

ABSTRACT

DISSERTATION: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF SOUTH ASIAN FEMALE GRADUATE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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My study investigates the experiences of non-traditional South Asian female international graduate students studying at four Midwestern universities in terms of their academic challenges, social challenges, and their experience achieving a balance between school and home as they pursue their education in the United States. The three main goals of my project were to better understand the experiences of South Asian female international graduate students to improve their education and life in the United States.; to identify any academic and social challenges that they experience, especially as they struggle to balance household and academic responsibilities; and lastly, to explore and suggest measures, programs and policies that are more supportive and welcoming for international graduate students. These goals were achieved by answering three research questions: What challenges do South Asian female international graduate students encounter in the United States? How do international female graduate students from South Asia describe the experience regarding the balance between their academic pursuits, family, and cultural expectations? Lastly, how do South Asian female international graduate students describe their experience of navigating the technology-rich U.S. environment in institution of higher education. The participants of my qualitative study were ten non-traditional female

international graduate students from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, studying at four Midwestern universities in the United States. Data was collected through individual interviews with each participant and analyzed using transcendental phenomenology. This dissertation is unique as it addresses the set of challenges particular to married women of South Asian origin and investigates the set of extra challenges they face as they juggle between their role as a student, wife, and/or mom. The findings of my study showed that the experience of attaining higher education in the United States proved to be an empowering and enriching experience for these women from South Asia. The study also revealed some of the academic and social challenges that these women faced upon arrival in the United States. Most of the academic challenges were due to a language barrier and pedagogical differences. In terms of technology use, apart from the social and cultural factors, age, affordability, and field of study were important factors in access and comfort with technology. However, the participants gained confidence as they became independent, and they had more exposure to various modes of educational technology in the United States. The findings indicate the need for a transition program to make the academic and cultural transition easier. Students coming from countries where English is not their first language may also need extra language support to achieve academic success. In addition, some programs to assist pregnant and parenting female graduate international students would be helpful as most of them do not have any extended family members present to support them. My study is of significance for educators and institutional leaders and will help them to consider ways they could improve the experience of female international graduate students and provide more support. This study adds to the existing literature on international graduate students and their experience in the United States as there

have not been many studies that have looked at how female international graduate students struggle to achieve a balance between school and their home life.