering and mediating role of familial social relations (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006). But married international graduate students also have limited opportunities to interact with domestic students because of the time invested in immediate families (Trice, 2004). Furthermore, they deal with complications related to their partner's social adjustment (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007). For example, if a partner faces language barriers, this might cause the social exclusion of the international student, as well. Thus, acculturation stress and lack of social support are "the utmost problems that international couples experience" (Vaez et al., 2015, p. 29).

Another way marital status impacts international students' social inclusion is through the implications of structural constraints imposed on their spouses. Spouses and children of international students are classified as dependents by the Department of Homeland Security, a highly gendered and racialized term implying limited rights and legal dependence on the primary visa-holder (Kim, 2006; Lo, 1993). The majority of the spouses of international students who do not study or work in the US are granted F-2 type visas, which ban them from working and applying for a Social Security Number (SSN). These "unfriendly laws toward accompanying spouses" cause a major disappointment and feelings of worthlessness (Yellig, 2011, p. 121). Fewer international students in the US hold J-1 type visas, with their families receiving J-2 type visas, which allow the acquisition of a work permit and SSN. However, J-2 visa-holding spouses face the hurdle of deskilling, that is, the "devaluation of credentials and experience" among immigrants, who were "treated as a source of cheap labor" regardless of academic backgrounds (Man, 2004, p. 140). Consequently, the autonomy and agency of spouses of international students are undermined as they lack the ability to "realize the goals they value and have reason to value" (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 45). The students are also impacted by these structural restrictions in terms of their emotional health, financial wellbeing, and capability to social relations (De Verthelyi & Frank, 1995; Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Teshome & Osei-Kofi, 2012).

Finally, the structural constraints on spouses of international students can disrupt the gender roles within the families. As Jiang, Soylemez-Karakoc and Hussain (2020) point out, majority of the graduate students in the US are in STEM majors, that are historically dominated by male students, and majority of the spouses of international graduate students identify as women. The study

demonstrates that even in the case of families with progressive gender norms and an equal share of domestic work back home, they tend to adopt traditional gender norms and division of labor once they realize the spouses will not be able to work or study in the US (Jiang et al., 2020).

Despite the unique vulnerability of married international graduate students to capability deprivations, there is no study that examines marital status as a conversion factor that create social inclusion/exclusion. Although some studies have focused on the families of international students (Chiang, 2014; De Verthelyi & Frank, 1995; Nayebare, 2016), few studies consider structural factors such as visa policies and institutional inadequacies (Jiang et al., 2020; Kim, 2006) or consider their implications for married international students in achieving their capabilities. By addressing this gap, we contribute two new personal conversion factors to the capabilities scholarship: the level of study and marital status.

### **DATA AND METHODS**

We conducted our single case study at an American public university with more than 20,000 students that locates in a small college town in Mid-Atlantic region. The university exemplifies typical medium-size public universities with regard to its ratio of international students (over 10%). Furthermore, it hosts around 500 spouses of international students. The university is in the process of increasing its number of programs to support social inclusion of married international graduate students with recently initiated weekly family meetings. Thus, it provides an interesting case study in terms of how much the university policies attend to married international graduate students and their families' capability to form social relations and networks.

We adopted a mixed methods approach using primary source survey and interview data with an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through this two-phase design, we first collected and analyzed the survey data to identify patterns in social relations and networks among international students. Then, we collected and analyzed the interview data to explain the interaction between their agency and the social arrangements that collectively affect social relations. Thus, the interview questions were informed by the survey findings. We sent out the survey to all international students via email, with two follow-up reminders in two-week periods in October 2017. In total, we had 297 international students from 51 countries respond to the survey (13.16% response rate,) and only 8 ended the survey without completing, leaving use with a sample size of 289. Almost half of all respondents are doctoral students (142), 30% are masters' students (84), and one fifth are undergraduates (60). We considered both master's and Ph.D. students as graduate students. Because our study focuses on the patterns of married international graduate students' social relations and networks, and uses the responses of undergraduate international students, the overrepresentation of graduate students in our sample can be justified. 52.8% of the respondents identify as female (152), and 23% of all our respondents are married (66). Thus, we have a sample that has 4:1 ratio of graduate to

undergraduate students, and 7:3 ratio of single graduate students to married graduate students.

**Table 1: Interviewee Characteristics**

ID	Student/ Spouse	Gender	Pseudonym	Nationality	Degree	Visa status
1	Spouse	Woman	Ashanti	Bolivia	MA	F2
2	Spouse	Woman	Mia	Columbia	MA	J2
3	Spouse	Woman	Martina	Columbia	BA	F2
4	Spouse	Man	Santiago	Brazil	High school	F2
5	Spouse	Man	Samuel	Uruguay	High school	F2
6	Student	Woman	Shirin	Iran	PhD student	F1
7	Student	Man	Haruto	Japan	PhD student	F1
8	Student	Woman	Kim	South Korea	PhD student	F1
9	Spouse	Man	Yang	China	MA	F2
10	Spouse	Woman	Janelle	Philippines	MA	F2
11	Spouse	Woman	Fatma	Turkey	BA	J2
12	Spouse	Woman	Zeynep	Turkey	BA	J2
13	Student	Woman	Nicole	Uruguay	PhD student	F1
14	Spouse	Woman	Linda	Taiwan	MA	J2
15	Student	Man	Carlos	Columbia	PhD student	F1
16	Spouse	Woman	Emily	Taiwan	BA	J2
17	Spouse	Woman	Ayse	Turkey	BA	J2
18	ISO director	Man	Aamir	Mauritius	PhD	N/A
19	Spouse	Woman	Sania	Bangladesh	MBA	F2
20	Student	Man	Hasan	Bangladesh	PhD student	F1

The survey included questions about demographic background, social relations and networks, and factors shaping respondents' levels of social interaction. To explore the facilitators and constraints on international students' capability to form social relations, we unpacked social relations and networks as the frequency of (1) attendance to social activities organized by the International Students Office (ISO) per semester, and social interactions with (2) colleagues, (3) friends from different countries, and (4) friends from the same country. Although social interaction frequency is not equivalent to the freedom to form social relations and networks, the students' self-reports reveal their perceived freedom to form social relations and networks. To analyze the data, we conducted

a series of independent samples t-tests to examine the mean-level differences in variables related to social relations and networks, first between undergraduates and graduates, and second between single and married graduates. By doing so, we show how married graduates' social interaction patterns compare to both undergraduates and single graduates.

To supplement our survey analysis, we conducted one-hour semi-structured interviews. To recruit participants, we organized an international family event, where we gathered contact information of the volunteers through a registration form. We also asked for the contact information of interviewee volunteers at the end of our survey. Finally, we used snowball sampling and asked each interviewee if they know other potential volunteers. At the end, we could recruit 20 interviewees: 6 international married graduate students, 13 spouses of international graduate students, and the head of the ISO (See Table 1). When conducting the interviews, we used a script that has seven umbrella questions about the process of coming to the US, the level of knowledge about visa permissions and constraints in the US before arrival, their social lives, and their satisfaction with the campus atmosphere regarding international individuals' social inclusion. However, the semi-structure design also enabled us to improvise, follow-up the participant's response, and see if there are important relevant themes to this project. We first conducted a text analysis of the interviews to reveal major themes and then focus on responses at the intersection of individual and structural factors.

## FINDINGS

Both our survey and interview findings suggest that the level of study and marital status are critical factors affecting married international graduate students' social inclusion. While the graduate respondents as a whole report significantly higher frequencies of attendance to ISO events and social interactions with their colleagues compared to undergraduate respondents, within them, married graduates report significantly lower frequencies of attendance to ISO events, social interactions with their colleagues, and as well as friends from different countries compared with single graduates. The only category that married graduates report higher frequencies is the interactions with friends from their home countries, although the difference between means is insignificant (See Table 2). To measure the internal consistency for our scale dependent variables, we calculated the Cronbach's alpha. It is 0.76 for social interactions, which indicates an acceptable reliability, and 0.92 for financial concerns over social interactions, which shows some redundancy, but a strong reliability.

### **Campus Relations: ISO Events and Interactions with Colleagues**

The ISO primarily aims to institutionally support international students. Under this mission, the ISO assumes multiple functions. First, the office helps the



**Table 2: Social interaction patterns: level of study and marital status**

	Level of Study (N=234)					Marital Status (N=192)				
	Undergraduate Mean	Graduate Mean	Difference	T-Value	P-Value	Single Graduate Mean	Married Graduate Mean	Difference	T-Value	P-Value
SI with colleagues	2.83	3.55	-0.72	-2.89	0***	3.68	3.2	0.48	2.12	0.04**
SI with friends from same country	3.88	3.82	0.06	0.22	0.83	3.81	3.87	-0.07	-0.28	0.78
SI with friends from different countries	3.88	3.65	0.22	0.95	0.34	3.84	3.16	0.68	3.12	0***
Attendance at ISO events	2.33	2.78	-0.44	-2.24	0.03**	2.91	2.42	0.5	2.66	0.01**

SI = social interaction, N = number of respondents. The model was built through an independent samples t-test. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

students with their paperwork, including student visas, immigration applications, and travel permits. Second, ISO organizes social activities that engage the

students in the campus community, such as orientation events, weekly coffee hours, and holiday dinners. That said, our findings imply that the ISO is more successful in attracting graduates to its events compared to the undergraduates, and acts as an institutional facilitator of graduates’ social relations and networks. On average, graduates report they attend ISO events two or three times per semester, whereas the mean for undergraduates is once per semester. Furthermore, several interviewees mentioned the international students’ orientation event and ISO weekly coffee hours when we asked about the role of the university in their social transition. For instance, Shirin, an Iranian graduate student, explained:

We (she and her husband) attended the international students’ orientation event. Until then, I did not know that there are Iranians in (the city of the university). There are good opportunities to hang out. For instance, once, there was World Cup, I guess four years ago. ISO was hosting the event to watch it together. We had flags and scarves.

There are several reasons that explain graduates’ higher participation frequencies. First, these on-campus events consume around two hours each time and graduates do not have to take much time away from their studies. These events also provide an event venue close by for social activities and students do not need to spend extra time for transportation. Second, ISO events provide free snacks and soft drinks. The free cost events might be especially attractive for graduate students because they report significantly higher levels of financial concern when they socialize compared to undergraduates.

We also find that graduates interact with their colleagues significantly more than undergraduates do. Two interviewees, Nicole and her husband, Samuel, explained to us how Nicole’s advisor had been a vital support to them with their transition, not only academically but also socially:

The only person we knew before coming is her advisor. She went to pick us up at [a city close to the university] and later she helped us find an apartment. She is the nicest person we have ever met... Before she got diagnosed with cancer, she would invite us to her house and have dinner together very often. Her families are not in [the same state as the university], so we got really close. We are like her families.

Thus, along with the institutional role of the ISO, individual interactions with faculty members, advisors, and fellow graduate students can also facilitate the capability to form social relations and networks for graduate students. This finding supports the literature arguing that graduates rely heavily on academic circles to form social relations (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011).

Despite the special significance of ISO events and relations with colleagues for graduate students, our findings suggest that the married graduates do not/cannot fully take advantage of them. Married graduates reported significantly lower levels of attendance at ISO events and social interactions with colleagues, compared to single graduate students. Also, among married respondents who participated in events organized by the ISO, 40% stated they had never brought their spouses and children to these events, and 23% said they rarely did so. A lack of direct communication between spouses and the university may provide an explanation for this finding. For instance, ISO hosts weekly international family meetings, which target married graduates and approximately 500 international spouses at the university. However, the participation rates remain low, varying from 5–15 people at each meeting, because spouses' emails are not registered by the ISO. Some of the spouse interviewees expressed they had never attended because they had not heard of the meetings: "I do not participate any of the activities... I don't know if there are activities that the spouses are invited" (Zeynep). Sania, another spouse interviewee, explained how the students' intermediation between their communication and the university is problematic:

I did not get an invitation or see an online advertisement for the international student family meeting. One day my husband said there is an international student family group, almost half year later than I arrived... If my husband did not see it on ISO newsletter, I would not know the family meetings.

Communication problems between the university and the spouses of international students have contributed to this resource being underpublicized and spouses feeling alienated from the campus space. Thus, the spouses' capability of voice –the capability to be able to participate, speak out, and be active in knowledge acquisition – is diminished (Walker, 2006, p. 180). A married graduate student, Hasan, asserted: "I wish ISO would ask for spouses' emails when they send the I20 forms. When my spouse is not happy here, of course it affects me and my studies." Because marital status is not acknowledged as a significant factor, the complications of socializing as an international family remains unaddressed. The institutional invisibility of spouses is likely to constraint the capability of married international students to form social relations and networks.

## **Interactions with Friends: Language and Cultural Barriers**

Married graduate's social interaction patterns are double disadvantaged with both their level of study and marital status. With regards to level of study, compared to undergraduates, graduates reported lower frequencies of social interactions with their co-nationals and friends from different countries, although the differences between the means are insignificant (See Table 2). The demanding nature of graduate studies does not leave much time for engagement in social activities beyond the campus. For instance, Haruto, a Japanese graduate student explained that it is not usual for him to leave his office before 7:30 pm. The survey corroborates this finding as graduate students reported an average of 8.74 hours spent on campus daily.

The married graduates have even lower rates of social interaction with friends from other countries than did single graduates. This finding can be interpreted with the buffer role of a partner or a family. Past research argues that married graduates fulfill "their social support needs at home through their spouse or family" (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006, p. 776). However, the other side of the story is that married graduates face challenges in their social engagement with friends from other countries when with family. First, spouses' language barriers might discourage them from interacting with English-speaking groups. These language barriers are likely to endure throughout their stay in the US as the university where we conducted our research does not provide English lessons for spouses. Another explanation is the cultural barrier. As Duru and Poyrazli (2007) demonstrated, compared to single students, married students report more acculturative stress, defined as "the psychological and physical discomfort experienced within a new cultural environment" due to the complications of culturally adjusting with a partner (p. 100). As the spouses do not study or work in the US and have few opportunities to interact with people from the host country, this stress can inhibit further attempts at social inclusion (De Verthelyi & Frank, 1995; Myers-Walls et al., 2011).

Concretely, we find that married graduate students report higher levels of social interactions with conationals (i.e., friends from same countries), although the mean difference is not statistically significant. This is the easiest form of social interaction for a family because language and culture barriers do not exist. For instance, Kim, a married graduate student, explained that she and her husband mostly hang out with her Korean friends as she was teaching for a Korean school and they constantly host cultural and social events.

## **The Indirect Constraints: Structural Restrictions on the Spouses of International Students**

The federal visa policies, deskilling, and a lack of language training on the spouse end also constrain married graduate students' social relations. As explained above, spouses of international students who hold an F-2 visa are not able to work legally, open a bank account, or get an SSN. These restrictions inhibit

their social inclusion and can be frustrating for the students, too. Ashanti, spouse of an international student, observed:

I think it is even harder for him than me. He feels very guilty because he thinks he screwed my career. I told him ‘No, it is not your fault. It is the system’s fault.’ He does not express his emotions. I can cry but he is not like that. He got so stressed that he got two balls on his neck. You know, it is like a tumor but it is not.

Although work restrictions do not apply to J-2 visa holders, many J-2 spouses cannot find a job because of the devaluation of their credentials. Among our J-2 visa-holding interviewees were a manager, a surgeon, a lawyer, and a teacher whose diplomas were not considered valid in the US. Consequently, they are unemployed, although they can work legally. Furthermore, because of the lack of appropriate language training support, some high-skilled spouses cannot find jobs suitable to their skills. For instance, Emily, a spouse interviewee, experienced a dramatic shift in her carrier:

I was the project manager of Mitsubishi in Taiwan and I did a great job there. I got promoted very fast and I made lots of money there...but here I am afraid there are not any suitable jobs for me... I am taking English classes.

The structural restrictions imposed on the spouses of international students exacerbate the financial concerns of married graduates exponentially, which further narrows down their social space. Nicole, a married graduate international student, explained how her husband’s work restriction causes significant problems for them:

It affects me when he has nothing to do. It is like a game of chess. You always need to be strategizing and fighting. You have to take your energy because of these stresses. All problems are caused by the fact he cannot work, like how are we going to pay the bill, other money issues.

This finding is supported by our survey data as well. In our sample of graduate students, 60% of the graduate students in our sample get their full income from their assistantship, 21% get their full income from their parents, 16% get their full income from their home country scholarship, and less than 1% get their full income from loans. Therefore, they are not professional graduate students, who work outside of the university. The added expenses for their spouses further exacerbated marriage students’ financial situation. For example, the university at which we conducted our research recommends a health insurance program for spouses, costing approximately \$3,600 annually. Even though the families of international students fall into a low-income group in certain states, F-2 visa status prohibits spouses from accessing government-sponsored healthcare programs. Thus, some spouses go without health insurance. Hasan, a married international student, explained how this can be troubling:

The insurance is too expensive that we ended up not having any plan for her... When I go to health center, they do not give advice to me about her. It is ridiculously strict here that they do not even care if the issue is important.

Financial concerns over essential needs constrain the family budget for social activities, not only because of the expense of the activities themselves but also because of the cost of transportation. Many interviewees could not afford a car even though public transportation is very poor in most college towns. Zeynep, a Turkish spouse who lives six miles away from the campus, did not own a car for her first two years in the US. When we talked about opportunities for social interaction on campus, she said, "I think there are so many opportunities for the socialization of international students, if they live close to the campus...but I spend too much time at home, and it can be very challenging."

The interview data analyzed above clearly shows that the work ban and deskilling trouble married graduates by undermining not only their capability to form social relations and networks but also their emotional health and integrity. The anxiety over ruining their spouses' career or worrying about their lack of health insurance challenges both their learning experience and full participation to university life for married graduate students.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Following the research of capabilities in higher education studies (Harrison et al., 2018; Walker, 2006; Wang, 2011; Wilson-Strydom, 2015), this research considers social relations and networks as a capability and analyzes the facilitators and constraints on achieving social inclusion for married international graduate students. By doing so, it makes an empirical contribution with a particularly vulnerable subject of study and three theoretical contributions to the scholarship of capabilities in higher education.

Through one university case study, we find that married graduate students' social relation and network patterns significantly differ from single graduate students and undergraduate students. They are less likely to attend ISO events or interact with their colleagues and friends from other countries. Although married graduates reported higher levels of social interaction with conational friends, past research informs us that this might not compensate for a lack of social interaction with friends from other countries (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Trice, 2004, p. 683). Social interactions with colleagues and friends from different countries, including host nationals, are crucial to function comfortably in the host country's culture. Thus, we argue and substantiate that the structural constraints on spouses, such as the invisibility created by university policies and restrictive visa policies, inhibit the married graduate students' capability to form social relations and networks.

Regarding theoretical contributions, we first extend the conventional personal conversion factors in capabilities literature by identifying two understudied factors when analyzing students' capabilities. The conventional

personal factors such as gender, race, and citizenship, are well-studied in capabilities and social inclusion in the higher education scholarship because of their explicit link to historical and institutional discrimination mechanisms (Calitz et al., 2016; Hämäläinen & Matikainen, 2018; Loots et al., 2016; Mwangi et al., 2019; Ngabaza et al., 2018). Other personal factors, such as the level of study and marital status, remain understudied as they are not immediately associated with social justice and equity questions. Second, through capabilities approach, we reveal that in unique circumstances, these less studied personal conversion factors can also bring with certain social and structural arrangements that significantly shape students' well-beings. Thus, we demonstrate how the personal, structural, and social conversion factors operate jointly in shaping individual's lives, even in cases of historically less marginalizing personal factors. However, our research remains limited in considering other conversion factors, including the gendered aspects of social relations.

Our third theoretical contribution is to unpack the capability of forming social relations and networks by focusing on specific social groups and activities. Whom married international graduate students can build social relations with matters significantly, because each group enables their social inclusion in a different way. Through comparisons between undergraduate and graduate students, we demonstrated the significance of campus relations, i.e., attendance to university activities and interactions with colleagues, for graduate students. While social relations with conational friends provide an atmosphere free of language and cultural barriers, the graduate students also need social relations and networks with their colleagues and fellow academics for their graduate program. Against this background, married graduates' significantly lower attendance to university events and social interactions with colleagues raise important concerns. Thus, we show that social relations and networks are not monolithic. The variation in social relation patterns and their impacts on achieving social inclusion invite capabilities scholars to further sophisticate the capability to form social relations and networks.

Higher education is critical in expanding future capabilities by contributing to personal development, democratic participation, and economic opportunities (Vaughan et al., 2012; Walker, 2019, p. 219; Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2017). These future capabilities could only be possible if students are socially included in the university. Capabilities approach in higher education studies emphasizes "not only personal characteristics like cognitive skills or intellectual skills and social attributes, but on social, political and economic determinants that people have and can employ to convert their resources to derive real capabilities." (Pham, 2015, p. 79). Married international graduate students, a particularly vulnerable group to social exclusion, face various structural facilitators and constraints based on their level of study and marital status. By unpacking these factors and identifying facilitators and constraints, we demonstrate the need for specific institutional resources to promote their social inclusion. Because international students "are entangled in a wide set of social relations," the indirect impact of the structural constraints on their spouses should be part of the debate on international students' social inclusion (King & Raghuram, 2013, p. 131). In

facilitating a welcoming atmosphere for international students, the universities should take these two personal factors into account. For instance, universities can register the contact information of spouses to increase their institutional visibility, inform the international families more about the visa restrictions before their arrival, and guide the spouses for language advancement opportunities. Also, when designing international student centers, there could be consideration for families, so married graduate students can find an opportunity to socialize with their colleagues and friends from different countries (Brandes, 2006).

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