LEARNING IN THE COMPANY OF WOMEN: THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER, AND RELIGION IN THE EDUCATIONAL AND CAREER EXPERIENCE OF IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONAL SUDANESE MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

DISSERTATION

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the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

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Abstract

Africans continue to immigrate to the United States voluntarily or involuntarily (Arthur, 2000; Stewart, 1993). Although much has been written about immigrants in the U.S., little literature is available on black immigrants (Rong & Brown, 2002; Arthur, 2000; Dodoo, 1997), and much less on Muslim immigrants from black Africa. Moreover, and despite the recent increase in Sudanese women’s immigration to the U.S. due to the conflicts in the South Sudan, Darfur and the government’s gendered policies and oppression of women (Abdel-Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002; Hale, 1997), there are virtually no studies that examine their experiences and the role that their race, gender, and religion play in their everyday lives. Therefore, this study aspires to add to the scant research in this area and contribute to the visibility of these women.

The purpose of this study is to explore the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women in the United States. The study tried to answer the following questions: How do immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women residing in the U.S. perceive their educational and career experiences in America? How do immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women perceive the impact of their race, gender, and religion on their experiences as they carve their own space within their respective professions? What are
the significant issues embraced by these women as they struggle to negotiate a place within American educational institutions and their professions?

The study is informed by Black feminist epistemology as a theoretical framework, and narrative inquiry as a method within qualitative research for data collection and analysis. Individual interviews, researcher’s journals, and field notes were used to collect the narratives of five educated Sudanese Muslim women who live and work in the U.S. The analysis of the data revealed several findings. First, the participants reported several encounters of discrimination and prejudice due to their race, gender, religion, accented English and immigrant status. Second, despite the fact that both racism and sexism perpetuate black women’s oppression in the U.S. (Collins, 2000; 1998; hooks, 1990; Crenshaw, 1997), most of the participants did not feel gender discrimination. Third, all of the participants have experienced religion discrimination, although it was harsher for those who wear the Islamic dress. They also reported that the incident of September, 11/2001 terrorist attack have heightened the enmity against Muslims.

The women’s narratives revealed that racism, sexism, accent, and religion did intersect in their experiences, at different levels, which negatively affected them during their educational pursue as well as in the workplaces. However, the participants’ stories reflected their resiliency and determination which helped them to defy discriminatory acts, stay positive, and achieve success academically and professionally. Further, implications for educational institutions and workplaces were discussed, along with recommendations for future research.
Dedicated to the spirit of my late mother Zainab Modawi
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Publications


Fields of Study

Major Field: Education
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Africans continue to immigrate to the United States voluntarily or involuntarily. Although much has been written about immigrants in the U.S., little literature is available on black immigrants, and much less on immigrant men and women from Africa (Rong & Brown, 2002; Arthur, 2000; Rong & Preissle, 1998; Dodoo, 1997). Furthermore, despite the recent increase in Sudanese women’s immigration to the U.S. due to the conflicts in the South Sudan, Darfur, and the government gendered policies and oppression of women (Abdel-Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002; Hale, 1997), there are virtually no studies that examine professional Sudanese Muslim women experiences in the United States and the role that their race, gender, and religion play in their everyday lives.

Currently, United States is witnessing a tremendous increase in immigrant population. They come from all parts of the world with diverse cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations, attracted by the opportunities that the United States could offer them and their families. As a result, recent years have also experienced a surge in the literature that focuses on immigrants’ different experiences (Okpalaoka, 2009; Basford, 2008; Kusow, 2007, Arthur, 2002; Abusharaf, 2002; Rida and Milton, 2001; Djamba, 1999), as well as, studies that relate to aspects of cultural and religious adjustments of
Among the growing numbers of immigrants in the U.S. are the Sudanese Muslims who constitute a religious minority that needs to operate within the framework of America’s secular systems. On the other hand, the number of immigrant Sudanese Muslim women - as the case with their male counterparts- though small, is rapidly increasing among immigrant population (Abdel Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002; Eljack, 2000). They are students, teachers, medical doctors, college professors, social workers, and business owners (Abdel Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002; Haddad & Lummis, 1987). Their presences as well as their contributions to American society warrant a study that examines their experiences.

This qualitative study explores the intersection of race, gender, and religion, in the educational and career experiences of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women who live and work in the United States. By so doing, I hope to contribute to the dearth of studies on immigrants from Africa and African Muslim immigrants in particular. I also aspire to contribute to the research on black Muslim women so as to narrow the identified gap in the literature which is characterized by: the dearth of research on black immigrants (Falola & Afolabi, 2008; Kusow, 2007; Rong & Brown, 2002; Arthur, 2000; Djamba, 1999; Dodoo, 1997), limited discourse on the experiences of black African Muslim

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1 Muslims are the followers of Islam, a religious faith that includes the belief in Allah (God) as the sole deity and in Muhammad as His Messenger.
women, and limited research on the educational and professional experiences of Sudanese Muslim women in the United States (Abdel Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002).

In this vein, Schrock (2008) who examined Somali experiences in Columbus Ohio reported that there are few studies about African Muslim immigrants, because most of the existing studies in the United States used to focus on European immigrants who are males (Schrock, 2008). Additionally, while there is abundant literature that examines the experiences of Latino and Caribbean immigrants, there are very few that researched black immigrants in the U.S. (Rong & Brown, 2002; Rong & Preissle, 1998). However, a small number of studies brought up some issues that concern and affect immigrants from Africa to the forefront of the educational, cultural, societal, and political discourse (Schrock, 2008; Agbali, 2008; Halter, 2007; Kusow, 2007; Falola & Afolabi, 2008; Dion & Dion, 2001; Djamba, 1999; Dodoo, 1997).

Nonetheless, there is virtually no study that examined the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of professional Sudanese Muslim women. On the other hand, the available literature about Islam and Muslims tends to associate Islam with Arabism; therefore most of the studies are inclined towards exploring Islam from an Arab/Middle Eastern point of view, where being a Muslim became equal to being an Arab (Sharkey, 2008; Nyombe, 1994, cited in Sharkey, 2008; Ahmed, 1992; Haddad & Lummis, 1987). Accordingly, there is very little research on Muslims from black Africa and Sudanese Muslim women.
It worth noting that, most of the people in northern Sudan who are considered Africans (Mukhtar, 2004; Hale, 1997) tend to align themselves with Arabism and Islamic culture. Consequently, Islam and Arabic language become central to their identity and their political and social discourse (Sharkey, 2008). Thus, the focus of this study is on Northern Sudanese Muslim women who claim both Arab and African heritage (Badri, 2008, Sharkey, 2008).

On the other hand, in the West, there is a perpetuation of the stereotype that depicts Islam as an oppressive violent religion and Muslims as backward, extremist, and terrorists (Curtis, 2009; 2006), in particular after the incident of September 11, 2001 attack. Therefore, the scarcity of empirical data and academic studies on the experiences of immigrant African men and women, including professional Sudanese Muslim women, and the misconceptions about Islam and Muslims necessitate this kind of study in order to shed the light on this minority’s everyday experiences.

In this chapter I discuss the following topics: the purpose of the study; statement of the problem; the research questions; background of the study; the significance of the study; Limitations; definition of terms; and overview of the chapters.

**Purpose of the study**

This study explores how race, gender, and religion intersect in shaping the educational and career experiences of the participants; how they navigate between two worlds: their native culture, traditions, Islamic faith, and the American mainstream culture; and how their educational and career experiences in the U.S. impact their
viewpoints. In this regard, it is anticipated that this study will contribute to the visibility of these women and give them the voice and the opportunity to tell their stories from their own perspectives. Likewise, it could empower them to critically examine the dominant ideologies regarding race, gender, and Islamophobia\(^2\) as specific forms of racism in the U.S. (Rana, 2007; Zine, 2006; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Haddad, 2004; Collins, 2000, Crenshaw, K, 1991; Hooks; 1990).

The study aims to: 1) Create awareness on the realities of these women among educators, employers, administrators, and legislators by providing them the opportunity to learn about Muslims and the lived experiences of professional Sudanese Muslim women and the nature of their individual development; 2) Highlight the issues that concern them and; 3) dispel misconceptions and stereotyping about Islam as a violent and oppressive religion and Muslim women who have been constructed as submissive and backward.

**Statement of the problem**

Studies show that despite the increase in the numbers of Africans who have made the U.S. their permanent home, research that explores their experiences is still lagging behind. Falola & Afolabi (2008) argue that: “While studies addressing new international migration patterns of ethnic groups into the United States, such as the cases of Asian-Americans, Latinos, Sino-Americans, etc. are on the rise, only few address African immigrants”(p.1). However, there was a turning point marked by a surge in the studies of

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\(^2\) *Islamophobia* is a Term used to describe growing anxiety and hostility towards Islam and Muslims in the United States (Rana, 2007; Zine, 2006).
Islam and Muslims after the incident of September, 11, 2001 attack on the United States. As a result scholars started to scrutinize Islam and Muslim immigrants’ communities in the West (Basford, 2008; Abdo, 2007; Sarroub, 2005).

Literature shows that the majority of the African immigrants are highly educated and skilled laborers, (Falola & Afolabi, 2008; Agbali, 2008; Halter, 2007; Kusow, 2007; Djamba, 1999; Dodoo, 1997; Butcher, 1994). Nonetheless, in spite of their noticeable presence and educational attainments, they are less researched, and their experiences in the U.S. are rarely documented. It worth noting that, a considerable number of African Muslims are among these émigrés who made the U.S. their home.

Currently, it is estimated that there are between 6-7 million Muslims in the United States who represent different nationalities and cultural traditions (Kusow, 2007). Other studies claim that about 14% of all immigrants entering the U.S. are Muslims, in addition to the 40% of African Americans who converted to Islam during the 20th century (Djamba, 1999; Blasing, 1996). For Muslims, Islam is more than a faith as it prescribes every detail of their daily life (Collet, 2007; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Barazangi, 2004; Said, 1981). Immigrant Muslims bring with them values that reflect their faith, traditions, and culture. However, many of them are marginalized, stereotyped, and depicted as terrorists and extremists (Curtis, 2009; Basford, 2008; Amer, 2005; El-Halwany, 2003).

Researching the literature, I found that none of the studies have examined the experiences of immigrant professional Sudanese women who are Muslims. Thus, taking in consideration this void in the literature and in view of Abdul-Ghafur’s (2005)
argument about “how profoundly ignorant Americans have been about Islam and Muslims” (p.2), and Abdo’s (2007) elucidation that “much of the hostility toward Muslims reflects the lack of knowledge about Islam that has persisted since the first Muslims arrived in America more than three hundred years ago” (p.7), I am determined to contribute to Muslim women’s’ visibility and to the knowledge about immigrant Sudanese Muslim women’s experiences in the United States.

For the purpose of this study and because generalizability is not an objective in this research, I choose to recruit a small sample. The participants are five immigrant Sudanese Muslim women with diverse professional careers and working experiences. They are originally from Northern Sudan and they lived in the U.S for at least 10 years. Although, all of them have obtained college degrees from Sudan before they moved to the U.S., they realized that they need to have credentials from a U.S. educational institution in order to get professional jobs.

**Research questions**

This study is based on Black feminist epistemology which is a scheme for carrying out research on the experience of those who are at the margin in order to illuminate the injustices that are inflicted upon them due to their race, gender, or class in addition to other categories of discrimination (Collins, 2000; Jones, 1997; Crenshaw, 1995; Etter-Lewis, 1991; hooks, 1990). The study also employs narrative inquiry as a method within qualitative research for data collection and analysis. Furthermore, I use black feminist scholars’ aspects of intersectionality (Collins, 2000, 1998; hooks, 1998,
1990; Crenshaw, 2000; 1997; king, 1988) in order to understand the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the experiences of the five immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women who live and work in the U.S.

Thus, the overarching research questions that drive the study are:

1. How do immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women residing in the U.S. perceive their educational and career experiences in America?

2. How do immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women perceive the impact of their race, gender, and religion on their experiences as they carve their own space within their respective professions?

3. What are the significant issues embraced by these women as they struggle to negotiate a place within American educational institutions and their professions?

**Background of the study**

Feminist scholars encourage researchers to consider their everyday experiences when writing about the standpoint of women (Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987). My personal experience as an immigrant, a Muslim, a Sudanese, a student, and a professional woman was a determinant for my choice of this research topic and the participants. Thus, I align myself with the feminist researchers who point to the importance of the race and ethnicity of both the researcher and participants (Collins, 2000). Further, I assume that my study’s participants and I share some of the experiences in the sense that we are all Sudanese professional black Muslim women, and recent immigrants to the United States from a
predominantly patriarchal society where Islamic religion, culture, and African traditions have great impact on our lives.

Furthermore, Like Baloyi (cited in Collins, 2000, p.3), and as a novice researcher I was baffled by the paucity of studies on black African Muslim women by African women. Since my migration to the U.S. twelve years ago, I also continue to be amazed by the pervasiveness of racism, sexism, classism, and Islamphobia in the American landscape. In fact, through the years I experienced numerous incidents of racism, sexism, and discrimination: in my job; educational institutions; grocery shops; and neighborhood among other social contexts. Thus, being viewed and treated differently became part of my everyday life which explains why I consider this study as a personal journey.

Literature points to the scarcity of studies on black immigrants compared to other immigrants such as Asians and Caribbean (Rong & Brown, 2002; Arthur, 2000; Rong & Preissle, 1998). Rong & Brown (2002) argue about the negative effects of this absence on American society “The lack of research on black immigrants denies the American public and policy makers opportunities to explore the many urgent and intriguing issues concerning black immigrants: therefore denying the public insight into the special needs of these immigrants which have been neglected” (p.249).

Likewise, Muslim immigrants who adhere to Islamic faith practices look for some consideration for their needs within American society, because their Islamic beliefs and cultures are different from the American mainstream culture. For them, Islam is the highest authority that dictates every aspect of their lives (Abdo, 2007; Barazngi, 2004;
Pulcini, 1997; Blasing, 1996; Haddad, 1987; Said, 1981). Consequently, the nature of the challenges that are faced by the Muslims in the U.S. and the specificity of Muslims’ relationship with the West (Said, 1978) render the uniqueness of their experiences.

Muslims as a religious minority in the U.S., and black Muslims in particular are at disadvantage. They are marginalized and discriminated against due to their race, gender, religion, or country of origin (Curtis, 2009; Basford, 2008; Abdo, 2007). In addition, those Muslims continue to endure the repercussions of the September, 11/2001 terrorist attack when large numbers of Muslims have been targeted by law enforcement and security agencies, and many incidents of discrimination, profiling, and violence against Muslims have been reported (Curtis, 2009; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; CAIR, 2005; El-Halawany, 2003). As a result, the September 11, 2001 attack became a dramatic turning point that influenced Muslims lives in America.

On the other hand, studies show that many Muslims rely on religion to help them through these difficult encounters. Byng’s study (1998) “Mediating Discrimination: Resisting Oppression among African-American Muslim Women” examined the intersection of race; gender and religion in African American Muslim women’s experiences. Although Byng’s study differs from mine given that she studied African American Muslim women who are not recent immigrants or professionals, and who are born and raised in America, her findings were similar to research that examines the experiences of recent immigrant Muslims in the West (Abdo, 2007; Zine, 2006; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Abuzahra; 2004; Haddad, 1987). Byng reveals that her study participants
were able to challenge racism and defy subjugation and inequity through personal agency
and determination, and they “resist the oppression of discrimination by maintaining a
humanist vision that views discrimination as triggered by difference” (p. 475). Similar to
Abuzahra (2004), Byng concluded that, the African- American Muslim women found
sanctuary and comfort in their religion and in their Muslim community, and that “faith,
belief in God and association with other Muslims gives them a social space that
transforms their life and their consciousness” (p.475). Both studies reveal the importance
of spirituality and networking in easing Muslim women’s frustrations and stress that
result from everyday encounters with societal injustices.

Significance of the study

Nyang (1999) point to the scarcity of literature on Islam and Muslims and argues
that "The field of Islamic studies in the United States is virgin territory” (p. 198).
Accordingly, this study can add to the ongoing discourse on gender, race, and religion,
and to efforts that aim at educating about Islam and Muslims. By hearing the Sudanese
Muslim women’s stories about their struggle to counter marginalization, stereotypes,
racism, and sexism, educators, employers, and social institutions could be enlightened
and encouraged to participate in providing a positive climate of tolerance and
appreciation of this “Other” minority. I also anticipate that such a study could provide
information that could be incorporated in teaching about African Muslims in general and
Sudanese Muslim women in particular and enhance the diversity and inclusion endeavors
within American educational institutions and workplaces. All in all, by conducting this
study I hope to contribute to the ongoing efforts that aim at helping American people to be well-informed, and Sudanese women’s concerns to be properly addressed.

**Limitations of the study**

This study employs narrative inquiry as a methodology for data collection and analysis. Scholars point that one of the limitations of narratives is due to the fact that it relies heavily on the researcher’s personal meaning and point of view (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Glesne (1999) maintains that “part of demonstrating trustworthiness of your data is to realize the limitations of your study…Limitations are consistent with the always partial state of knowing in social research, and elucidating your limitations helps readers know how they should read and interpret your work” (p. 152).

Other limitations of this study is the small number of the participants whose variety of perspectives, told stories, and experiences do not represent all immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women in the United States, therefore it will not be deemed generalizable. A larger size sample might have provided broader perspectives of experiences.

Second, the researcher’s prior knowledge and experience is as well considered a limitation to the study as it may have influenced the research findings. As an immigrant Sudanese Muslim woman, I entered this study with prior cultural and religious knowledge. My position as insider who shares similar experiences with the participants has an effect on the different stages of conducting this study; from data collection and analysis to the findings and recommendations. However, in order to ensure impartiality
and minimize these limitations, I relied on member check and peers review (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Third, the told narratives are by no means the exact representative of all Sudanese Muslim women who reside and work in the United States. In particular, Reissman (1993) contend that narrative is a selective construction of stories where “individuals exclude experiences that undermine the current identities s/he wishes to claim” (p.64). Therefore, since narrative is not concerned about the ultimate truth, it is apparent that narrators omit or add to their stories.

Finally, my understanding of the participants’ experiences and the interpretation of the findings is influenced by my own subjectivity and personal experience. It is argued that researcher’s subjectivity may influence the interpretation of the study’s findings. For Patton (1990) “The ideals of absolute objectivity and value-free science are impossible to attain in practice and are of questionable desirability in the first place because they ignore the intrinsically social nature and human purpose of research” (p. 55). Consequently, I acknowledge my subjectivity; that my understanding of the participants’ experiences and the interpretation of the findings were influenced by my own bias and personal knowledge. All in all, and despite the above mentioned limitations, I anticipate that this study will contribute significantly to the limited research on this segment of U. S. population.

**Definition of terms**

*Africans:* People from Africa.

*Allah:* The Arabic word for God.
Covered: wearing Islamic dress.

Discrimination: It is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of blacks and people of color on the grounds of differences. This definition includes racial, ethnic, accent, immigrant, foreign status, and cultural differences such language, in addition to other oppressive behaviors.

Foreigner: A person who was born in a country other than the United States.

Hijab: Head covering for Muslim women.

Hijabi: a woman who wear hijab

Immigrant: A person who emigrated to the U.S. from another country

Islam: The Arabic word Islam means “Submission to the will of God”. Islam is the religion of Muslims like Christianity to Christians.

Islamic Law: It is the code of Law derived from Quran, also known as Sharia. It includes a system of ethics and Laws that is concerned with what a Muslim should and should not do.

Professional: I define professional as one who possesses the educational credentials and work in a profession that requires a specific skills and expertise.

Prophet Muhammad: God messenger who carried the message of Islam to Muslims.

Ramadan: It is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. During this holy month Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset
Refugee/ Asylee: A person who left his/her country due to famine, war, or fear of prosecution.

Progressive Muslims: They are part of an Islamic movement “the core ideological concern of the progressive Islamic movement, is in redefining Islam, taking into account modernity and the knowledge and scientific advancement that accompany it” (Yacoob, 2004, p.2).

Sudanese: A citizen of the Sudan.

Toab: Traditional Sudanese women dress.

Veil: The veil refers to the women’s Islamic dress that covers and conceals the body from head to ankle, with the exception of the face, hands and feet (Hoodfar, 1992).

Overview of the chapters

In this chapter I discussed the following topics: the purpose of the study; statement of the problem; the research questions; background of the study; the significance of the study; Limitations; and provided definition of terms.

In chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature that informs this study. Chapter 3 presents the methodology that guides this study. In chapter 4 I discuss and analyze the findings from the intersecting themes that recurred through the participants’ narratives. Finally, in chapter 5, I present a summary of the findings, the implications of the study, and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 2

Review of the literature

This study examines the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of professional Sudanese Muslim women who live and work in two cites in the Midwest of the United States. In this chapter, I heed Merriam’s (1998) recommendation that researchers have to consider previous studies that examine the same area of research. Therefore, I draw upon a wide array of literature that informs my study. I provide a review of literature on the following areas: A history of African immigration; a history of Muslims immigration; a brief review of studies that examine immigrants’ acculturation; Islam perspective on gender and education; and the intersectionality of race, gender, and religion.

An overview of the history of Immigration to the U. S.

The dynamics of the U. S. immigration policies are worth noting in this study. Thus, I will start with a brief introduction to the U.S. history of immigration. The United States of America is a country that was formed by immigrants except for the Native Americans who were the only original dwellers of the continent (Arthur, 2000; Dinnerstein & Reimers, 1999; Rong & Preissle, 1998; Parrillo, 1997). According to

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1 When I started this study the Sudan was the largest country in Africa. Unfortunately, after a prolonged conflict and episodes of wars between the North and South of Sudan and following a January, 2011 referendum the South decided to split and form a separate entity named the South Sudan which took effect on the 9th of July, 2011.
Arthur (2000) U.S. immigrants fall into two categories, the first group is the voluntary immigrants, who relocated from their native countries for economic and personal reasons. They migrated seeking the opportunities that the U.S. may offer them regarding religious and political freedom, education, and financial prosperity. The second group is the involuntary immigrants whose migration is tied to the various conflicts such as: wars, and famines that occurred in several parts of the world and resulted in the displacement of people from their homelands. The latter group includes the Africans who were brought to the United States during the slave trade in the 17th century (Arthur, 2000; Rong & Preissle, 1998; Stewart, 1993).

The first wave of immigrants was constituted by two major groups; the voluntary immigration of Europeans who were mainly from England, and the Africans who were brought involuntarily into slavery (Rong & Preissle, 1998). In fact, those early European immigrants were the ones who set the foundations for the American society which included a dominant value system that is associated with Anglo-Saxonism and Protestantism (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 1999; Parrillo, 1997). The early settlers were the majority who expected the subsequent waves of immigrants to conform to their set of values; the Protestant faith and the Anglo Saxon standard. The second wave of immigrants that occurred between 1849 and 1850 witnessed a noticeable demographic change. During this period an increased numbers of émigrés from other Europeans nationalities (Irish, Dutch, and Germans) relocated to the U.S. However, the early settlers, namely the British, were agitated by the presence of these newcomers whom they
viewed as a threat to the integrity of their established system (Arthur, 2000; Dinnerstein & Reimers; 1999; Parrillo, 1997).

The third wave of immigrants that happened during the years of 1880-1914 have as well included an influx of large numbers of immigrant Jews and Catholics. Again these immigrants faced the animosity of the early settlers who labeled them as inferior, and as having different values and beliefs that impede their full assimilation in the mainstream America (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 1999). These differences in beliefs and values have escalated the tension that took place earlier and resulted in immigration Acts that tried to limit the admittance of certain ethnic groups (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 1999; Parrillo, 1997). As a result, Japanese and Chinese laborers were restricted from entering the U.S. because they were viewed as having low moral standards and inassimilable due to their racial and cultural attributes (Rong & Preissle, 1998; Stewart, 1993).

In this context, the issuance of the immigration Laws of 1965 and 1990 was the turning point that benefited those who aspire to come and settle in the U.S. These Laws had allowed a significant increase in the number of immigrants from all over the globe, which ranked the U.S. as the highest immigrant receiver and the most diverse and multiethnic country of the world (Arthur, 2000; Riche, 2000; Rong & Preissle, 1998; Stewart, 1993). Likewise, the issuance of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was advantageous to other nationalities. This Act removed the national origin quotas that was established before, and considered family reunion and possession of needed expertise as accepted conditions for admittance. Consequently, more people from Asia, Latin
America, and to a lesser extent from Africa were able to immigrate to the United States (Rong & Preissle, 1998; Stewart, 1993).

The number of immigrants continued to grow during the course of the years and by the 1970s it reached about one million per annum (Rong & Brown, 2002). Soon after, additional Immigration Acts were issued. In particular the 1986 and 1990 Acts increased the numbers of immigrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean countries. It is worth noting that, during this period new segments of immigrants began to enter the U.S. This includes the asylees, refugees, amnestied, and the undocumented (Rong and Preissle, 1998; Stewart, 1993). According to Stewart (1993) the U.S. has became the world’s highest refugee receiving country due to the refugee Act of 1980 that allowed those who fled persecution, civil wars, and political conflicts in their homeland to be admitted to this country.

The above mentioned categories of immigrants have included individuals from African countries such as: Ethiopia; Mozambique; Somalia; and Sudan (Stewart, 1993). It is fair to say that, even though those immigrants were welcome to live and work in the United States, they are also ridiculed if they did not conform to the majority’s culture (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 1999). Indeed the perceptions and the ideas of Americanization, and the dominance of Anglo-Saxon values continue to discriminate against those who

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4 Merriam Webster online dictionary defines amnesty as the act of an authority by which pardon is granted to a large group of individuals. In 1986 the U.S. government amnesty program gave about 2.8 million illegal immigrants the opportunity to obtain legal residency through the Immigration and Reform Control Act (http://www.usamnesty.org).
have different features and hold to their original cultural and religious beliefs (Agbali, 2008; Abdo, 2007; Aido, 1998; Parrillo, 1997).

**A brief history of African immigration to the U. S.**

Literature indicates that Africans’ presence in the U.S. dates back to the early 1600 (Agbali, 2008; Bennett, 1984; Bryce-Laporte, 1972). Studies show that the motivations for Africans’ migrations may vary from one person to another. According to Ogbu (1991) “immigrant minorities have generally moved to their present societies because they believe that the move would lead to more economic well-being, better overall opportunities or greater political freedom. (p. 8). Similarly, Falola & Afolabi (2008) summed the factors that trigger Africans relocation into “the desire for a better life” (p.6). This indicates that whether the reason for their relocation is political, economical, fleeing a war zone, or all the above, immigrants are hoping to change their lives for the better.

The numbers of African immigrants in the U.S. continued to rise over the years. They have benefited from the United States immigration legislations. Specifically, the Immigration Act of 1965 that removed many of the previous U.S. immigration restrictions has enabled many Africans to relocate to the U. S. (Agbali, 2008; Arthur, 2000; Rong & Preissle, 1998; Stewart, 1993). As a result, their numbers have increased by 6% per year between 1980 and 1990 (Arthur, 2000; Djamba, 1999; Kusow, 2007).

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5 Such as the Chinese exclusion Act of 1882 that put restriction on their admission to the U.S. (Stewart, 1993).
Another increase in the number of African immigrants in the U.S. followed the issuance of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act that allowed undocumented immigrants to gain legal status. Accordingly, around 30,000 of African immigrants were granted permanent residency (Halter, 2007, p.284). Likewise, the immigration Act of 1990 that raised the limit of legal immigrants to 700,000 per year has given the chance for more immigrants to obtain U.S. residency. Auspiciously, this Immigration Act was advantageous to the Africans and their families because it eradicated the previous quota preference system and replaced it with three categories of lawful admission to the U.S.: family sponsorship; employment skills; and diversity (Stewart, 1993).

The lottery visa program of 1990 which was established by th1990 Immigration Diversity Act was as well beneficial for Africans (Kusow, 2007). This program which played an important role in raising the number of African immigrants has granted a 37% of its 1995 diversity visas to individuals from Africa (Gordon, 1998). Recent data from 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates reveals that; there are approximately 1,449,172 African immigrants in the U.S. However, some scholars believe that the actual number of African immigrants do exceed what was reported by the censuses due to the fact that it did not include individuals who are in the country illegally (Agbali, 2008).

Nonetheless, despite the rapid increase in their annual numbers, African immigrants are less researched and their experiences are rarely documented (Rong & Brown, 2002; Arthur, 2000; Rong & Preissle, 1998). Falola & Afolabi (2008) argue that:
“While studies addressing new international migration patterns of ethnic groups into the United States, such as the cases of Asian-Americans, Latinos, Sino-Americans, etc. are on the rise, only few address African immigrants” (p. 1).

In the following section I provide a background of East Africans’ immigration to the U.S.

**East African immigration.**

As reported by Kusow (2007) most of the early immigrants from East Africa\(^6\) were male students who were sponsored by their government to study in the U.S. and expected to return to their countries after obtaining their degrees. Although the majority of these students did return to their countries, few of them have stayed and became the basis for an increasing East Africans’ community in the U.S. (Kusow, 2007, p. 296). According to Kusow (2007) immigrants from East African countries such as: Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda constitute about 26% of all African immigrants in the United States, which makes them the second largest African group in America after West Africans who count for 36% (Kusow, 2007, Wilson, 2003). They are becoming more visible and their presence is noticeable in most of the U.S. metropolitan cities (Kusow, 2007; Wilson, 2003). Yet again scholars argue about the unreliability of the data claiming that their actual numbers are much higher than what was estimated by the 2000 census (Agbali, 2008: Kusow, 2007). However, the 2007-2009 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates about 395,698 East Africans in the U.S.

\(^6\) The Sudan is one of the East African countries that include Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, and Uganda.
Followers of the Islamic faith are among these East African immigrants. While few people in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda follow the Islamic doctrine and culture; in Sudan and Somalia Islam is the religion of the majority. Likewise, studies point to the discrepancy in the number of Muslim émigrés in the U.S. (Haddad, 2004; Agbali, 2008; Kusow, 2007). According to these scholars the discrepancy might have stemmed from their status as illegal immigrants who do not participate in the census, or to the fact that the U.S law does not permit a census question about individuals’ religious affiliation.

All in all, the numbers of immigrants including Muslims will continue to grow and the impact of such large numbers on American society cannot be underestimated. Therefore, it is logical to provide a brief account of Muslims’ migration.

**A brief history of Muslims immigration.**

Before I discuss Muslims’ immigration to the U.S., I provide a brief introduction about Islam and Muslims. Islam means submission to God’s will and Muslims are those who adhere to the principles of Islam. Islam is considered one of the fastest growing religions that include more than a billion followers (Haddad, 2004; Blasing, 1996; Ahmed, 1992 Haddad & Lummis, 1987). The Quran\(^7\), Sunna\(^8\), and the Hadith\(^9\) are the foundational sources of Islam. All Muslims accept Quran as the highest authority that contains the words of God which was revealed to the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon

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\(^7\) Quran is the Muslims’ Holy book, as the Bible to Christians.

\(^8\) Sunna is the Prophet Mohammed’s words and deeds.

\(^9\) Hadith is the collections of the Prophet’s sayings.
Him\textsuperscript{10} in the seventh century (Hassan, 1999). For Muslims Islam is more than a faith and spirituality, and for many it is their primary identity location ((Basford, 2008; Gune, 2007; Collet, 2007; Haddad, 2004; Pulcini, 1990; Said, 1981)

For vigilant Muslims, religion and culture are inseparable, and accordingly religion is always present in their private and public lives (Abdul-Ghafur; 2005; Ahmed, 1992; Haddad & Lummis, 1987). Clearly, this aspect of Muslims’ identity is found in Collet’s (2007) study of Somali immigrant students in Toronto, Canada. For the students in her study, being a Somali is inseparable from being a Muslim. Both culture and religion tend to define these students’ identity. Said (1981) eloquently explains this location of Islam: He argues: “Islam is a totalistic and makes no separation between church and state or between religion and everyday life…It is a total system not only of belief but of action, with fixed rules for everyday life and a messianic drive to combat or convert the infidel” (pp. 10-11).

Immigrant Muslims growing numbers and rising visibility in the U.S. society merit studies that examine their day to day experiences. A significant increase in Muslims’ immigration was a result of the revocation of the 1965 immigration act that excluded Asians\textsuperscript{11} from entering the U.S. (Haddad, 2004). Although there is no exact documentation of Muslims’ presence in the U.S., history shows that Muslims had landed on the American shores as early as late 16\textsuperscript{th} century. Amadou- Mahtar M’bow (2001)

\textsuperscript{10} Peace be upon Him is said by Muslims whenever the Prophet is mentioned.

\textsuperscript{11} For example the 1882 Exclusion act restricted the Chinese from entering the U.S. claiming that they have different cultural values including low morals (Stewart, 1993).
sustains that, a ship carrying Muslim Moors traveled in 1587 from North Africa to America. Other studies trace back early Muslims’ presence to the slave trade in the 18th century where Muslims were among the African slaves who were brought involuntarily to America (Arthur, 2000; Djamba, 1999; Rong & Preissles, 1998).

The majority of the early Muslim immigrants were sojourners who worked as peddlers and farm workers (Alghamdi, 2005; Shakir, 1997). These immigrants were mostly from Arab and Turkish origins who immigrated for financial reasons with the intention to go back to their country of origin after they earn enough money. Nonetheless, since they could not achieve their financial goals they decided to remain in the United States and become the basis for the Muslim communities (Alghamdi, 2005; Suleiman, 1999; Shakir, 1997). Clearly, the demography of Muslims began to change in the late 19th century when an increased number of them moved to the United States from other parts of the world, including the Middle East, Africa, and south Asia (Kusow, 2007; Elliot, 2006; Haddad, 2004; Abusharaf, 2002). Elliot (2006) reports that, during 2005 alone, about 96,000 Muslims have obtained the U. S. permanent residency which she considers the highest annual number since the September, 11, 2001, terrorist attacks (p.1).

Djamba (1999) maintains that, Muslims constitute a 14% of all immigrants entering the U.S.; in addition to the 40% of African Americans who converted to Islam during the 20th century. On the other hand, Abdo (2007) confirms the global spread of Islam, claiming that it is the fastest growing religion in America that nearly surpassed Judaism as the country’s second religion. For Haddad and Lummis (1987):
Islam which was once thought of primarily as way of life of the Arabs and a faith alien to the Judeo-Christian heritage in this country…has moved into a position of sufficient size and strength that it must be courted today as one of the prominent, and rapidly growing religious movement in America (p.3).

Although, data is not available on the exact number of Muslims in the United States; scholars allege that their numbers range between 6-7 million who represent different nationalities and cultural traditions (Abdo, 2007; Eck, 2007; Kusow, 2007). A recent study by Haddad (2004) supports the argument about the inaccuracy of Muslims’ demographics:

There are no accurate figures for the number of Muslims in the United States. Neither the Census data, nor the records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, provide any information on religious affiliation of citizens or immigrants. Consequently, there exists a great disparity in the estimates which range between two million, as published by the B'nai Brith, and as many as eleven million, as reported by Warith Deen Muhammad, leader of the Muslim American Society (MAS), the largest African-American Islamic organization. The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reports in all of its communiqués that there are seven million Muslims in the United States. While the numbers are contested, it is generally agreed that they are significant” (P.1-2).

Other demographic studies such as the 2000 “Mosque Study Project” which was conducted by the Council on American Islamic Relations estimated about 1,400 mosques with more than two million active members (Eck, 2007). The same study supports other scholars claims that Muslims in the U.S., including the African Americans Muslims, constitute between 6-7 million individual (Eck, 2007, p. 215) which is far less than the eleven millions that was assumed by Warith Deen Muhammad, the leader of Islamic association in the U.S. (cited in Haddad, 2004, p.1).

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12 Mosque is the Muslims’ house of worship.
Sudanese Muslim women immigration

Research tends to associate Islam with Arabism, where being a Muslim is equal to being an Arab. Therefore, most of the existing studies are inclined towards exploring Islam and researching Muslims from an Arab/Middle Eastern point of view. Hitherto, Muslims from black Africa are absent from the research that explore their experiences and document their lives in the Diaspora (Kusow, 2007; Arthur, 2002; Rong & Brown, 2002). The Sudanese Muslims are part of the aforementioned and seldom researched minority.

The Sudanese Muslim community is composed of voluntary immigrants who relocated to the U.S in search of better opportunity in addition to a substantial number of refugees and asylees who fled war zones, famine, and prosecution. This community is constantly influenced by the political and economical situation in the Sudan and by the U.S. immigration policies, in particular during times of crisis that involve Muslims (Curtis, 2009; Al-Halawany, 2003). A case in point is what happened during the September, 11, 2001 attack when the U.S. became more hostile towards Muslims.

Aggression and intimidations were reported by Muslims, especially women who wear the Islamic dress; the significant identifier of their Muslim Identity (Curtis, 2009; Abdo, 2007; CAIR, 2005; Al-Halawany, 2003). Studies point to the negative effect of such incidents in the life of these immigrants. Falola & Afolabi (2008) argue that, these hostilities and discrimination usually intensifies immigrant women’s feeling of “displacement, alienation, and not so enchanting reality of exile” (p.6).
Although the migration of Sudanese to the U.S started centuries ago, a large scale of that was prompted by the recent conflicts in the South; Darfur; and by the Sudan government’s gendered policies that use political Islam\(^\text{13}\) to control women and silence their voices (Badri, 2008; Abdel Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002; Hale, 1997). Abusharaf (2002) affirms that: “the Sudanese presence in the Western Hampshire dates back to 1863, when the black Sudanese Muslim Conscript Battalion crossed the Atlantic en route to Veracruz, Mexico, in response to emperor Napoleon’s request for troops in his war against Mexico” (p.2). She also cites Hill and Hogg (1995) that, these Black Sudanese troops had been forced by the government of Egypt to enlist and serve as military recruits in Napoleon’s army (pp 2-3).

Abusharaf (2002) also reveals that in the early 20\(^{th}\) century a pious Sudanese Muslim whose name was ‘Majid’ came to the U.S. via France. Through his preaching; Majid was able to convert some Americans to Islam. Abusharaf writes: “A passenger coupon issued by the Compagnie Francaise de Navigation Fabre Line shows that he arrived in the United States at the port of New Orleans, Louisiana. From there, he traveled to New York, where he spent the next twenty-five years preaching Islam until his departure in 1929” (p.17). She also maintains that few Sudanese males were as well recruited in the U.S. navy during World War II.

Nonetheless, the last two decades have witnessed a surge in the immigration of Sudanese men and women; as well as a noticeable change in their fashion of

\(^{13}\) Knudsen (2003) believes that the most inclusive definition of political Islam is the use of Islam for political ends.
immigration. During this period many Sudanese women were able to travel to the U.S. despite the fact that their position and the patriarchal\textsuperscript{14} nature of their society used to limit their chances of movement and migration (Abdel Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002). Even when they get the chance to immigrate they are “at best … treated as dependant variables who move only as part of family” (Abusharaf, 2002, p.93), which explains why most of the early Sudanese immigrants were males.

Abdel Halim (2006) elaborates on the recent phenomenon of single Sudanese women travelling alone and residing abroad which was not permissible before. According to her, the immigration of single women without their families is a 1990s phenomenon that was triggered by the current military government of Sudan gendered policies; and its application of fanatic Islamic rules that oppress and silence women (Abdel Halim, 2006; Hale, 1997). Upon their arrival in the U.S. these women are faced by the differences between their Islamic culture\textsuperscript{15} and American culture, and the need to integrate into American society which is delayed by these differences and by the stress that follows (Abuzahra, 2004; Dion and Dion, 2001).

Nonetheless, several studies reveal that the majority of the Muslim immigrants continue to observe their religion, culture, and traditions, while few confirm that some immigrants were able to immerse, acculturate, or integrate in the Western cultures by

\textsuperscript{14}Patriarchy as defined by Walby (1990) is social structures and practices through which males dominate, oppress and exploit women (p. 20).

\textsuperscript{15}Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) defined culture as "a group of people whose members speak the same dialect and share common activities, values, and interests" (p. 11). For Carter (2007) Culture is “a system of meaning with values, norms, behaviors, language, and history that is passed on from one generation to the next through socialization and participation in the group’s organizations and institutions” (p.18).
adopting its values (Ahmadi, 2003; Abdulrahim, 1993). Thus, in such unfamiliar environment my study participants might find themselves at different stages of adjustment, assimilation, or separation (Berry, 2003).

**Muslim immigrants’ Acculturation: Sudanese women as an example**

This study investigates the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of immigrant Sudanese Muslim women who reside and work in the U.S. It also examines how these women navigate between the two worlds: their native culture, traditions, Islamic faith; and the American mainstream culture. While an extended assessment of the acculturation studies is beyond the scope of this study, I find it important to provide a brief review of some of the studies that examine the acculturation of immigrants, and discuss the acculturation of Sudanese Muslim women.

The concept of acculturation was originally developed in anthropology and has been used in other fields of study such as education. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) came up with the term acculturations to explain what happens when two dissimilar cultures come into contact. They define acculturation as “those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (p.149). Berry (1980) provides a similar and most used definition of

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16 Fichter (1957) defines assimilation as a social process where two or more individuals or a group of people accept the other group’s patterns of behavior. Acculturation and assimilation deal with the same idea, that is an explanation of how immigrants adopt the host culture’s patterns or become similar to the people from the host culture, and it is also part of the acculturation levels proposed by Berry (2003).

17 Berry (2003) offers four levels of acculturation. Further details will be found in the section below.
acculturation which is: the phenomenon that occurs when two diverse cultures come in contact which results in changes in the minority group original cultural and behavioral patterns. According to Berry (1984) two basic issues challenge individuals and groups while they acculturate: The first one is the maintenance and preservation of one’s ethnic identity and cultural patterns; and the second is attached to the individual’s interest in ethnic contact and in having positive relations with the larger host society (Berry, 1984, p.11).

Berry (1980) specifically draws attention to the fact that during the process of acculturation, the dominant group’s culture prevails and “contributes more to the flow of cultural elements than does the weaker of the groups” (Berry, 1980, p. 10). Snowden & Hines (1999) view acculturation as “the process by which ethnic and racial minorities participate in the cultural traditions, values, beliefs, assumptions, and practices of the dominant society” (p. 36). As a result of acculturation process, psychological and physical changes may develop among immigrants, as well as their ability to adapt to the new country’s culture (Nwadioran & McAdoo, 1996, p.478). Moreover, acculturation of Muslim immigrants also involves adaptation to diet, climate, housing, and specific interactional styles (Berry, 1997; Nwadiora & McAdoo, 1996).

As a vibrant enduring process, acculturation has four levels: 1) Assimilation, which is the act of rejecting the individual’s original cultural and accepting the host country’s culture, 2) Integration, which involves acceptance of the host country’s culture while preserving one’s own cultural identity, 3) Separation, where immigrants value and
hold to their original culture while avoiding interaction with others in the host country and 4) Marginalization, which entails the rejection of both cultures (Berry (2003, p. 24).

In this context, a relevant study by Abdulrahim (1993) examined the experience of Palestinian immigrant Muslim women in Germany. This study found that, the women in the study have experienced many changes in their lives. Contrary to Abuzahra’s (2004) participants who follow their Islamic cultural tradition, Abdulrahim’s study shows that Western culture-in this case German culture- has affected the cultural and religious values of the participants. The women in the study who were Hijabis before have changed their Islamic attire, removed their head scarves, and shortened their skirts whenever they were out of their families’ surveillance. This change in the cultural values, traditions, and the immersion in the Western culture reflects a high level of acculturation in these women’s experiences (Berry, 2003).

Another study by Ahmadi (2003) examined the migration challenges and views on sexuality among the Muslim Iranian immigrants in Sweden. By interviewing a 29 Iranians living in Sweden, Ahmedi found that “Iranians’ encounter with the Swedish way of thinking and the Swedish sexual culture seems to have influenced their views on virginity, premarital sexual relationships, and acceptance of young people’s sexual activities” (p. 702). Both Abdulrahim (1993) and Ahmadi (2003) studies indicate that sometimes the changes in the values and beliefs of immigrants are inevitable. A dramatic change is what happened in the case of Ahmadi’s study where Iranian men careless about

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18 The Web definition of Hijabis is: they are women who wear Hijab, a type of head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women, but can also refer to modest Muslim styles of dress in general that covers the whole body except the face and hands.
their wives being virgin before marriage, albeit in Islamic societies men tend to be very specific about the virginity of their wives. Women could be chastised if they do not conform to the Islamic cultural norms and values\(^\text{19}\) (Abdo, 2007; Alghamdi, 2005; Sarroub, 2001).

At the same time, Muslim women who came from patriarchal societies such as the Sudan are largely affected by the differences between their country of origin and the U.S. which might slow their integration and aggravate their feelings of alienation. Additionally, since language is seen as one of the barriers to immigrants’ integration; it is much easier for those who come from countries where English is the official language (Nigeria, and Kenya) to acculturate than those from none English speaking countries such as: the Sudan and Somalia (Halter, 2007; Kusow, 2007). On the other hand, we should not think of Sudanese women as having uniform acculturating experiences because they came from diverse cultural, social, economical, and patriarchal backgrounds, despite the fact that, U.S. media tend to portray them as “a homogeneous subordinated oppressed group” (El-Halawany, 2003, p. 12). Therefore, their acculturation may well diverge between those who cling to their culture and Islamic values; those who immerse in the new culture; and the rest who navigate between the two (Padilla & Perez, 2003; Berry, 2003; 1990; 1980; Nwadioran & McAdoo, 1996).

Djamba (1999) believes that the assimilation of Africans was more successful in the past since there were limited African students in the U.S. educational institutions, and

\(^{19}\) Muslim women are supposed to refrain from premarital sex "a woman who loses her virginity not only brings shame on her own family, but also loses her chance of finding a suitable husband" (Al-Mughni, 1993, p. 14).
when African immigrants’ numbers increased; their assimilation into the American society became much more difficult and complicated. However, the increase in minority immigrants might also provide a larger ethnic safe haven through which these immigrants can lessen their acculturative stress (Abuzahra, 2004; Curran & Saguy, 2001; Amer, 2005).

Indeed Sudanese Muslim women are important players in maintaining their families’ welfare in the new environment, and in preserving their cultural traditions while adjusting and integrating in the American “melting pot”20. Upon their arrival, U.S. policies play a significant role in determining these women’s position, adaptation, and eventual integration in the new culture (Arthur, 2000; Berry, 1980). Further, acculturating Sudanese women bring with them their specific cultural and religious traditions which are different from the U.S. values. They “straddle two or more worlds and must negotiate various systems of beliefs that may not complement each other” (Sarroub, 2005, p.3). And when they fail to assimilate and cling to their culture “the host culture may find a justification to ghettoizing them. And when immigrants are females, who carry physical marks of their culture, the distance that already exists between them and the new homeland increases” (Abdel Halim, 2006, p.1).

One needs to acknowledge that during the ongoing process of acculturation and while adjusting to the new environment, these women become conscious that issues such as their race, ethnicity, skin color, language, religion, and attire are markers that affect

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20 The ‘melting pot’ refers to a place where a variety of races, cultures, or individuals assimilate into a cohesive whole (Online Merriam’s Webster dictionary).
their integration and differentiate them from what is considered to be American (Basford, 2008; Killian, 2003; Padilla & Perez, 2003). Generally, I contend that acculturation theory might well provide a level of explanation for the different experiences that my study participants went through as a result of the contact between the two dissimilar cultures (Berry, 2003; 1980; Nwadioran & McAdoo, 1996; Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936).

In the following section I discuss how Muslim women in the U.S. seek comfort and companionship in their religion and the Muslim community during the process of acculturation. Studies indicate that, faith and Muslim community help immigrants to tolerate and defy both the forces that oppress them and the mainstream culture that singles them for being the “other” (Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Abuzahra, 2004; Byng, 1998).

**Finding a safe heaven: Network and faith**

Immigration is a difficult occurrence for those who experience it. As part of the U.S. increasing immigrant population, Sudanese women face many intricacies between the processes of their relocation and cross-cultural adjustment. They also encounter various discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes related to their appearances and cultural practices. Researchers confirm the significant role of faith, Muslim communities, and Islamic centers as sites of spiritual and social support and comfort for those who experience injustices due to their race gender, or religion. In these sanctuaries Muslims are able to sustain their connections with their humanity, faith, cultures, customs, and other Muslim fellows (Eck, 2007; Abuzahra, 2004; Byng, 1998).
Women use their faith and spirituality\textsuperscript{21} as sources of strength and power to handle life’s hardships. For Richards (1980) spirituality is not a logical idea that could be measured, or explained. It is “the truth of who we are at the core of our being…the consciously active means by which we can recognize activate, and live the impartial, nonjudgmental, consistent truth of who we are” (cited in Vanzant, 1996, p. xxiii). Studies that investigate the role of faith and spirituality in the lives of Muslim immigrants are limited. However, the available research findings validate the importance of religion for immigrants, in particular, at times when their ethnicity or faith is tied to crises that escalate the hatred against them. Scholars who examined the experiences of immigrant Muslim women in the Western hemisphere found that faith is significant in reducing the trauma and in easing the tension caused by alienation, discrimination and societal injustices (Eck, 2007; Abdo, 2007; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Abuzahra, 1999; Byng, 1998). Eck (2007) argues about the positive role of religion and Islamic communities in the lives of immigrants and criticizes the scarcity of such studies:

For new immigrants of all traditions, as for those of earlier generations, religious communities have provided important sites for affirming and reformulating their identities in a new context. While ethnic and Asian American studies have tended to ignore the significance of religion, it is increasingly clear that religious communities are often a critical part of the experience of new Americans. Because religion is a recognized and meaningful social category in the U.S., religious affiliation enables immigrants to secure their sense of identity and also gain acceptance in the wider society (p.215).

Likewise, research found that, Muslim immigrants tend to seek social support from their networks of Muslim community, family and friends which help them to cope

\textsuperscript{21} I use spirituality, religion, and faith interchangeably.
with adjustment issues. In this regard, the prominent African feminist and writer Merriama Ba (1989) documents African women’s pride of being Muslims and how they voluntarily seek sanctuary in the practice of their faith for spiritual and emotional guidance, in particular, at times of vulnerability and despair. This positive influence of religion is clearly reflected in Ba’s (1989) main character “Ramatoulaye” narratives, that she found comfort in spirituality and prayers which helped her to cope with her husband’s death.

Scholars view religiosity as having noticeable impact on the well being of the majority of immigrant Muslim men and women (Eck, 2007; Abdo, 2007; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Abuzahra, 2004; Haddad, 2004). Spirituality, family, and Muslim communities are seen as salient in alleviating immigrants’ stress level. In her study of Muslim women in the U.S., Abuzahra (2004) found that, although the process of immigration and acculturation causes a lot of stress to the women in her study, they were able to relieve their levels of tension by finding refuge in their religion, and in the support provided by their families and Muslim community (Eck, 2007; Byng, 1998; Ba, 1989).

A related study by Byng (1998) reveals that, African American Muslim women found comfort in religion, and their “faith, belief in God, and association with other Muslims gives them a social space that transforms their life and their consciousness” (Byng, 1998, p.475). This study reveals the importance of spirituality and networking in reducing Muslim women’s frustrations that result from everyday encounters with societal injustices. In such circumstances religion might as well be used as “a coping strategies in
mitigating the stress of immigration process and their diurnal existence within urban America” (Agbali, 2008, p.105).

**Sudanese Muslim women’s Education and position**

Before I discuss Sudanese Muslim women education and position and its Islamic perspective, I offer a brief historical overview of the Sudan. The Sudan, which is located at the intersection of Africa and Middle East, used to be the largest country in the continent of Africa before its recent split into two countries on July, 2011. It is a former British colony that gained its independence from the British colonizers in the 1st of January, 1955. The Sudan occupies about 8.3 of the African continent, with an area of 2.5 million square miles and a population of more than 43 million (theafricanews.net). The country’s’ weak infrastructure, high literacy rate, low GNP, and the conflicts in the south and Darfur have affected the livelihood of its population and placed it among the least developed countries in the world (World Bank, country profile, online document).

The Sudan is considered one of the most multiethnic and multicultural societies in the continent (Hale, 2004, p. 174). Ethnic identity in Sudan is very fluid and is influenced by how people identify themselves: Africans, Afro Arabs, or Arabs (Sharkey, 2008). Bechtold (1976) reported that:

The Northerners are simply almost all inhabitants of the Northern provinces. They are overwhelmingly Muslim (Sunni) and have an acceptable command of Arabic language. These two factors have shaped a certain degree of identity among northerners and have created a kind of common cultural heritage resembling that of other Arabs yet remaining distinctly Sudanese” (p. 10).
Therefore, Islam and Arabic become central to Sudan’s political and social discourse. The records also contend that, the country’s population is composed of 50% black Africans, 40% Arabs, 6% Beja, and 3–4% other (Library of Congress Country Profile: Sudan, December 2004).

While most of Northern Sudanese are inclined towards identifying them as more Arabs than Africans, many Sudanese scholars have contested the notion of designating the Sudan as solely Arab. Nyombe (1994) believes that the conflicts in the south, East, and Darfur have created a challenge to Arabism, Islam, and race in the Sudan (cited in Sharkey, 2004). Similarly, Mukhtar (2004) claims that although Northerners think of themselves as Arabs, their experiences in the Arab countries revealed to them that the Arabs do not really consider them as Arabs. However, according to Sikainga (1996) the roots of this contested identity began since the 18th century:

During the eighteenth century Sudanese society underwent many changes as a result of the arrival of a large number of Muslim merchants and holy men…and the emergence of an indigenous merchant class. Members of the new middle class dominated external trade and adopted an Arab identity by constructing genealogy tracing their origin to Arab ancestors” (Sikainga, pp.6-7).

Currently, many Sudanese intellectuals are affirming the dual “Afro-Arab” identity of the Sudan despite the official rhetoric that refers to the nation as Arab and joining the appropriate international organizations to solidify that identity (Hale, 2004, p.176); while others such as Mukhtar (2004) claims African identity as the sole characteristic of the Sudan.
Sudanese women’s education

Scholars argue about the power of education in changing people’s lives and in influencing how they perceive gender and equity (Kabeer, 2005; Barazangi, 2004; Collins, 2000; King & Hill, 1997; Ahmed, 1992; Fagerlind & Saha, 1989). At the same time, several researchers point to the paucity of studies that investigates the importance of women’s education. Sutton & Levinson (2001) argue that policy research have paid little attention to: how education is important to female students; how patriarchy affects women’s educational attainment; and how the existing educational achievements are the product of the different social powers and hegemony.

In fact, the existing research emphasizes the link between women level of education and her well-being and the well-being of her family. That an educated woman is likely to have healthier family and increased power in regard to decision making (Kabeer, 2005; King & Hill, 1993; Fagerlind & Saha, 1989). Many scholars emphasize the crucial role of education in the development of societies. They explicate that:

Investment in education has traditionally been justified by optimistic assumptions, the first being that an educated population contributes to the socio economic development of the society as a whole, and the second, that education contributes to the well being of individuals within the society (Schultz as cited in Fagerlind & Saha, 1989, p.3)

Feminist researchers agree that, education has great influence on how people perceive gender and how women accept or reject their gendered position (Alghamdi, 2005; Collins, 2000; Ahmed, 1992; Etter-Lewis, 1991). In the same way Abdulrahim (1993) reiterates the positive outcome of females’ education: “education gave the
theoretical possibility of socio-economic mobility and the improvement of living conditions … education gave women a relatively legitimate reason to justify their presence in un-segregated … Public area” (p.77).

Likewise, Islamic scholars sustain that Islam encourages women’s education and pursuit of knowledge (Barazangi, 2004; Ahmed, 1992). Indeed authentic Islamic teachings<sup>22</sup> emphasize women’s egalitarian status and encourage both sexes to acquire knowledge because seekers of knowledge are praised in the Quran be they males or females (Alghamdi, 2005; Barazangi, 2004; Wadud, 1999; Ahmed, 1992). Islamic feminist<sup>23</sup> scholars authenticate the importance of Muslim women’s education and religious knowledge in order to challenge the patriarchal readings of Quran that was done by males and perpetuates women’s subjugation; and to interpret the sacred text from a woman’s stand point; to claim their equality; and to dismantle the forces that oppress them. However, there are two points that warrant explanation: First: Islamic feminism is a movement that challenges the patriarchal interpretation of the holy text; and second: it aims at providing an alternative to the Western perception of Muslim women (Barazangi, 2004; Wadud, 1999; Ahmed, 1992, Mernissi, 1987).

Conversely, in many Muslim countries, schools are considered as a space for cultural and economic reproduction and at the same time a place where patriarchy is

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<sup>22</sup> By authentic Islamic teachings I mean what is stated in the holy text and not the biased patriarchal interpretation.

<sup>23</sup> According to Moghadam (2004) the concept of Islamic feminism refers to a reforming movement with a religious essence aiming to re-interpret religion from a woman’s stand point. She further elucidates: “Islamist women raise the questions about male domination, polygamy, and unequal norms and laws governing divorce and child custody. These women, who have come to challenge their subordinate status within the family and the society, partly by engaging in a woman-centered re-reading of the Quran and early Islamic history have come to be known as Islamic feminists” (p.155).
perpetuated (Alghamdi, 2005; Hale, 1997). Traditional education tends to teach normative demeanors and gendered attitudes that are dictated by patriarchal institutions and text books include restricted accounts of women’s authority and aspirations (Baden, 1992). Women are as well discouraged from pursuing certain educational paths and expected to refrain from jobs such as engineering and law which are seen as males’ and as sites for mix between men and women which is presumed culturally unacceptable (Alghamdi, 2005). For example, in Sudan, the British colonizers, claiming to preserve traditions have provided limited educational opportunities for women and provided few plans to incorporate them in societal activities (Abusharaf, 2004). Even when women were encouraged to pursue education and work, they were limited to jobs that were considered suitable to women, such as nurses, teachers and midwives.

Looking beyond the current argument about women’s access to education and what kind of education they get, one has to realize that the education in Sudan is structurally different from the education in the U.S. Through the ministry of education, the Sudanese government regulates educational policies, curriculum, and designate funds for all levels of education. Thus, the state becomes “a key institution when it comes to education. Through its monopoly of … education it shapes the supply of schooling: the quantity and content of schooling, types of personnel, and overall learning experience” (Stromquist, 1995, p.439). Accordingly, the influence of the government guidelines and funding are the main directives of the educational institutions’ policies (Willemse, 2001; Hale, 1997).
Additionally, the schools’ teachers follow what Freire (1970) called “Banking education”\textsuperscript{24}, and students “have been taught to sit in class silently, taking verbatim notes that will be studied, memorized, and then reproduced on exam or paper” (Aubrey, 1991, p. 21). Those students when they enroll in the U.S. educational institutions are expected to participate in knowledge construction. What is anticipated from these students at school might be strange to them. They are not only unaccustomed to speaking up in class, but also have been taught that it is rude to question their teachers’ knowledge or to offer their critical opinion (Alghamdi, 2005; Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003; Aubrey, 1991).

Compared to American students; these students who have not had the experience of class discussions or to think critically are at disadvantage. They might as well feel pressured to sooner change their academic attitudes.

On the other hand, the post colonial education in Sudan remained unchallenged and it has been replicating the colonizer scheme of literacy and knowledge (Abdel Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002). Colonial education policies used to be geared towards the interest of colonial authorities that reinforced patriarchy, and both men and women had no influence in the structure and purpose of their education (Abusharaf, 2002). It is true that after the independence of the Sudan, as the case with other African countries, the colonizers passed the power to “males” who were educated in the colonizers’ schools.

What happened next is that, these males became the new leaders who enforced the

\textsuperscript{24} Freire is known for his critique of what he calls the "banking education" in which the students were viewed as blank slate where teacher is the only source of knowledge that fills it and students are presumed passive. He adds "it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads men and women to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power" (Freire, 1970, p. 77)
patriarchal attitudes, limited women education, and prevented their participation in decision making inside and outside their homes (Assie-Lumumba, 1997).

Remarkably, a group of educated Sudanese women were determined to lift and empower their fellow women. In particular, activists such as educator Fatima Talib, the first Sudanese women to gain a bachelor degree abroad from London University, who formed the first association for educated women in 1947; Malakat Aldar Muhammad, an educator, a writer, and the first Sudanese women to publish a novel; and Khaleda Zaher the first Sudanese woman medical doctor and chairwoman of the first Association of Sudanese Women (Badri, 2008; Hall & Ismail, 1981; Babiker, 1976). Through their scholarship, Activism, and writings, these women among others, have exerted efforts to raise the awareness of Sudanese women and to organize them so as to contest the issues that impede their progress and emancipation.

However, things started to change for Sudanese women when Islamists took over the government. Subsequently, in the name of preserving the country’s Islamic values and cultural traditions, a dress code was enforced and restrictions were imposed on women’s movement and participation in the public sphere and violators were punished publicly (Badri, 2008; Hale, 1997). In this context, Armstrong (2001) argues:

Today, when fundamentalists fear the destruction of true faith, the bodies of women have once again become the focus of acute anxiety. They must be shrouded, protected, and secluded from the inimical world, like the endangered community itself, which often withdraw from mainstream society to create an

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25 These include: cultural traditions, patriarchy, political and economical restrictions among others (Ba, 1989).
enclave of pure faith and build new barriers against an invasive secularism” (in Haddad & Esposito, 2001, p.xi)

Additionally, one way that the government used to control women’s education is the issuance of the public order act of 1991 that enforces women segregation in public spheres. Under this act, and subsequent articles that claimed to preserve the morals, the government continued to legitimize the use of the educational institutions as tools of hegemony and ideological dominance (Willemse, 2001; Hale, 1997). Hale (1997) argues that, the government ideology of Islamization, morals preservation, and the politicization of education perpetuates the oppression of women and gives priority to ideologies instead of sustainability (Hale, 1997). Hale adds that, since females and males attend separate schools except at college levels, it makes it easier for the government to manipulate the curriculum and further its gendered policies.

Clearly, the gendered policies, women oppression, in addition to famine, wars, and conflicts are some of the reasons that triggered Sudanese women migration (Abdel Halim, 2006; Abusharaf, 2002; Hale, 1997). In particular, professionals and college graduates are among those women who chose to settle in the United States. It worth noting that, in the U.S. researchers such as Kusow (2007) found that “African immigrants exhibit significant achievements according to almost all measures of socioeconomic status. The educational attainment of Africans is the highest among any immigrant group in the U.S.” (p. 298). Another study by Djamba (1999) reveals that “compared to native blacks [African Americans]…African immigrants are generally, more educated, less likely to be on welfare… and more employable” (p.210).
Without doubt, education is seen by those African immigrants as a significant variable in changing their status and in enhancing their economic conditions, as well as one of the mechanisms through which immigrant are expected to acculturate in the host country’s culture (Djamba, 1999; Kusow, 2007). Moreover, studies show that, the majority of them believe that education has the potential to offer their children a brighter future (Djamba, 1999). Hence, I recognize the centrality of education and knowledge for immigrant Sudanese women and its power in aiding them to achieve their dreams of equality, prosperity, and deconstruct the existing popular image of Islam and Muslims (Said, 1981).

**Sudanese women’s gender position**

Feminist researchers argue that women as part of the oppressed group have a tendency to develop increased consciousness of their own experiences and the experiences of the dominant groups (Collins, 2000; Lather, 1988). Therefore, it can be said that, the ultimate goal of feminist movement is to achieve equality between men and women. Through their activism feminists aspire to “correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women’s unequal social position” (Lather, 1988, p.571), as well as put an end to sexism, racism and all kinds of societal injustices (hooks, 2000, p.viii).

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26 According to Freedman (2002) Feminism is “a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men” (p. 7).
Muslim feminists (Alidou, 2005; Barazangi, 2004; Ahmed, 1992; Lazreg, 2000; Merrnisi, 1987) agree with black feminists (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Hooks, 1990, 1998; Lorde, 1984) that Western feminist approach to women equality does not represent all women perspectives since it reflects a white middle class women interest. In her study “the politics of theorizing ‘Islamic feminism’: Implications for International Feminist Movement” Mojab (2001) underlines the differences between feminists groups and explains how the “theoretical perspectives of identity politics, cultural relativism and postmodernism emphasize the uniqueness, particularism, and localism of each and every feminist movement” (p.1).

The 1980s witnessed the emergence of a group of progressive Muslim women who identify as “Islamic feminists” (Mojab, 2001). Islamic feminism has made remarkable contributions to the research on Muslim women position within Islamic societies (Mahmood, 2005; Alidou, 2005; Aussie-Lummba, 2002; Mojab, 2001; Wadud, 1999; Jawad, 1998; Ahmed, 1992; Merrnisi, 1987). Although, these feminists differentiate themselves from Western feminism, they as well acknowledge the global aspect of feminist movements because “women in almost every country of the world are engaged in various struggles to change their lives” (Mojab, 2001, p.1).

Moreover, Islamic feminism as part of “a growing group of highly educated, religious women see themselves as engaged in a new effort to use their education to…look deep into the spirit of Koran and find the gender justice they believe was the original intent of the prophet Mohamed” (Fernea, 1993, as cited in Alghamdi, 2005,
p.49), exemplify the emergence of a new awareness within the Muslim societies which is changing the map of gender relation within the framework of Islamic religion and culture. They basically use Quranic verses to prove that Islam has afforded women the same status the men have.

It is equally important to remember that, during the early Islamic era, Muslim scholars who are males were the ones who interpreted the Quran and set the regulations within the framework of Sharia laws (Hassan, 1999; Ahmed, 1992). However, these patriarchal interpretations have compartmentalized women’s position in domesticity and caused women inferior status and subordination. It also created a state of dependency where women are inclined to rely completely on a father, a husband or any male figure within their immediate family (Alghamdi, 2005; Harris, 2005; Badawi, 2002). Thus, Muslim women in Africa have long started the fight against the powers that marginalize them. Hichott (2000) explicates on how educated African Muslim women scholarship and dedication contributed to the rise of African women’s awareness towards societal injustices; gave them voice; and encouraged them to seize their rightful place:

We women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African mother who, in his anxiety, man confuses with mother Africa. Women have a place within African literature, the place due to them on the basis of their participation-side by side with men-in all phases of the liberation struggle, and their contribution to economic development. But women will have to fight for that place with all their might (Ba as cited in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997, p.36).

27 Sharia is the Islamic religious law.
Hassan (1999) argues that Muslim women rights within Islam have been compromised and influenced by patriarchy and by the societal gendered institutions. Scholars such as Hassan argue that, in Islam, a woman has more rights than during the Judeo-Christian eras (Barazangi, 2004; Hassan, 2002; Ahmed, 1992). They attribute the existing inferior status of women in Islamic societies to the fact that Quranic verses have received diverse interpretations which were influenced by the different schools of thought\textsuperscript{28} and the Ulama\textsuperscript{29} who interpret them. In fact, the Quran stresses that all human beings regardless of their gender, sexuality, class, or skin color are granted equal rights and responsibilities, and the only difference between them is the degree of their \textquotedblleft Taqwa\textquotedblright\textsuperscript{30} (Barazangi, 2004).

However, since the hierarchy of power within Sudanese Muslim society rests in the hands of men and supported by the gendered policies of the State that favor men and suppress women (Badri, 2008; Abdel-Halim, 2006, Hale, 1997); the subordinate status of women is likely to persist. In this regard, Badri (2008) notes that “Sudan did not sign or ratify any convention or protocol related to women. The current government is reluctant to do so. As they maintained that certain articles are contradicting to Islamic Laws. Several articles have been written by activist indicating standpoints as either negating any justification even based on contradicting Islam or Sudanese Laws” (p.23). Thus, in most of the Islamic countries a woman is only viewed as a mother, wife, daughter, or sister, even though: “There is nothing in the scripture that women should limit themselves to the

\textsuperscript{28} There are four schools of thought in Islam: the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, and Hanbali.
\textsuperscript{29} Ulama are the Islamic religious scholars, the singular is Alim
\textsuperscript{30} Taqwa is the Arabic word for piety
roles of wives and mothers, indeed there is a great deal to suggest that women as well as men, should be educated and women have the right to work even if men hold the primary responsibility for the family economic support” (Harris, 2005, p.33).

The fact of the matter is that, the Quran, Hadith, and Sunna, bestowed respect for human beings dependent on their deeds and knowledge. Various verses of the Quran accentuate the equal status of all humans regardless of their gender: “if any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, they will enter paradise and not the least injustice will be done to them” (verse 4:124). Clearly, gender equality is at the heart of the Islamic faith: “Each human being shall face the consequences of his or her deeds. And their Lord has accepted of them and answered them: Never will I suffer to lose the work of any of you, be male or female: you are members one of another” (verse 3:195).

The Quran also mention and praise several women who were historically and religiously influential. They include, but not limited to, “Bilqis” and Virgin “Mary” to whom a whole chapter of the Quran is exclusively devoted. There is evidence that during the early Islamic era women were accorded undeniable rights and granted equality and respect (Ahmed, 1992). Other studies highlight that, the Prophet Mohammed himself, the first preacher of Islam, did not confine women to domesticity (Barazangi, 2004; Ali, 2000; Belarbi, 1999; Ahmed. 1992). He recognized women’s intelligence and endorsed

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31 Hadith is the collections of the Prophet Mohammed sayings
32 Sunna is the prophet’s Mohammed words and practices
33 Belgis was the Queen of Sheba
34 Surat Maryam (Mary in English) Chapter 19 of the holy Quran.
his spouse “Aisha35 as a distinguished scholar when he declared that half the knowledge of his revelation should be acquired from his companions and the other half from his wife Aisha (Ali, 2000).

Therefore, it can be argued that, the patriarchal interpretations of Islamic text and the legally “codified” Islamic laws that are implemented in Muslim societies do not necessarily represent the sacred text views towards women. Barazangi (2004) sustains that “It is this legal codification that stripped Islam of its Quranic conscientious morality and pedagogical dynamics” (p. 69). Subsequently, the patriarchal interpretation of the holy text becomes a central point and essential disempowering mechanism that is used against women to thwart their emancipation (Belarbi, 1999).

In Sudan, institutionalized patriarchy is always at work where preference is given to the boys over the girls; at home, school, and in the community at large. It is deeply ingrained in the traditional beliefs that men are the bread winners who are supposed to be in charge and women are the subordinates (Alghamdi, 2005; Aussie-Lumumba, 2001; Aubrey, 1991). Additionally, politics play a crucial role in determining Sudanese women’s position and in enforcing sex division in order to compartmentalize women’s location in the society. Consequently, in such traditional communities, women from a very young age are taught to believe that a woman is helpless and needs a man in her life in order to please God and become a full person (Dangor, 2001).

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35 Aisha is the daughter of the Prophet’s companion and the first Muslim Caliph “Abu Bakr”
In her book “Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism, and the State” Hale (1997) interviewed educated Sudanese women and found that these women are continuously encountering and challenging the state’s policies that aim to influence their thoughts and dictate their roles in the society. However, the status of Sudanese women who support the government’s policies is not different. Although they as well suffer the consequences of women’s oppression, they consciously chose to adhere to the patriarchal scheme that regards men as more capable of taking big decisions. In this context, women themselves become part of the social and political powers that subjugate women and impede their advancement in which case the oppressed becomes the oppressor (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Freire, 1970). In this regard, I draw upon hooks (2000) impressive argument that:

Women though assigned different roles to play in society based on sex are not taught a different value system. It is woman’s overall acceptance of the value system of culture that leads her to passively absorb sexism and willingly assume predetermined sex role.”(p. 87).

It is a reality that in Sudan as well as in most of the Islamic societies, women rights usually exist in relationship to men. Islamic teaching and cultural traditions are intertwined which makes it harder to separate between them (Badawi, 2002). Thus, while most educated women are exerting effort to separate between the two and break the chain of male dominance, some are still trapped between males’ authority and their helplessness (Abdel Halim, 2006; Alghamdi, 2005; Badawi, 2002; Ahmed, 1992). Nonetheless, the intersection of patriarchy and religion are the main elements in Sudanese women’s disempowerment in their country of origin.
De Beauvoir eloquently articulates this location of women in such societies

“Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as autonomous being…she is the inessential as opposed to essential. He is the subject he is the absolute. She is the other” (cited in Alghamdi, 2005, p.57). Thus, women exist as subordinate and as men’s affiliate (Johnson, 2005). A female’s value increases when she gets married, and a wife is frequently praised for being obedient to her husband and in-laws. Males enjoy the authority while females are expected-traditionally and religiously- to be shy and submissive. A father, a husband, or a son is expected to take decisions on their behalf.

Sudanese Muslim women share with other Muslim women in patriarchal societies these burdens of powerlessness and subjugation (Badri, 2008; Assie-Lumumba, 1997; Ba, 1989; Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1987). Scholars argue that equality of women within Islamic religion could only be realized through knowledge and re-interpretation of the sacred text from a woman’s standpoint (Barazangi, 2004; Wadud, 1999; Jawad, 1998; Ahmed, 1992). Ahmed’s scheme of empowering and educating Muslim women coincides with other Muslim feminists’ initiative to deconstruct the long held beliefs that Islam confines women to domesticity (Harris, 2005; Barazang, 2004; Ali, 2000; Nayyar, 1994; Ahmed, 1992). Their goal is to raise Muslim women’s awareness towards the threats of patriarchy, males’ domination, and encourage Muslim women to fight against sexist repression.
These Muslim scholars deserve to be credited for the growing consciousness of Muslim women. While encouraging Muslim women to fight for their rights within Islamic religion; they also reject the suppositions that only Islamic religion is oppressive towards women. They argue that women’s subordination is present across religions and since the pre-Islamic eras: “Mesopotamian, Persian, Hellenic, Christian, and eventually Islamic cultures each contributed practices that both controlled and diminished women, and each also apparently borrowed the controlling and reductive practices of its neighbors” (Ahmed, 1992, p.18).

Considering Sudan as an example, there have been endeavors to improve the status of women in post 1955 independence from Britain (Hall & Ismail, 1981). Noticeable improvements were reflected in women’s participation in the government and in public life. Nevertheless, this progress did not last for long because the Islamic radicals and proponents of women’s subjugation took over. As a matter of fact, the state discriminates against women and “its definition of gender tends to restrict women to domestic sphere and to ignore how domesticity links with other forms of social control” (Stromquist, 1995, p.424). Further, the State has adopted gendered ideologies that sustain sex division, and place women’s intentions within a patriarchal culture. Ordinances and provisions that control women and limit their mobility were issued (Hale, 1997).

Women’s inferior status is also prevalent in other African countries. For example the prominent Senegalese writer and activist Mariama Ba (1989) discussed the low status of women in Senegal in her novel “So long a Letter”. She argues about the persistence of
African women’s oppression, in particular patriarchy that determines gender roles in Senegal. Through her protagonists’ narrative, Ba (1989) explicates Senegalese Muslim women’s struggle with oppression and marginalization, and how these women have managed - in their own ways- to empower themselves. The narrative shows that, despite their sufferings from the hurdles of males’ oppression, sexism and gendered culture, they were able to survive patriarchy and cultural traditions that restrain them.

For the women in my study, the struggle is challenging. They moved from a patriarchal culture with aspirations to achieve their dreams of freedom and success. Soon they are faced with many barriers that affect their adjustment to U.S. culture. Their skin color, though “no people in Africa prior to the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism called themselves ‘black’ ” (Marable, 2002, p.12), gender, and religion become significant factors in determining their place in the U.S. social hierarchy. As a result of the intersection of these aspects of oppression, they encounter what King (1988) labeled as the “triple oppression”

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality refers to the intersection of multiple oppressive factors that taint the experiences of black women and the injustice stemming from them (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000, 1990; Crenshaw, 1997). Studies show that black women in the U.S. are encumbered by the intersection of racism and sexism in addition to other categories of discrimination (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; King, 1988). Black feminist scholars use

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<sup>36</sup> I borrow King’s (1988) term “triple oppression” to refer to the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the experiences of professional Sudanese Muslim women.
the term intersectionality in order to explain the interlocking nature of oppressions that shapes black women’s everyday life (Collins, 2000; 1998; hooks, 1998; Crenshaw, 1997; King, 1988). They argue about the painful experiences of black women due to their race, gender, and class. Furthermore, these scholars used the term intersectionality to analyze the intersection of race and gender in black women’s day-to-day lives.

In this fashion, intersectionality as coined by Crenshaw (1997) identifies race, gender, class and other social categories as important factors in understanding the experiences of women of color. For Crenshaw intersectionality is “a transitional concept that links current concepts with their political consequences, and real world politics within postmodern insights” (1993b, p.114). Through her analysis of the intersection of race, gender, and class, Crenshaw (1995) tries to tackle the persistent subjugation of black women and women of color. At the same time she criticizes both antiracism and feminism movements for not taking in consideration the fact that the experience of women of color in regard to race is different from those of men; and their experience with sexism is as well different from that of white women. Crenshaw (1995) uses the term political intersectionality to explain the location of women of color:

The concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agenda…for example, racism as experienced by people of color who are of particular gender-male- tends to determine the parameters of antiracist strategies, just as sexism as experienced by women of particular race-white- tends to ground the women’s movement” (p.360)

37 Although white women exist at the intersection of race and gender, they are privileged by their whiteness as they belong to the majority group which spare them from racial atrocities
Additionally, Crenshaw views intersectionality under three categories of subordination: 1) Structural intersectionality: is concerned with social, economic, and political institutions and the way they impact the individuals’ access to opportunities. It also investigates “the lives of those at the bottom of multiple hierarchies to determine how the dynamics of each hierarchy exacerbates and compounds the consequences of another”; 2) Political intersectionality, which looks into the split of political power according to race or gender and to what extent it can contest each other, and; 3) Representational intersectionality, which examines how race and gender discourse shapes the images of women of color and accordingly influence their representation. (Crenshaw, 1993b, p.114).

Following the same argument, Collins (1998) defines intersectionality as “a form of analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age form mutually constructing features of social organization.” (P.278). Collins demonstrates how dominant discourse tends to maintain the oppression of people of color. She as well elaborates on how individuals’ experiences are influenced by the aforementioned categories which explain the social hierarchy that exist in the society “constructing racial hierarchy is a gendered process that works with and through social class, age, and heterosexism as comparable hierarchies” (Collins, 2000, p.18).

Black feminist researchers assert the interconnectedness and intersection between the elements of oppression in the lives of black women. hooks (1990) examines the role that race and gender play in the experiences of black women in the U.S. She is very
critical of those who compartmentalize race versus gender. According to her, It is not either or, but any examination of the injustices against black women and women of color should take into account both race and gender as sites of inexcusable discrimination (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1993; king, 1988, Hooks, 1998). hooks expressively challenges those who ignore this connectedness:

It often makes me tired to think that black women must still defend our concern with eradicating sexism and sexist oppression, with feminist politics, that we must continually deal with folk asking us which is more important, or telling us race is more important. That’s why I think it’s so crucial to focus on ending oppression and domination, because such a focus is inclusive; it enables us to look at ourselves as a whole person who are affected by sexism and racism and class exploitation. (hooks, 1990, p. 218)

On the other hand, King (1988) believes that Blacks and black women resistance to racism, sexism, and classism is one of the significant aspects of black feminist thought. Further, King (1988) criticizes the limitation of intersectionality claiming that it does not examine the multiple forms of discrimination and hegemony. King used the term “multiple jeopardy” to explain the interlocking nature of racism, sexism, and classism in the lives of black women. She adds “In order to understand the concept of multiple jeopardy it is necessary to look beyond the social structure and process of the dominant society that insidiously pervade even the movements for race, gender, and class liberation” (p.51).

**Intersectionality at work: Racism, sexism, and religion discrimination.**

Historically in the United States race is more specifically defined by the culturally invented ideas and beliefs we have about the differences in skin color, hair texture, nose
width, and lip thickness that give meaning to the word race (Smedley and Smedley, 2005, p. 20). In other words in the U.S. people are judged by their features and color of their skin more than by their deeds. On the other hand, a remarkable definition of race is as well provided by Omi and Winant (1994). They define race as a socially construct that is historically situated within the social structure of the U.S. society. Their definition pertains to the political nature of race in the U. S. that excludes other racial groups by labeling American identity “white”. As a result, racial beliefs and practices have become even more intricate and divisive (Omi and Winant, 1994). Thus “Race takes on a hierarchical meaning. It serves to help us separate groups that have been defined by "race" into superior and inferior categories. It is, perhaps, this aspect of the race concept that does the most damage” (Jones, 1997, p. 348).

According to Jones (1997) there are three levels of racism in the United States. These are: (1) Individual racism which is aligned with race prejudice, and reflected in the following excerpt from Abraham Lincoln’s speech that demonstrates an “individual racist thinking”:

I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor qualifying them to hold office…I will say in addition to this that there is a physical differences between the white and black races which I believe will ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And in as much as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race (in Jones, 1997, P. 13, cited by Hay [Ed], 1894).
The second level of racism as stated by Jones (1997) is the institutional racism which has two meanings: (1) it is the institutional extension of individual racist beliefs, constituting primarily of using and manipulating duly constituted institutions so as to maintain a racist advantage over others. (2) It is the byproduct of certain institutional practices that operate to restrict- on a racial basis-the choices, rights, mobility, and access of groups of individuals (p.14). The third level of racism is the cultural racism which Jones defines as “contains elements of both individual and institutional racism…can be defined as the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one race’s cultural heritage over that of another race…when one group enjoy the power to define cultural values-and the individual forms those values should take-and to reward those who posses them and punish or ignore those who do not” (p.14)

Racism has negative effect on the lives of those who experience it. Many studies have examined black females’ struggles with the deep rooted practices of oppression and discrimination in the United States (Collins, 2000; 1998; Crenshaw, 1997; hooks, 1990). In particular, Black feminist scholars have done extensive research on black females’ struggle with the binaries of racism and sexism (Collins, 2000; 1998; hooks, 1990). They sustain that, their examination of American history reveals that racism, sexism, and other categories of discrimination are deeply entrenched in the American society and reflected in Blacks and people of color’s everyday experiences of injustices (Collins, 2000; Collins, 1998; Solorzano, 1998; Crenshaw, 1997; hooks, 1990; 1989). Carter (2007) explains the dimension of the damages that racism inflicts on blacks and people of color:
Because people of Color are subjected to various forms and levels of racism, many are rendered vulnerable to lifelong exposure and as a result have higher rates of poor physical and mental health, experience numerous life event stressors, and receive little societal support or recognition for their social plight… Furthermore, because racism has endured for hundreds of years, it seems reasonable to argue that the chronic and pervasive nature of racism in society can cause people to become physically and emotionally vulnerable… Racist incidents may be repeated and reoccurring, subtle, and covert as reflected in language or symbols. They occur within the context of a society that for centuries sanctioned and made legal various forms of racial harassment and discrimination. (pp. 36-37)

While most of the studies that examined women experiences with racism and sexism in the U.S. have focused on African American females (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; hooks, 1990), I still found them relevant to the experiences of my study participants. In particular, Collins (2000) in the 2nd edition of her book “Black Feminist Thought Knowledge Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment” has included a transnational module that encompasses other black women’s experiences. Therefore, and in order to discuss how race affect the immigrant Sudanese Muslim women in the U.S. one has to look at race as a social construct that responds to historical, social, and political circumstances at a certain point of time (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Omi and Winant, 1994; Collins, 1991). That “people in the United States are identified by their skin color, language, and physical features, and are grouped and ranked into distinct racial groups” (Carter, 2007, p. 18).

In addition, being a woman and a black in the U.S. renders a common experience, we are a “one oppressed group in specific historical situation” (Collins, 1998, p.xvi). Still Sudanese women’s experiences with racism, sexism, and inequity do differ from that of African American women because in addition to their skin color, their experiences are
also marked by the specificity of their original culture, faith, immigrant status, accented English, in addition to the stereotypical assumptions about their education which is presumed less competitive, and the negative perception of Africans and Muslims (Okpalaoka, 2009; Arthur, 2000; Collins, 2000; Said, 1978; Bryce-Laporte, 1972).

Solórzano (1998) highlights three important factors that shape racism in the U.S: a) First, one group believes itself to be superior; b) second, the group that believes in its superiority has the power to carry out the “racist behaviors”; and c) third, that racism affects not only the Blacks but other ethnically different groups (Solórzano, 1998, p.124). Solórzano confirms that in the United States, racism is associated with the institutional power, and as long as blacks and people of color have no power they will continue to face racism, discrimination, and its repercussions. Furthermore, scholars who studied race and gender in the U. S. affirmed the intersection of these categories in shaping the experiences of Blacks and people of color and consequently perpetuate their oppression (Collins, 2000; 1999; 1998; hooks, 1998; Crenshaw; 1997; 1993; King; 1988). On the other hand, King (1988) applauds black women’s awareness of racism, sexism and the pervasiveness of discrimination which has helped us to resist oppression and to realize that “Our day-to-day survival as well as our organized political actions have demonstrated the tenacity of our struggle against subordination” (p. 43).

Stereotyping and discrimination that result from acts of racism, sexism, in addition to Islamophobia, are some of the encounters that face Sudanese immigrant women in the U. S. As with Blacks and other people of color, they are also seen as
inferior to their white counterparts and these elements become significant in their oppression (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1998). Moreover, considering my familiarity with racism, sexism, stereotyping, and discrimination in America, I consider their experience is a result of “a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African American, Latino, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians, and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color” (Banks as cited in Solórzano, 1998, p.124).

**Immigrant Sudanese Muslim women now.**

Several studies have examined the challenges that face most of Muslim immigrants who have been negatively constructed by the mainstream dominant discourse. Thus incidents such as September 11, 2001 terrorist attack poses additional challenges for Muslims and in particular for those Muslim women who wear the Islamic dress, the visible marker of their Islamic identity. It is true that the 9/11 episode have really exposed how racism and discrimination are deeply entrenched in the American landscape (Curtis, 2009; Abdo, 2007; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; CAIR, 2005; El-Halawany, 2003).

A relevant study by Byng (1998) employed black feminist thought to examine how the intersection of race, gender, and religion structures African-American Muslim women encounter with discrimination. Byng (1998) interviewed twenty African-American Muslim women in order to understand how the intersection of their race,
gender, and religion (the matrix of domination\textsuperscript{38}) influences these women’s daily experiences. The study reveals that these women were able to challenge racism and defy subjugation and inequity through self-definition and determination, and they “resist the oppression of discrimination by maintaining a humanist vision that views discrimination as triggered by difference (p. 475). Hence, the black feminist thought that encompasses the particularity of African-American women’s knowledge and resistance explains the standpoint of these Muslim women. Like Byng my goal is to understand how the intersection of race, gender, and religion impact my participants’ experiences. However, I anticipate that my participants’ experience will differ in many ways from that of Byng’s since it is influenced by the specificity of their cultural traditions and their immigrant status.

A complimentary study by El-Halawany (2003) investigated how highly educated Egyptian women who live in the United States perceive themselves after the incident of September 11, 2001. The study reveals that, in post 9/11 Muslim women have faced physical attacks and intimidation. A significant finding of this study is that the participants’ education in Egypt was not enough to enable them to assess their predetermined perceptions about the U.S. Finally, the author recommends that Muslim women should collaboratively represent themselves in American society and voice their concerns.

\textsuperscript{38} I borrow this expression from Collins (1991)
In the U.S. immigrant Sudanese Muslim women are faced with many challenges that range between preserving their Islamic culture that prevails in their traditions, religious ideals, dress codes, diet, relations with the opposite sex; and the their integration in American mainstream culture and secular values; while navigating their multiple identities as women, blacks, Muslims, immigrants, and Americans (Basford, 2008; Abdo, 2007; Abusharaf, 2002; Blasing, 1996; Hynes, 1996). However, the intersection of aspects of being blacks, females, and Muslims with accented or little English diminish Sudanese women’s aspirations of realizing the American dream\(^\text{39}\) of a better life in America. The various stereotypes and assumptions about them were associated with; the popularized African women’s images\(^\text{40}\); their minority status; and the mainstream discourse that depicts Islam as an oppressive violent religion and Muslims as backward and extremist (Curtis, 2009; Zine, 2006; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; EL-Halawany, 2003; Ibrahim, 1999; Aidoo, 1998). In this respect, I support Haddad’s argument that these women “see their marginalized reality in the U.S. as deliberate and specific [and]…at times experienced a manifestation of… ‘anti-Muslim’ sentiment” (p.110). Moreover, Aidoo (1998) contests this stereotyped image of African women and refers to the

\(^{39}\) The “American Dream” was first introduced by Adams in (1931) who pointed to the possibility of prosperity and success in America depending on each one’s ability or achievement.

\(^{40}\) Aidoo (1998) criticizes the world’s erroneous perception about African women: “The image of the African woman in the mind of the world has been set: she is breeding too many children she cannot take care of, and for whom she should not expect other people to pick up the tap. She is hungry, and so are her children” (p. 39).
numerous successful and world’s prominent African women such as: Nefertiti\textsuperscript{41}, and Winnie Mandela\textsuperscript{42}.

Observant Muslim women follow a restrictive Islamic dress code (hijab) that ranges between full veiling to only covering the head (Gunel, 2007; Zine, 2002; Ahmed, 1992). However, the West negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslim women’s hijab have been examined by many scholars (Killan, 2003; Ahmed, 1992; Said, 1978). A case in point is what was reported by Killian (2003) regarding Muslim girls in France who were forbidden from wearing their headscarves in schools. Killian study confirms that these Muslim girls were forced to change their appearances in order to comply with the schools rules and continue their education (Killian, 2003). Several incidents of prejudice and discrimination against Muslim women due to their Islamic attire have been reported after September, 11, 2001, terrorist attack (CAIR, 2005; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; El-Halawany, 2003). The testimonies of many Muslims women during such times of crisis confirm that stereotyping and profiling are becoming the norm rather than the exception (Curtis, 2009; Basford, 2008; CAIR, 2005; El-Halawany; 2003).

Other studies show that women’s hijab pose a significant barrier to their jobs’ access. Smith’s (2002) study of Muslim women experiences in Canada found that: twenty nine out of thirty two veiled participants had prospective employers made reference to their hijab when they applied for jobs; twenty one of them were asked by an employer

\textsuperscript{41} Nefertiti is the Great Royal Wife of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten.

\textsuperscript{42} Winnie Mandela the ex-wife of the South African leader Nelson Mandela, is an activist, and the head of the ANC Women's League in South Africa
whether they will remove their headscarves; while a third of them had been advised to remove their hijab if they wanted the job (Smith, 2002, cited in Zine, 2004). The findings of this study illustrate how discrimination, profiling, and “Othering” of Muslim women that is associated with their appearances as *hijabis* limit their access to jobs, and could negatively affect them socially, economically, and discursively limit their access to career opportunities.

An additional challenge to Muslim women is the contradiction between the Western values that permit free mixing between the sexes and Islamic values that restrict relationships between women and men (Abdo, 2007; Alghamdi, 2005; Sarroub, 2005; Blasing, 1996). Muslim girls and boys are expected to adhere to these restrictions as soon as they reach the puberty stage. Conversely, and due to the patriarchal nature of Muslim societies, girls face more restrictions than do boys, because Islamic values, cultural traditions, and patriarchy tend to dictate women’s position and demeanor within their community (Alghamdi, 2006; Abdo, 2005; Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003).

In traditional Islamic societies such as the Sudan, a good Muslim woman is believed to be covered, invisible, and must not raise her voice, gaze, or look others (especially men) in the eye (Basford, 2008; Elnour & Bashir-Ali, 2003, Ahmed, 1992). Like hooks (1992) through the years I came to consider not only looking but to gaze and stare “I want my look to change reality” for myself and for other women who tend to internalize their oppression and inferiority. They are raised to accept that a woman is inferior and worthless without a man dictating how she could runs her live which is
reflected in the popular Sudanese proverb “a shadow of a man is better than a shadow of a wall”.

Furthermore, reading hooks’ (1992) explanation of how the slaves’ masters labeled their “gaze” as a symbol of rebellion, made me realize that our oppression is relevant to being enslaved. I become conscious that I am oppressed and enslaved “here and there”\(^\text{43}\). Yet ‘here’ adds further dimensions to my oppression; being black, a woman, and a Muslim. I envision hooks’ (1992) argument that “White slaves owners…punished enslaved black people for looking…the politics of slavery, of racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze” (p.116). hooks’ illumination of the gaze as a site of resistance enticed me to look back and try to understand why conservative Islamists do not want us (women) to “gaze”. It is true that, they are petrified that, similar to the black slaves, our gaze will be critical and challenging to the status quo “one that is oppositional”.

In the realm of living in the U.S. for over twelve years I become conscious of my being the “other”. I have firsthand experiences regarding the intersection of my race, gender, accent, and religion. I recall many events so vividly. Through the years, I have been looked at as the invisible “other” who does not measure up to the American standards. Years ago I worked at one of the banks in Columbus, Ohio. I was the only black African in that branch. My co-workers did not shy from making me feel I am

\(^{43}\) ‘Here’ in the United States and ‘There’ in the Sudan.
different in a negative way assuming that I am inferior to them “the true Americans” although I had a master degree from England, the highest degree in the branch.

Though, I consider myself lucky since I had the chance to travel and visit many countries in Africa, Europe, and America, which affected my perceptions and attitudes towards the societal injustices. In addition, as a result of these experiences the “frame through which I view the world” has changed as well as my identity that has been constructed/re-constructed, which influenced my choice of this research and research participants. I believe that my study participants and I have been subject to the “double jeopardy” and “multiple oppressions” both in our original country and in the United States.

However, in spite of all the aforementioned discrimination and stereotypes—which are not inclusive- studies show that immigrant Muslim women, in most cases, were able to navigate between the norms and values of their own cultures and those of their host country. They were also able to learn to adapt and get along with a culture in which they are the “Other”, and place themselves at different levels of acculturation (Abdo, 2007; Sarroub, 2005; Abusharaf, 2002; Alghamdi, 2005).

**Summary**

Sudanese Muslim women are part of the growing numbers of immigrants in the United States. They are, like other minority immigrants, straddle between many worlds, their religion and cultural traditions, and the American culture. Though, studies assert that, most of the Muslim women who live in the West continue to maintain their original
culture and religion, while few of them try to immerse and adopt the new culture (Ahmadi, 2003; Curran, & Saguy; 2001; Abdulrahim, 1993).

When I decided to study the experience of immigrant Sudanese Muslim women in the United States, I considered how Muslims are stereotyped and portrayed as violent, extremists, and backward, and Muslim women as oppressed and subjugated. Malti-Douglas (1992) posits that “the image of women languishing under the yoke of Islam titillated the Western observer and permits him to place himself in the superior position. Women and their role become a stick with which the West can beat the East” (p.17). As I mentioned earlier, by conducting this study I seek to deconstruct the popularized image of Muslim women and help people “Learn about … meaning of race, experiences of different ethnic groups, the existence of different religions and belief systems, myriad variations of cultural practices” (Cortes, 2000, p. 19).

My selection of the study’s topic and participants is influenced by my being immigrant African Muslim women who is going through the different levels of adjustments in the American society, and with a firsthand experience of what it means to be black, a woman, and a Muslim in the United States. As an African Muslim women who is raised in a traditional Islamic patriarchal society and currently living in the U. S., I find myself constantly negotiating between what I was raised to conform to and what is becoming rational to me. Since I rarely adhere to orthodoxy Islam, I used to question myself, whether I am on the right path or am I not Muslim enough? In fact, the process of writing this work helped me to advance my knowledge, gave me the chance to look
deeper into myself and my religion, and to connect with progressive Islamic feminists’ endeavors that aim at challenging the patriarchal interpretation of the holy text and re-interpret the Quran from a woman’s viewpoint.

All in all, by allowing the study participants to tell their stories from their own perspective; I hope to shed light on their actual experiences which are missing in current studies. My goal is to contribute to research in this area by filling the identified gap in the literature, and add to the understanding of the various backgrounds and experiences of this minority group.
Chapter 3

Research Methodology

This qualitative study seeks to investigate the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women who are living and working in two mid-Western cities in the U.S. More specifically it explores how race, gender, and religion shape the educational and career experiences of these women; how they navigate between two worlds: their cultural traditions, Islamic faith, and the American mainstream culture; and how these experiences impact their perspectives and their everyday lives. By employing qualitative methods in collecting and analyzing the data that is generated from the participants’ stories; I consider Glesne’s (1999) argument about the significance of this method of research since “qualitative studies are best at contributing to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and processes (p. 24). I also, take seriously Glesne’s explanation of the role of researchers who use qualitative methods:

Qualitative researchers are interpreters who draw on their experiences, knowledge, theoretical dispositions, and collected data to present their understanding of other’s world. As interpreters, they think of themselves not as authority figures that get the “facts” in topic, but as meaning makers who make sense out of the interaction of their own lives with those of research participants. (Glesne, 1999, p.157)
In this chapter I present the methodology that guides my study. This includes: the conceptual framework, research methodology and design, data collection, data analysis, and establishing trustworthiness. I also situate myself within my study and delineate my personal experiences and background that affected the different phases of my research: from choosing the research topic, participant selection, gaining access, interview questions, establishing trust, to the process of transcribing and analyzing the participants’ narratives.

**Conceptual framework**

To fulfill the purpose of this work which explores the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women, I employ a constructivist approach (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002) that is centered on individuals’ meaning-making that aims to deconstruct the dominant powers regarding race, gender, class, sexuality, in addition to other kinds of discrimination. Different from the positivist approach; constructivist’s ontology acknowledges that, there is no one objective reality or knowledge; there are multiple realities that are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own perspectives (Hatch, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1994 cited in Hatch, 2002; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2000). Thus, “All knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such is contingent upon human practice, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, P.42).
Furthermore, constructivists presume that individuals construct reality and that “knowledge is symbolically constructed and not objective; that understandings of the world are based on conventions; that truth is, in fact, what we agree it is” (Hatch, 1985, p.161, in Hatch, 2002, p. 15). Humans construct how they understand life, and knowledge construction takes place through communication and interaction between people which will allow the participants to describe and represent their realities “Human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it” (Schwandt, 2000, p.197).

Therefore, similar to constructivist scholars, I employ a naturalistic qualitative research methodology for the collection and analysis of data. Researchers within this paradigm dedicate long periods of time for interviewing participants in their natural settings in order to capture how they construct and make sense of their everyday life (Hatch, 2002, p. 15). However, although the women in my study were the stakeholders and the creators of knowledge, they and I have constructed meanings and understanding together (Hatch, 2002, p.13). In regard to qualitative research findings, constructivists use criteria other than the ones proposed by positivists and post positivists and “terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, in Hatch, 2002, p.16).

The theoretical framework is based on black feminist thought because it “consists of theories or specialized thought produced by African-American women intellectuals.
designed to express a black women’s standpoint” (Collins, 1991, p. 32). It is also, a scheme for carrying out research on the experience of those who are at the periphery; and illuminate the injustices that blacks and people of color in the U.S. are experiencing (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990). Black feminist intellectuals use qualitative methods to fill the existing gap in the studies that examine the day-to-day experiences of African American women and women of color with racism, sexism, and classism, and consequently, exert efforts to bring the realities of these women to the forefront of the debate (Collins, 2000; 1991; 1998; Crenshaw, 1997; Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995; Hooks; 1994; 1990; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Additionally, in the 2nd edition of her outstanding book (2000) Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, Collins provides a new dimension of black feminism. In this edition, she presents a “social justice project” that focuses on a transnational and global context of African American women everyday encounter with injustices. She elucidates “we must recognize that U.S. Black feminism participates in a larger contest of struggling for social justice that transcends U.S. borders. In particular, U.S. Black feminism should see commonalities that join women of African descent as well as differences that emerge from our diverse national histories” (Collins, 2000, p.xi). In the same manner, hooks (1994) delineates a worldwide context of black feminism that goes beyond the national boundaries to include all the Blacks who are fighting to liberate themselves from the powers that oppress them.
As a novice black feminist researcher, I align myself with Black feminist scholars who use qualitative methods to understand the national and global experiences of black women with racism, sexism, and other categories of oppression (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1998). This connection between the struggles of African American women and black women from other parts of the globe exemplify the appeal of black feminist epistemology to my study. In particular, because it is “a theory that is emancipatory” I believe it is sensible to utilize it to explain the participants’ experiences, highlight their struggles against “oppression” (Collins, 1991, p. 32), and explain how their race, gender and religion intersect in shaping these experiences (Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Solórzano & Yasso, 2002; Collins, 2000, 1991; Byng, 1998; Crenshaw, 1997; Ladson-Billing and Tate, 1995; King, 1988).

Collins (1991) argues that “Black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African-American women which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black women. In other words, Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it” (p. 22). Collins (1991) makes clear that people’s identities and experiences are shaped by reality, and that oppressive experiences could be formed by racism, sexism and class domination which she labeled as “Matrix of domination”\(^4\). Thus, through this study I endeavor to get a deeper understanding of the experiences and standpoints of the study participants, their

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\(^4\) Matrix of domination is used by Collins (1991) to refer to the intersection of race, gender, and class in shaping African American women everyday experiences, and how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized (p. 18).
struggle with racism, sexism, and Muslims’ stereotyping while trying to succeed academically and career wise.

Furthermore, Collins (1991) argues that, because knowledge has been defined by white male scholars, thinkers, and institutions; black females’ ways of knowing have been suppressed, distorted, and silenced. In the same way, black feminist scholar Etter-Lewis (1991) posits that, black women's lives were distorted, minimized, or rendered invisible. Etter-Lewis (1991) confirms that, the existing popular narrative does not actually reflect the life experiences of black females in America. She criticizes the existing black women’s self-image; and proposes that, the images of black women should be tailored to their cultural perspectives.

By utilizing the black feminist approach, I hope to contribute to the visibility of immigrant Sudanese Muslim women and provide them a space to articulate their realities and voice their concerns. In addition, I aim to contribute to research that focuses on black women’s fight against “a system that gains part of its strength by objectifying Black women” (Collins, 1998, p.47). The power of black women speaking out, and making public their perspectives is eloquently expressed by Collins’ (1998) statement that:

Breaking silence can be a triumphant process in lived experience...by speaking out, formally victimized individuals not only reclaim their humanity, they simultaneously empower themselves by giving new meaning to their own particular experiences. Racism, poverty, sexism, and heterosexism, all harm their victims. For individuals, healing from this harm by making one’s experiences and point of view public remain one of the most fundamental contributions of breaking silence” (p.48).
In the same way, black feminist scholars affirm the connection between black women’s oppression and advocacy (Collins, 2000; Collins, 1991). For them, Black feminist thought is not only a survival strategy but it also encompasses a space where black women become in charge of themselves because “there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be” (Collins, 1991, p.237).

Taking all the above in consideration, I attempt to examine the intersection of race, gender and religion in immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women’s educational and career experiences, and consequently develop a critical knowledge and awareness regarding the ways in which oppression and domination impact these participants. It is true that, being black, a woman, and a Muslim in America affects my everyday experiences as well as of those of my study participants (Basford, 2008; El-Halawany, 2003; Byng, 1998; Ibrahim, 1999). I also believe that “it is more likely for Black women [we] as members of an oppressed group to have critical insights into the condition of our own oppression” (Collins, 1991, p.33). In view of this, Black feminist thought could encourage new awareness and utilizes professional Sudanese Muslim women and their taken-for-granted knowledge and place them at the center of the analysis (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billing, 1994).

Additionally, because Sudanese professional Muslim women, similar to other black women in the U.S., exist at the nexus of race, gender, and Muslims’ stereotyping, the black feminist thought that encompasses the particularity of African-American women’s knowledge and resistance (Collins, 2000) will help me to explain the standpoint
of my study’s participants and assist me in understanding and constructing meaning of their told stories (Creswell, 1998; Glesne, 1999). I also believe that a theory that promotes social, cultural, and political justice and addresses the special needs of those who are oppressed and “othered” by U.S. mainstream culture (Crenshaw, 1997, 1988; Collins, 2000; 1998; 1991; hooks, 2000; 1998; 1981; Ladson-Billing, 2000; King, 1988), is the most appropriate method to explain the educational and career experiences of the participants, since, similar to blacks and other people of color, the participants deal with the injustices and barriers that are related to their access to education, employment, health care, and housing among others.

All in all, the Black feminist paradigm will enable me to analyze the interplay of race, gender, and religion in the lived experiences of the women in my study (Solórzano & Yasso, 2002, Collins, 2000; Solórzano, 1998; Byng, 1998; hooks, 1990), to understand and construct meaning from their told stories, to bring these women’s experiences to the center of the discussion, and to provide a counter narrative that is empowering (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Equally, it is a pertinent approach that could help me to understand how these women, in their own narrative, deal with personal and professional challenges as they struggle to be accepted in their professions and at the same time defy their marginalization and “otherness”. Finally, it will assist me in crystallizing the participants’ perception of these experiences, the thinking about the research, and to determine ways in which I could make sense of the data during and after its collection (Creswell, 1998; Glesne, 1999).
Rationale for qualitative inquiry

In this study I employed a qualitative approach because it allows further examination of issues that have not been fully explored (Creswell, 2002), and will yield a deeper and new understanding of the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the experiences of professional Sudanese Muslim women in the United States (Hatch, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). In Addition, I acknowledge that the situated action of the qualitative research method resonates with the purpose and objectives of my study because:

It consists of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

Likewise, I draw upon Patton’s (2002) view of the qualitative researcher’s responsibility towards the research participants to correctly represent their intentions.

According to Patton “the task for qualitative researchers is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their point of view about the world, or that part of the world about which they are talking” (p.21).

Therefore, my use of narrative methods to collect and analyze the participants’ stories will assist me to accurately represent the participants’ lived experiences.
Narrative research

This study utilizes narrative inquiry as a method within qualitative research for data collection and analysis. Narrative is a form of representation that focuses on gathering and interpreting the stories that people use to explain their everyday life (Schwandt, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). According to Errante (2000) narrative research is gaining popularity among researchers who use it in different areas of research, particularly in education. She writes “in recent years qualitative researchers have demonstrated growing interest in the personal narrative as a valid articulation of individual and collective experience with the social, political, and cultural world of education” (p.16).

Narrative inquiry according to Schwandt (2001) is concerned with studying and analyzing stories of personal life experiences such as life histories, memoires, autobiographies, and narrative interviews. Equally, Connelly & Clandinin (1990) view narrative inquiry as a deliberative research process based on ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions. They draw our attention to the fact that human beings live and tell stories about their lives, while narrative researchers are expected to explain the lives of the researched through collecting and telling stories about them, and writing the narratives that reflect their experiences (Atkinson, 1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Hatch, 2002).

For Creswell (2002) narrative is a distinctive qualitative research method that focuses on “studying a single person, gathering data through the collection of stories,
reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of these experiences for individual” (p.21). Moreover, Schwandt (2001) views narrative inquiry as a broad term that encompasses the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analyzing stories of life experiences:

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experience that make up people’s lives, both individual and social. Simply stated…narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) discuss the different styles through which narrative studies could be conducted. They sustain that narrative research includes:

Any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials; The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner (field notes of an anthropologist who writes up his or her observations as a narrative or in personal letters). It can be the object of the research or a means for a study of another question. It may be used for comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore personality” (pp. 2-3).

In this respect, I choose the life story narrative in order to collect data from the told stories of the participants. Researchers such as Reissman (1993) believe that storytelling in narrative methods is empowering and has a transformative prospective, and narrating becomes educational and adds value for both the researcher and the researched stories (Reissman, 1993). Storytelling is practiced by individuals who take the opportunity to share their life stories as they experienced it. In fact, storytelling is a valued African practice that is viewed as a tool for education and knowledge diffusion. Specifically,
African women are expert in the transmission of knowledge which makes them excellent storytellers (Egbo, 2000). Therefore, the storytelling and African women’s ability to tell them is a key point for my study as I anticipate it to yield information-rich narratives that reflect the participants’ everyday experiences. Through the telling, the women in the study could reclaim their voices which are otherwise excluded from the discussion (Errante, 2000; Madriz, 2000; Collins, 1998; hooks, 1998). Heilbrun (1988) cites Gilbert & Gubar (2000) and expressively state the value of women “coming to voice” through stories’ construction. They argue that “women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves” (p.33). Following the same debate, Connelly & Clandinin (1990) assert the significance of voice in storytelling:

Voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community …The struggle for voice begins when a person attempt to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, feeling heard by others are all part of this process…voice suggests relationships: the individual’s relationship to the meaning of experience and hence, to language, and the individual’s relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process (P. 4).

In a study titled “Black women’s life stories: Reclaiming self in narrative texts”, Etter-Lewis (1991) used life story method to elicit the narratives of older African American women during the period of 1920-1940. Some of these women were college graduates and held professional jobs that were usually taken by whites or males. By studying the life stories and the day-to-day life struggle of these African American women, Etter-Lewis seeks to answer the following questions: what is the narrative
patterns of the African American women reveal about their lives? How do their unique experiences influence the manner in which they tell their own life stories?

Etter-Lewis (1991) refers to her participants’ life stories as the “narratives that exemplify the perils and triumphs of being black and female in America” (p.43). Indeed this powerful statement signifies African American women’s experiences in the U.S. that encompass their activism to dismantle the gendered power relations, racism, and sexism (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Etter-Lewis, 1991; hooks, 1990). A salient finding in Etter-Lewis (1991) study that might be relevant to the experiences of the women in my study was the significance of the level of education in her participants’ articulation of their experiences. She explain that even slave narratives and the early autobiographies of black women reveal that, not only education is significant in making their voices heard, but also the chances they were accorded to articulate their experiences and have their stories printed.

Nonetheless, Reissman (1993) reminds us that “A personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of what happened, nor is it a mirror of a “world “out there. Our readings of data are themselves located in discourses” (Reissman, 1993, p.64). The view of life story narrative is further elaborated by Richardson’s (1997) elucidation that “the story of a life is less than the actual life, because the story told is selective, partial, contextually constructed because the life is not over. But the story of a life is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to other, others seeing
themselves, knowing themselves through another’s life story, re-visioning their own, arriving where they started and knowing “the place for the first time” (p. 6).

As mentioned above, I used life story narrative as a core qualitative methodology to collect and analyze the data that emerged from the narratives of the immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women. And since narrative research retells life stories, my earnest goal is to present the actual told stories of the researched as well as the researcher’s story. Reissman (1993) assigns a significant function to narrative inquiry. He argues that: “Psychotherapists encounter narratives of personal experience everyday and use them to change lives by retelling and constructing new ones…individuals construct past events and actions in personal narrative to claim identities and construct lives” (pp.2-3).

For example, the Personal Narratives Group (1989) ascribes another powerful function to personal narrative. They argue that autobiographical narratives provide a powerful vehicle for resisting oppressive power system, and by telling stories about themselves, narrators could change who they are (Anderson, 1997; Freeman, 1993; Gergen, 1994; Reissman, 1993). In addition “narrative inquiry allows access to professional craft and experiential knowledge otherwise invisible to those outside the occupation, allowing for the complexities of life in these professions to be preserved in the research product” (Morgan-Fleming, 2007, p.355). Thus, I consider narrative as the appropriate method for conducting this study in order to capture the participants’ experiences and empower them to tell their stories as they lived it:
It is oral narrative that ideally suited to revealing the “multilayered texture of black women’s lives”…Oral narrative offers a unique and provocative means of gathering information central to understanding women’s lives and viewpoint. When applied to women of color, it assumes added significance as a powerful instrument for the rediscovery of womanhood so often overlooked and/or neglected in history and literature alike. Specifically, articulation of black women’s experiences in America is a complex task characterized by the intersection of race, gender, and social class with language, history, and culture (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p.43).

I believe in narrative research’s transformative possibilities that could allow for new meaning and multiple ways of knowing to surface (Reisman, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In fact, this narrative approach provided me with the chance to be part of my study participants’ stories as they were part of mine. Hence, in the next section I include my personal narrative as it relates to these women’s stories.

**My Narrative Tale**

*It is our inward journey that leads us through time-forward or back, seldom in straight line, most often spiraling. Each of us moving, changing, with respect to others. As we discover, we remember, remembering, we discover; and more intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge (Welty, 1984, p.102)*

My choice to study the narratives of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women and to explore the role of their race, gender, and religion in shaping their educational and career experiences stems from the fact that I am a Sudanese Muslim woman who grew up and went to college in Sudan and now lives and work in the U.S. My personal experience is marked by a journey through diverse geographic and cultural territories. I traveled and visited many countries in Africa, Europe, and finally America,
which enriched my knowledge and understanding of diverse people and cultures, afforded me a critical lens, and influenced my perceptions and attitudes towards patriarchy, gender oppression, and other societal injustices.

Scholars suggest that researchers who employ narrative in their research should include their personal experiences and stances “by starting with a story about themselves, explaining their personal connection to the project or by using personal knowledge to help them in the research process” (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Similarly, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) maintain that “research is a collaborative document, a mutual constructed story out of the lives of both researcher and participants’ (p.12). I recognize the power of narrative, and believe that the transformative and therapeutic nature of autobiographical narratives that does more than just describing a pre-existing self have great relevance to my positionality. Narrating is positioning and individuals are positioned by their narrative (Gregen, 1994; Reisman, 1993).

Now I have the opportunity, for the first time, to reflect upon my own life story. I realized that it is not an easy task, especially because I am not used to talking about myself. I struggled trying to find the suitable words and to entwine my story with the participants’. I also stumbled on how to put it on paper and make sense of what happened through the years. In fact, I grew up knowing that talking about one’s self is not acceptable and Individualism is seen as egocentric and a betrayal of the African communal believe that “I am because we are and we are because I am”. The first time I talked about myself was in one of my classes at the beginning of my
studies at OSU. The professor asked each student to present an autobiography. I watched the students talking about their lives and their achievements. I heard many “Is” without any “Wes”. Then, it was my turn to speak, and although I have a lot to share I found myself hesitant to talk about my different “Is”. I remember that I staggered and then said a few words about myself.

To start writing about my life I have to overcome many obstacles and boundaries, but now I am able to say “indeed I can”. However, I have to confess that my censorship intuition which was developed since childhood is always at work, and sometimes it prevents me from articulating many past and present incidents. It is worth mentioning that, in Sudan and in Islamic culture in general, the extended family has the priority over individual interest. Males enjoy the authority in the family and the community at large, while females are expected- traditionally and religiously- to be shy, submissive, and males (a father, a husband, a son, or a first degree relative) in their families take decisions on their behalf. There is a clear division in sex roles which dictates women positions in the society and most of them-women- tend to accept the status quo.

I was raised in a patriarchal conservative Muslim environment, where my brothers have more freedom than us, the girls, and the father takes all the decisions in the house. Thus, I recall, while I was living with my parents (children, in particular girls must live with their parents until they get married) I was not allowed to go out by myself at night, although I was a college graduate and had a decent job. If for any reason I had to leave the house at night I had to take one of my younger brothers with me. My brothers were
allowed to stay out late but I was supposed to be at home before dark. Ironically, my father who is very conservative and follows the patriarchal traditional Islam, was very supportive of girls’ education and until now he continues to encourage me to finish my studies.

While writing about my personal experiences, I thought about patriarchy, restrictions, and the gendered roles ascribed to women in Sudan. hooks (2000) clearly explicates this patriarchal notion “We all knew firsthand that we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men, to see ourselves as always and only in competition with one another for patriarchal approval, to look upon each other without compassion and punish each other harshly” (p.14). In fact, my resistance to patriarchy and gender oppression was the main reasons for my migration to the U.S.

Years ago, when I had the chance to travel to the U.S., I went to get my exit visa from the Sudan Ministry of Interior. The officer who was in charge of exit visas’ issuance required my marriage certificate, and a signed consent by my husband stating that he does not oppose my travel to the U.S. In the case of single women, a father, a brother, or an adult son must submit the approval, because in the Sudan, by law, a woman is not allowed to travel abroad alone without her “mahram’s” authorization. As a result, and

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45 Maharam is a male whom a woman can never marry because of close relationship (e.g. a brother, a father, or an uncle), or a husband (www.Islamawarness.net/glossary). In Islamic societies like Sudan women are not allowed to live alone or travel without a mahram. Currently, a Sudanese woman traveling by herself will not be granted an exit visa unless a mahram provides a written consent allowing her to travel alone.
until now, Sudanese women’s mobility and freedom—which is already limited by traditions and religion—have been compromised by this law and subsequent regulations.

On the other hand, when I decided to settle in the U.S., I was not cognizant of the pervasiveness of racism, sexism and other kinds of discrimination. Through the years, and similar to other black women and women of color, I became aware that my race, gender, religion, and accent are factors that impede my chances of opportunities. In addition, it was hard for me to get a professional job with my educational and career credentials from Sudan, but I was also optimistic and counting on my graduate degree from a reputable university in Britain. However, over the years and before the current job market stagnation, I came to believe that, in the land of opportunity, nobody is willing to give an immigrant black women with an accent a fair chance.

Eventually, I took a job as a teller in one of the banks in Columbus Ohio. Although, most of my coworkers, including my supervisor, were either high school graduates or college students, they viewed me—with two Master degrees, one from Britain and one from Sudan—as the least qualified person. There, I lived the experience of “otherness” day after day despite the big sign inside the bank that reads “we are an equal opportunity employer” and a caption that states “the bank’s policy prohibits any discrimination according to race, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or country of origin”.

Then, I started my graduate studies at Ohio State University while working at the same bank’s branch near OSU. One day while I was talking about my graduate classes at
I heard a co-worker who is an undergraduate at the same university whispering to
the one sitting beside him “How did she get in?” meaning how on earth could I- a black
and an African - be qualified to enroll for a graduate degree at OSU. Okpalaoka’s (2009)
articulation of her experience with prejudice and misjudgment speaks well to my own
experiences: “Americans do not believe that any education obtained outside the U.S.,
especially in Africa, can meet up to the standards they have. In fact they have such
skepticism and fear of anything foreign that foreigners hardly stand any chance of
obtaining the so called “American dream.” (p.129-130). Similar to Okpalaoka, and as I
stated before, these experiences have greatly affected my choice of the research topic and
the participants in this study. After articulating my experience I came to understand the
importance of everyone’s story, including my own.

Abu-Lughod (1993) alerts me that “A story is always situated; it has both a teller
and an audience. Its perspective is partial…and its telling is motivating” (p.15), and the
stories of immigrant Sudanese Muslim women including mine are no exception. The use
of narrative inquiry has also brought me closer to my participants by sharing my story
with them as they shared their stories with me. Through the telling we were both able to
recall the past and refigure the present in order to form meaningful and coherent
narratives and to “move back and forth between personal and the social and between the
past, the present, and the future” (Clandinin & Connolley, 2000, p.2)
Yet, my personal journey will continue to evolve. Nevertheless, since narrating the self for the first time was empowering and relieving to me, the same could be inferred to my study participants as they tell their life stories from their own perspective.

**Research site**

The study was conducted in two mid-Western U.S. cities, namely, Columbus and Toledo Ohio. These cities were selected because a) their population includes considerable numbers of professional Sudanese Muslim women; and b) their proximity to my place of residence, which alleviated some of the study’s expenses.

**Sampling**

In this study I combined both purposeful and snowball sampling. Patton (1990) explains the premises of purposeful sampling in the following statement: “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich* cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (as cited in Glesne, 1999, p.29). On the other hand, the use of snowball sampling allowed me to find the participants who are suitable for my study through referrals by the preliminary selected participants. Snowball sampling is a strategy used to find participants with characteristics relevant to the study and getting referrals from them to locate others who fit the same attributes. I employed a snowball sampling procedure by asking two informants who are known to me to identify other participants who might be willing to participate in the study (Creswell, 2005).
Through this approach I attempted to include a diverse sample in terms of career and Islamic teaching’s adherence.

**Participants’ selection**

The participants in this study are five professional Sudanese Muslim women whose ages range between 40-55 years old. All of them have resided in the U.S. for at least 10 years, and worked in different jobs. The following are the criteria that was used in selecting the participants: a) they are recent immigrants who have been in the United states for at least five years; b) they represent different levels of adherence to Islamic culture and religion; c) they live and work in a Mid-Western city in the United States; d) they are college graduates who have attended at least one year of college in the U.S.

My choice of five participants is informed by Hatch’s (1995) statement that, in qualitative research, there is no direct existing relationship between the number of participants and the quality of study’s questions and the levels of analysis. The sample size does not affect the quality of the study, but the depth and insight into the experiences is what matters. Therefore, a small number of information rich samples were chosen to illuminate the specified participants’ experiences. Consequently, I recruited five immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women who share common characteristics of race, gender, and religion, and represent a diverse range of professions. In chapter four I provide a brief description of each participant’s level of education, profession, and job at the time of the interview.
**Entry to the field**

Glesne (1999) suggests that “whether approaching gatekeepers or a series of individuals, you want them to say ‘Yes, your study sounds interesting. You are welcome” (p.39). As a member of the Sudanese Association of Ohio, I had the opportunity to introduce my research project to two women who are members of the association. I met with them in order to explain my project and the criteria for participation, and then I asked them to refer other participants. Next I approached those who were interested in taking part in the study and met with them individually in person and explained the research project, the criteria for participation, and obtained their consent. The consent form included information about the study, its purpose, risks, benefits, the confidentiality of information, and the right of the participants to withdraw from participating in the study at any time (Creswell, 1998). I also met with each of the participants a second time and explained in detail the purpose and objectives of my study, attended to their concerns, and answered their questions.

**Data collection and transcription**

I conducted the fieldwork for this study between April 2011 and March 2012 (Appendix D includes a timeline table). As a feminist researcher, it is imperative for me to use the life story narrative of the women in my study as a source of data (Bloom, 1996). According to Marshall & Rossman (1999) there are four methods of gathering information within qualitative research that form the core of qualitative inquiry. These include participation in the setting, direct observation, in-depth interviewing, and
analyzing documents and material culture. In this study, I used multiple data-collection techniques. This included the individual interviews that I designed in order to obtain the narrative data (Schwandt, 2007), in addition to personal journals and field notes. In the process of data collection and interaction with my respondents, I carefully listened to their stories, took detailed notes, and let them articulate their realities as they experienced it, because the best way to capture a story is through participant’s own voice (Atkinson, 1998).

**Interviews.**

Interviewing means essentially, the gathering of data through direct or indirect questioning (Langness & Frank, 1981). Interviews aim at gaining access to participants’ experiences and obtaining “descriptions of the life world of the interviewees with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1996, p.6). In this study I used an initial set of interview question to obtain biographic data. I used open-ended questions to obtain more details of the participants’ experiences. Interviews were the main tool to gain access to interviewees’ narratives about their everyday life. According to Schwandt (2007) interview is “a behavioral event—that is, verbal behavior, a verbal exchange, or pattern of verbal interaction…the researcher aims to ask the right questions so as to elicit responses in the form of authentic feelings and meanings of the interviewee” p.162).

There are different kinds of interviews: informal, formal, and standardized. This study uses informal semi structured in-depth interviews as the main method for data
collection to elicit the participants’ life stories. For researchers such as Hatch (2002), informal interviews are unstructured conversations that take place in the research scene and provide opportunities to ask participants to explain their perspectives on what the researcher has observed. These interviews are semi structured because, although I as a researcher prepared the questions, I was open to follow the leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during interview interactions (Hatch, 2002). These interviews are also structured in that, as a researcher I was in control of leading the interview, and there was a specific time for each interview which was audio taped (Hatch, 2002). They were also in-depth because they are designed to go deeply into the understandings of the informants’ experiences (Hatch, 2002).

For that reason, informal, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were used in this study (Hatch, 2002; Glesne, 1999; Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1996) so as to encourage the participants to tell their stories and to present their viewpoints. I agree with Patton that “the combined strategy offers the interviewer flexibility in probing and in determining when it is appropriate to explore certain subjects in greater depth, or even to pose questions about new areas of inquiry that were not originally anticipated” (Patton, 2002, p.347). I used individual interviews because it includes “careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge” (Kvale, 1996). During the interviews I explored each individual’s narration of experience and engaged in multiple interviews. I interviewed each participant between 2-3 times for one
hour each time. All the interviews were audio taped. In addition, during each interview I inscribed descriptive and reflective field notes.

This process of interviewing required me to be a good listener, and to ask relevant questions on the spot. It also allowed me to ask the participants to explain or elaborate on what I have observed (Hatch, 2002). Thus, the open-ended interview questions encouraged the participants to narrate and share their stories (Riessman, 1993). I previously obtained the participants’ consent to tape the interviews and again I assured them about the confidentiality of their story and that they will have the chance to go over their stories in order to make sure it is their stories that reflect their own experiences (Borland, 1991).

With regard to the interviews locations and time, each participant was given the choice to decide when and where she wanted to be interviewed. Accordingly, three of the participants preferred to be interviewed at their homes while the other two were interviewed at the public library and coffee shops near their places of residence. Using narrative methods, I provided each participant with equal chance to tell her story as she lived it. During the interviews the participants were able to discuss the difficulties they encountered in adapting to life in America as college student, as community members, and as part of its workforce.

**Researcher’s journal and field notes.**

As Richardson (2000) has suggested, I ventured to make my field notes very explanatory and analytical since they were the true inscription of what I observed, heard,
or sensed, and helped me to make sense of the transcribed data. These field memos were the registry of my observations, feelings, dissatisfaction, or thrills, and a record of ideas and thoughts that arose during my interaction with the participants. Additionally, in the researcher’s journal I recorded my insights and thoughts that arose during the research process, and reflected on the meaning attached to participants’ stories (Richards, 2005; Huberman and Miles, 2002). Thus, the detailed records of every incident during the process of data collection were central in assisting me to accurately represent the participants’ stories, as well as to refrain from being “judgmental” (Glesne, 1999). Also, it allowed me to write notes about the progress of my study and to log dates, times, duration, and places of the different interviews. Thus, I consider my journal and field notes as a complementary source of data for my research.

**Data analysis**

Glesne, (1999) considers data collection as a phase of extended data analysis; therefore, there was a process of continuous analysis throughout this project. Black feminist epistemology was the theoretical framework of this study, and narrative inquiry was the method used for data analysis and interpretation (Creswell, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Lieblich et, al., 1998; Reissman, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1991). Hatch (2002) argues that “Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning” (p.148). Scholars point to the potentials of narrative analysis that help to advance the understanding about human nature, and to create empathy and connection to others (Freeman, 2004; Patton, 2002; Hatch, 2002; Reissman, 1993).
In addition, the analysis of data provides the opportunity for systematic study of personal experiences and how these experiences have been constructed by the participants (Reissman, 1993). According to Patton (2002) “The central idea of narrative analysis is that stories and narratives offer especially translucent windows into cultural and social meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 116). This includes “preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2007, p.148). “It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others” (Hatch, 2002, p.148).

However, I am aware that my personal values and beliefs will, without doubt, affect the lens through which I view and analyze the participants’ narratives (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1999). Therefore, in order to minimize my insider-researcher authority and bias, I relied on member check and self assessment to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings of this study.

Additionally, as a researcher and insider I concur that “one of the difficult risks an insider researcher takes is to ‘test’ their own taken-for-granted views about their community” (Smith, 1999, p. 139). However, listening to the participants telling their captivating stories, I realized the similarities between my experience and those of the women in this study.
All of us are educated recent immigrant professional women who share the same cultural and religious backgrounds and aspire to achieve success and prosperity in the “land of opportunities”. My familiarity with the role of race, gender, and religion in my experience allowed me to validate these women’s stories. According to Connelly and Clandinin’s (1990) research is a collaborative document and a mutual construct story out of the lives of both the researcher and the participants. Thus, as I listened to the participants’ narratives, I as well reflected upon my own life story taking into account Connelly and Clandinin’s delineation:

We are, in narrative inquiry, constructing narratives at several levels. At one level it is the personal narratives and the jointly shared and constructed narratives that are told in the research writing, but narrative researchers are compelled to move beyond the telling of the lived story to tell the research story (p.10).

The collected data, including tape-recorded interviews, was transcribed in detail by repeated listening and paying close attention to verbal and non-verbal information such as laughs, pauses, cadences, repetitions, sighs and even utterances (Lieblich et al, 1998; Reissman, 1993; Glesne, 1990). Reissman (1993) confirms that “close and repeated listening, coupled with methodic transcribing, often leads to insights that in turn shape how we choose to represent an interview narrative of our text” (p.60). Therefore, I read the transcript several times in order to grasp the participants’ perspectives, and then reexamined it in order to pinpoint the accounts that pertain to their experiences with race, gender, and religion discrimination.

In addition, the data analysis process requires the constant formulation of assertions, which need to be revised based on a detailed analysis of the corpus of data.
(Richard, 2005; Lincoln, 2000; Glesne, 1999). Furthermore, Hatch (2002) explains that “analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories” (p.148).

The data collection, transcription, and processing were done in both concurrent and successive manners. I opted to transcribe my own interviews so as to keep with Kvale’s (2007) proposition that researchers’ transcription of their own interviews lend them the opportunity to learn more about the contents of the interviews and its emotional and social facets. As I listened carefully to these women’s stories I was also cautious of Connelly & Clandinin’s (1990) delineation that:

In narrative inquiry, it is important that the researcher listen first to the practitioner's story, and that it is the practitioner who first tells his or her story. This does not mean that the researcher is silenced in the process of narrative inquiry. It does mean that the practitioner, who has long been silenced in the research relationship, is given the time and space to tell her or his story so that it too gains the authority and validity that the research story has long had (p.4).

The written transcript was analyzed thoroughly manually. It worth noting, that the participants’ narratives enrich the understanding of how race, gender, and religion shape their experiences in America. To this end, I selected the stories that exemplify the struggle, the resilience, and the triumph of being a black women and a Muslim in America. First I organized the data in order to explore the main ideas and themes then categorized them in initial codes. Data reduction was the second step so as to include the
data that is represented in the final coding. Then I began entering the “code mines”\footnote{I borrow this expression from Glesne (1990)} during which the data was coded, re-coded and organized according to the emergent themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Glesne, 1999).

According to Glesne (1999) coding is “a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data (i.e., observation notes, interviews transcripts, memos, documents, and notes from relevant literature)” (p.135). Further, the codes were grouped and categorized in a manner that identifies relationships between them in order to create meaning (Creswell, 1998). In the second round of coding, the participants’ statements were categorized into themes that accurately represent the data (Glesne, 1999). Finally, the data was arranged into categories, classified, and mapped in conjunction with the research questions. Eventually, three themes were chosen as a result of the repeated examination and constant comparison of the narratives and the meaning attached to it (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

**Establishing Trustworthiness**

I followed the techniques proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to ensure trustworthiness of my study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) these methods include: credibility that could be achieved through extended engagement, peer debriefing, and member check; transferability through thick description; dependability by using audit trial, and through reflexive journal (p. 328). Additionally, peer reviews and member check were used to insure credibility (Schwandt, 2001, Glesne, 1999, Denzin & Lincoln,
Different data-collection methods were as well used (interviews, field notes, and researcher’s journals) to ensure trustworthiness. Therefore, after the interviews transcription I had a follow up meeting with each participant in order to clarify any confusion regarding their responses. The entire written narrative was taken back for members check and review by the study participants to ensure that I am correctly representing them and their views. Member check helps the researcher to minimize biases and misrepresentation (Maxwell, 2005; Borland, 1991). During member check both Mona and Eman made changes to their interview transcript. The changes were mainly clarification of some of their responses which contributed to the trustworthiness of this study. Indeed this study has espoused strategies that guarantee the adequate ethical manners in conducting a qualitative study (Merriam, 2002, p.31, Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Schwandt, 2001). By so doing, I wanted to avoid the misrepresentation (Maxwell, 2005; Borland, 1991) and to ensure that each of my study participants-after reading her interview transcript- to say “this is my story”. At the same time, as a feminist researcher and insider I was also vigilant about what Borland (1991) called the “interpretive conflict” that might occur during the process of data collection and analysis. Borland (1991) explicates:

For feminists, the issue of interpretive authority is particularly problematic; for our work often involves a contradiction…on one hand we seek to empower the women we work with by revealing their perspectives, their lives, and their art in a world that has systematically ignored or trivialized women’s culture, On the other hand, we hold an explicitly vision of structured conditions that lead to particular social behavior” (p. 64)
Equally, and in order to ensure transferability and dependability, I took a great responsibility in making the process of data collection and data analysis logical, traceable, and documented manually, and electronically. The data and the findings were audited through member checking and peers review. The files that include the transcribed interviews, journals, and field notes are also available in electronic format as well as in hard copies.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an important ethical consideration in this study and “subjects (participants) should at least be informed of those cases in which confidentiality cannot be assured” (Chambers, 2000, p.865). I was earnest and succeeded in establishing a trusting relationship and built rapport with my respondents (Cresswell, 1998; Glesne, 1999; Hatch, 2002) which helped me to obtain in-depth thick descriptions, learn, discover, understand, and gain insight into their experiences (Merriman, 1998). Pseudonyms were used during the process of this study to ensure and maintain the anonymity of the participants. In addition, the data that is saved in electronic and hard copy files will be kept securely and I will be the only one who has access to the data.

Ethical concerns

Merriam (2002) asserts that a good qualitative study is supposed to be carried out systematically and ethically, and its findings have to be trustworthy. I agree that what makes my qualitative study a good one is the fact that it was carried out ethically and consequently, its findings are trustworthy. Ethical considerations are the vanguard of
naturalistic research. As a researcher I am required to pay close attention to ethical responsibilities when conducting my study (Glesne, 1999; Erlandson et al., 1993). Following the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research on human subject guidelines and out of respect to the researched, I disclosed to the participants the purpose of my study, used pseudonyms to protect their names and information, and was sensitive to time and the number of interviewees involved in the study. Furthermore, the participants were provided with written and oral information about the research purpose, methods, and procedures. Prior to the start of the study, each participant signed a consent form which included detailed information on the purpose of the research, risk, benefits, and confidentiality.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study is to extend the research on immigrant African Muslim women in the U.S. More specifically, it aims to explore how race, gender, and religion intersect in shaping the educational and career experiences of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women and how they navigate between two worlds, their native culture, traditions, Islamic faith, and the American mainstream culture.

In this chapter I discussed the methodology and conceptual framework of my study as well as the use of Black feminist thought as its core theoretical frame. A discussion of narrative inquiry as a qualitative method, researcher’s narrative tale, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis, in addition to establishing trustworthiness are also included. In the next chapter I present the narratives of five
professional Sudanese Muslim women that reflect their daily experiences with racism, sexism, and religious discrimination. Hence, my ultimate goal is to explore how their race, gender, and religion intersect in shaping their everyday experiences.
Chapter 4
Research Findings

Introduction

This study examines the life stories of professional Sudanese Muslim women, who are recent immigrants to the United States. It provides a snapshot of how race, gender, and religion affect their everyday life experiences. Many scholars have noted the paucity of research that examines the experiences of black immigrants in America (Kusow, 2007; Ron & Brown, 2002; Arthur, 2000; Djamba, 1999). Therefore, this study aspires to contribute to the scant research in this area and to further explore how aspects of race, gender, and religion shaped the participants’ educational and professional experiences in the U.S.

The use of narrative inquiry was important in this study because “narrative typically focuses on studying a single person, gathering data through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences” (p.521). Narrative researchers confirm that “narrative and life go together and so the principal attraction of narrative as method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, P.10).
Additionally, narrative inquiry was utilized because of its congruency to the theoretical framework of this study, black feminist thought. The participants’ stories represent personal and unique perspectives on their everyday life experiences and serve to add their voices to the analysis of the role that race, gender and religion have played in shaping their educational and professional lives. According to Clandinin & Connelly (2000) “in narrative thinking context is ever present…context is necessary for making sense of any person, event, thing…context was assumed…to be everywhere” (p. 32). By framing my analysis of the participants’ narratives within the context of their race, gender and religion, I was specifically interested in exploring the following research questions:

1. How do immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women residing in the U.S. perceive their educational and career experiences in the United States?

2. How do immigrant professional Sudanese women perceive the impact of their race, gender, and religion on their experiences as they carve their own space within their respective profession?

3. What are the significant issues embraced by these women as they struggle to negotiate a place within American educational institutions and their professions?

In the remaining sections of this chapter I offer, first, a brief profile of each of the women in this study. Next, I present the narratives of the five women framed within several themes that emerged from the collected data, elaborating each theme with illustrative excerpts from participant narratives. I then organized these themes within the
main topics addressed in this study: 1) racial/ethnic discrimination and prejudice; 2) gender discrimination; and 3) religious discrimination.

Participants’ Profiles

The five women in this study graciously and candidly shared with me a great deal of their life experiences. Consequently, during the interviews, I listened carefully to the participants’ storytelling while heeding Connelly & Clandinin’s (1990) suggestion that: “In narrative inquiry, it is important that the researcher listen first to the practitioner's story, and that it is the practitioner who first tells his or her story” (p.4). Thus, as I write about these women’s accounts of their experiences, I visualize Daiute & Lightfoot’s (2004) explanation that “narrating is developmentally relevant because it creates the conditions for emergence of complexity, such as multiplicity of perspectives, orientations, and even self concepts” (p.xi).

All the women in this study identified themselves as Sudanese Muslim immigrants. Each of the participants was born, raised, graduated from college, and worked for a minimum of two years in the Sudan, and two of them earned graduate degrees before immigrating to the U.S. Shortly after their arrival in the U.S., these women realized that it would be difficult for them to obtain professional jobs with their educational and professional credentials from the Sudan. Each of them, therefore, embarked on acquiring a second bachelors or graduate degree in her area of interest.

For the sake of confidentiality and anonymity, I gave each of the women in my study a fictitious name. Amal, Mona, Eman, Nadia, and Enas, who all have American
citizenship, are part of the ever growing Sudanese American community in the United States. Each of the five women brought her own perspectives and presented her story in response to the interview questions.

**Amal’s profile.**

Amal is in her fifties. She is currently working as an Associate Professor in Women’s studies and an active feminist who is devoted to women’s issues. She graduated from a college of Law in the Sudan and earned a masters degree in International Law. Amal was a lawyer in the Sudan for over a decade before immigrating to the U.S. 19 years ago. In the U. S. she earned another masters degree and a PhD in Education. Amal has a wealth of experiences and accomplishments. She suggested that we meet at her friend’s house; therefore our two interviews were conducted there.

Amal grew up in a middle class family. She has four sisters and three brothers. Her late father was an educator and her mother stayed at home. Amal mentioned that she was the first woman in her extended family to graduate from college which opened the door for her sisters and cousins to follow in her footsteps “By the way I was the first in my family and among my cousins from both parents’ sides, the first one to get Sudan certificate [equivalent to high school diploma]. Armed with her parents’ support, especially her father’s, Amal became very determined and passionate about furthering her education.

Amal first came to the U. S. after finishing high school. She got married and accompanied her husband at the time who had come to the US to complete his graduate
studies. Unfortunately, after returning to Sudan, Amal got divorced and soon after she returned to school, went to college, and graduated from the College of Law. Amal credits her late father for her educational aspirations and success. She is proud of the fact that her father was enthusiastic about girls’ education. She recalled a time when she was about eight years old and her father, who was a teacher, was assigned to a school in a small town that only had one school for boys. Consequently, her father enrolled her in the boys’ school. She laughs as she remembers her experience of being the only girl in that school. When I asked her if she had had any trouble in that school her response was “my father was the head master of that school so I did not have any problems being in an all boys’ school.” Indeed Amal’s siblings followed her path and graduated from college as well. Amal became very emotional as she proudly recounted her memories of the day she graduated from college with her father standing beside her.

After relocating to the U.S., Amal was faced with many difficulties. It was the first time she was attempting to live by herself in a foreign country. It was also difficult for her to find a job that suited her qualifications. Thus, the harshness of the early experiences caused Amal to consider going back home. She became aware that “as a Law graduate and practitioner in the Sudan I came to realize that the American educational system does not recognize any of that... so I went to school...got a master’s degree and a PhD”. Amal confessed that “after living here for over 19 years, every time I apply for a job I do not forget that I am different; black, Muslim, and African with an
Amal identifies herself as an Afro-Arab, claiming both heritages which coincide with the dominant discourse in Northern and central Sudan. Amal considers herself an observant and progressive Muslim. She wears modest attire but does not cover her hair. She is an active participant in the Sudanese Diaspora community and a contributor to online forums and debates regarding issues that are vital to women inside and outside of the Sudan. During our two interviews I found Amal to be a very pleasant person who is focused, organized, passionate about her career and eager to help people. Amal’s greatest concerns looking towards the future are living alone, getting old, receiving a pension, and whether to continue living in the U.S. or go back to the Sudan, although she doesn’t mind living here after retirement.

Mona’s profile.

Mona is a pharmacist in her fifties. She graduated from a College of Agriculture and worked at a research institute in the Sudan. Twenty years ago, she came to the U.S. on a Fulbright scholarship to pursue a master’s degree in business administration. She got married during her graduate studies. Contrary to the Sudanese tradition that requires the bride to be present at her parents’ house during the marriage ceremony, Mona was in the U.S. when her husband-to-be went back home, met her parents who acted on her behalf, and married them.

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47 According to Nyombe (1994) the Sudan government policy assumes that if somebody became a Muslim and adopted a Muslim name and culture will consequently be considered an Arab, thus Islam is used as a passage to Arabism (in Sharkey, 2007)
In the Sudan, Mona was part of the Democratic Women’s Union and participated in their campaigns against the government’s gender policies that aim to silence women and limit their mobility. After earning her MBA, Mona decided to stay in the U.S. “I did not want to go back...I did not like the political agendas of the government especially how they treat women.” Mona worked in the banking business for over 15 years before deciding to go back to school, changing her major and becoming a pharmacist. Since graduating in 2011, she has been working in a private pharmacy. She loves her job although she drives everyday for more than an hour to get to work and works eleven hours a day. Her husband also works in another city and comes home on the weekends.

Mona, who has one son, came from a humble background. Her parents, who had very little formal education, were the driving force behind her educational attainment. She explains:

Although my father was a third grader and my mother did not go to school, both of them encouraged us to excel in school. Early on they taught us that if we want to change our status to the better we had to have an education...so we studied very hard...we wanted a better life for our family...also my brother was young...maybe if he was the oldest... maybe we could have relied on him to take care of the family because that is what men do in the Sudan... So we excelled in school... We all have college degrees...you know (laughing) I am the oldest and my dad used to say to me “if you went to college I will let you choose your husband but if you didn’t I will choose one for you”...because in most families the father decides whom his daughter will marry...maybe I wanted to have the privilege of choosing my own husband...and I did” (Personal Communication, 05/10/2011).

Mona has three sisters and one brother. All four of Mona’s siblings are college graduates and two of them have masters’ degrees. I interviewed Mona three times in her house. She was always warm, genuine, and entertaining. I was very grateful that she
welcomed me at her house where I enjoyed her Sudanese hospitality. She insisted that I stay for dinner which I enjoyed very much. Mona worked as an unpaid intern in a hospital pharmacy during our first and second interview. I felt that I had to interview her after she got a permanent job at one of the pharmacies. For that reason I interviewed her for a third time.

Mona does not consider herself religious although she performs some of the Islamic rituals such as fasting during Ramadan. As for prayers, she said with a hilarious tone “it is a hit and miss”. Mona doesn’t wear hijab either and “will never do” because she believes that she has always been a moderate Muslim, modest in her attire and need not cover. She clarifies her viewpoint “I do not feel less Muslim if I did not wear hijab…I do not like it…but if other women prefer to wear hijab, I do not have a problem with that…I respect their choices…they have their justification and I have mine” (Personal communication, 02/15/2012).

Mona has a vivid memory of events, places, and people. She is a very opinionated and outspoken woman who is not afraid to challenge those who stereotype her or treat her with disrespect. During our interviews in her living room, I found Mona’s sense of humor to be very amusing. She had many stories to tell and she related them in a very captivating manner. Mona is very proud of her African identity. She feels she is basically African and is very critical of those Sudanese who claim that they are Arabs and ignore their deep African roots.
Eman’s profile.

Eman is in her early forties. She was a special education teacher in the Sudan. With her father being a teacher she was motivated to follow the same field of study. She graduated from a college of education, earned a masters degree in the same subject area, and worked as a high school teacher before immigrating to the U.S to join her husband. Eman came to the U.S. twelve years ago and immediately started attending classes to improve her English language. She also worked in various retail stores before making the decision to go back to graduate school. Eman later earned her master degree in special education. Currently, she works as a substitute teacher while preparing to take her certification exam. Eman loves teaching and dreamed of being a teacher since she was very young. She is passionate about her profession as a special needs educator: “I love teaching…I love my students and care about them…it is what my teacher said long time ago…I was born a teacher”. Eman attributes her love of teaching to her father who is a teacher himself:

My dad loved his students as his kids and he loved school as his home and family…yes he loved it and he always talked about his experiences as a teacher…he did it every day for forty years. He started before I was born so I just saw him doing something remarkable… plus my teachers in the school were nice and I felt comfort with them…after I finished my college education and thought about what I am going to do I decided to go back and work in a job that I love dearly…that was why and how I became a teacher (Personal Communication 04/12/2011)

Eman grew up in a middle class family. She has four sisters and two brothers. Eman is married with two children. When I went for my first interview with Eman I found her to be a typical Sudanese lady who is very hospitable and entertaining. Each
time I visited she offered me lots of drinks and food. It is part of the Sudanese culture that food is used as a mean of connecting with and showing appreciation for people. Eman has a strong interest in helping her Sudanese community. She volunteers at the community’s Sunday school and is passionate about teaching young children about their Sudanese culture and the Islamic religion.

The second interview was at her home. During the second interview, I had to stop the recording several times because she either had to attend to her children’s needs or answer the phone. I planned for two interviews with Eman but since I could not finish the second interview that day, we arranged for a third interview the following week. The third interview was also at her house and lasted for less than an hour. I finished the remainder of the interview questions and recorded whatever she wanted to add to her story.

Eman is very articulate and has a vivid memory regarding the incidents where she was treated differently due to her race or religion. From our conversations, I could tell that she is a competitor and at the same time quick to confront those who belittle her. She is also very conscious of her African background although with her fair skin she could pass as a North African of Arab descent.

*Indeed, I see myself as an African. Maybe if I consider the culture and religion I might relate to the Arabs but my inner feeling tells me that I am an African and black...you know even if it happened that there is a competition between the Arabs and the Africans I find myself always siding with the Africans...I really consider myself black and I find pride in that. In my immediate family I have brothers and sisters who have darker skin and I have cousins and uncles who are really dark (Eman, personal communication, 04/12/2011).*
Eman is as well very proud of her African and Sudanese background and although she immigrated to the U.S. twelve years ago, she still misses her life back home. Four years ago Eman decided to wear the Islamic dress, *hijab*. I asked her why now and she responded that she had been thinking about it since she was in Sudan. However, at that time she used to cover her hair because of the government’s regulations in regard to women clothing and not because she wanted to do it:

*I wore it back then in the Sudan because I did not want to get in trouble or punished by the government...hmm...but here it is different... yeah I used not to like it...when I cover my hair and look in the mirror I used to see myself ugly...I say...I look like a grandma and when I style my hair it looks nice...at that point I didn’t want to cover...in fact I kept thinking about it since I came here (the U.S.) and one day...it was during the month of Ramadan...there was a Ramadan gathering...so I said to myself after Ramadan party I am going to cover my hair and immediately the next day I did...but I was thinking about it before I got married* (Eman, personal communication, 04/12/2012).

I asked Eman if she sees herself as a better Muslim after putting on a head cover and she answered “*I do not do a hundred percent of what Islam asked me to do but my hijab is part of it... though I used to say that I am a good Muslim why should I cover my hair*” (Personal Communication, 04/12/2011).

**Nadia’s profile.**

Nadia is in her forties. She came from a highly educated well to do family. Both her parents were college graduates. Her father held a PhD and her mother was a high school teacher. With her family, Nadia traveled to many countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe, either because of her father’s job or just for vacation. Nadia graduated from the College of Dentistry in the Sudan and used to have her own private dental clinic. She has
one sister who is a medical doctor and a late brother who was also a doctor. After her relocation to the U.S. ten years ago, she realized that, in order for her to work in the profession she loves the most, she would have to go back to school to earn her certification and becomes a dentist in the U.S. For that reason, she left the city where her late husband, two kids, and her mother were living and enrolled in one of the colleges of dentistry on the west coast. After facing many obstacles and incidences of discrimination at school she finally got her degree and became a certified doctor of dental surgery (DDS). Currently, Nadia works as a dentist in a public facility and also has her private practice clinic.

Nadia chose to be interviewed at home because of her busy schedule. She currently lives in a big house in one of the nicest neighborhoods in the city. Nadia is a private person and rarely socializes with other members of the Sudanese community. However, I interviewed Nadia twice and on both occasions she was very welcoming, friendly, genuine, and formally dressed. Nadia is a widow with two children.

Since most of northern Sudanese identify with the Arab culture despite their African features and ancestry, I asked Nadia about how she identifies herself and she answered “I am an Arab”. When I said I identify myself as an African, she added:

*Yeah we are a mixture of both but I belong to Arabs more than I belong to Africans…but if I have a form that asks about ethnicity and there are the different options: White, Black, Hispanic, other…etc ...I always circle the black option...yes, I identify myself as black...period...but if I am in an Arab community I belong to them more to than I do belong to Africans...it is not just the color or features...it is about the culture (Personal Communication 09/06/2011).*
The fact of the matter is that, the issue of how most of the people in the Northern Sudan identify themselves is an area of continuous debate. We are all raised believing that we are Arabs and Muslims, buying into the dominant discourse, that Muslim and Arab are synonymous. However, many enlightened Sudanese have contested the notion of viewing the Northern Sudan through the official narrative that enforces the Arab culture and construct a contested ethnic identity of the Sudan (Sharkey, 2007; Amir, 2005; Mukhtar, 2004; Sikainga, 1996). Researchers such as Amir Idris (2005) eloquently delineate the issue of identity discourse in the Sudan:

The country [The Sudan] contains multiple identities and histories, which reflect the historical realities and experiences of its people. Like other African countries, the Sudan is the land for a clash of nationalist discourse that offer competing narrative of the past and contemporary forms of identity…Northern-based nationalism in the Sudan has created, for itself, a genealogy that stretches into the Islamic Arab past and suggests a primordial and essential identity shared by all those who reside within the Northern Sudan, regardless of their particular ethnic, racial, and cultural orientation (p.15).

Enas’ profile.

Enas is fair-skinned Sudanese woman in her mid forties. Although she can pass for an Arab, she is proud of her identity as an African woman. She grew up rich and financially secure. Her father was an entrepreneur and her mother was a housewife. She has six sisters and two brothers. According to Enas, her mother was very serious about her daughters’ education which Enas attributed to the fact that her mother did not have much education. Because her mother’s parents wanted her mother to get married at a young age, Enas’ mother “…was eager to see her daughters reach high levels of education.” Although Enas vowed not to get married until she finished her education, she
too got married early while in college. She explains “You know...I got engaged... then I agreed to get married under one condition, that I continue my education...in fact my husband was very supportive of my education”. Enas earned a bachelor degree in accounting from a university in Sudan. After that, the family moved to Saudi Arabia because her husband got a job contract there.

Fifteen years ago, after living in Saudi Arabia for more than a decade, Enas and her family immigrated to the United States. In the U.S., after putting much effort to learn the “American English” she went back to school, changed her major, and earned a second bachelors degree in computer science. Enas used to work as a computer analyst and presently works as a hardware technician intern with one of the computer companies. Enas has four children, one girl, and three boys. I interviewed Enas twice. The first interview took place at a café near her home, and for the second interview we met at a public library not far from her place of residence.

Enas credits her affiliation with “Republican Thought” for giving her the strength and adequate knowledge about her religion, and in particular women’s status in Islam. The founder of the “Republican Thought” is the late Sudanese engineer Ustaz Mahmud Mahamed Taha, a progressive Islamic philosopher whose followers “became particularly famous in Sudan through their campaigning for the rights of women” (Retrieved from http://www.alfikra.org).

48 The Republican Thought or “Alfikra Algamhoria” in Arabic presented a new vision of Islam where it applies a progressive scientific approach to religion and to the interpretation of Quran (www.alfikra.org)

49 Mahmoud Mahamed Taha is the founder of the “Republican Thought”
Presentation of Data

Jones (1997) defines prejudice and racism as “ways in which people devalue, disadvantage, demean, and in general, unfairly regard others…prejudice and racism are processes by which people separate themselves from others who are different in certain ways and attach themselves more closely to people who are like them in certain ways” (p.7). Collins (2000) powerfully explains the grounds of discrimination and oppression of Black women in the U.S.:

Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among others [such as religion] constitute major forms of oppression in the United States…the convergence of race, class,, and gender oppression characteristics of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another. It also created the political context for Black women’s intellectual work…this larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and protect elite white male interests and worldview (pp.4-5).

For many African woman immigrants, moving to the United States “…led us to a range of new dislocating and unfamiliar alienating experiences” (Beoku-Betts & Nijabi, 2004, p. 303). Coming from societies in which the majority of people are black and/or people of color, they never had to identify themselves in terms of race.

The categorization of a racialized and gendered immigrant status created in us a sense of confusion regarding our new identities, including the dominant society’s perception of these identities. For the first time, perhaps even more so than before, we developed a conscious political awareness of an outsider status that our new experience of being identified as black women, women of color, and third world immigrants reinforced heavily, in an undeniably racially defined society (Ibid, p. 303)
All five women in this study described encounters with various forms of discrimination. Beyond racial discrimination they also encountered discrimination because of their accents, culture, religion, as well as their status as immigrants. Moreover, these factors became triggers for incidents of humiliation and stereotyping. The fact that these forms of discrimination often occur simultaneously speaks to the intersectional nature of the discrimination they encountered. Makkonen (2002) explains:

The traditional approach to discrimination has proceeded from broad categories of sex, “race”, ethnic origin language disability age, sexual orientation etc. This kind of top to down approach has obscured the often times intersectional nature of discrimination, heading to its invisibility. Hence, any future analysis of discrimination should proceed from the ground up and observe the real life experiences, instead of looking for conduct that fits the ready-made categories and assumptions. A new, less categorical approach to discrimination and disadvantage needs to be established (p.23).

The participants in this study encountered unjust treatment in many places; in educational institutions, workplaces, and public spheres (Jones, 1997). Thus, for the sake of discussion I present the participants’ perspectives on these encounters framed within the following themes: 1) racial/ethnic discrimination, 2) gender discrimination, and 3) religious discrimination. Within the context of these themes I present and analysis of the data that first, examines how the participants perceive their educational and career experiences in the United States; Second, explores how the participants perceive the impact of their race, gender and religion on their experiences as they carve their own space within their respective professions; And last, focus on the significant issues embraced by the participants as they struggle to negotiate a place within American educational institutions and their professions.
Encounters with racial/ethnic discrimination: Accented speech

If it was a white person...say... from France or Germany...I do not think she would have said the same thing about them...it is a kind of discrimination because I am black...if it is a German or a French accent she might thought of it as exotic and exciting and for us it is an unintelligent enunciation (Personal Communication with Eman, 06/22/2011)

Intersectionality researchers maintain the interconnectedness of racism, sexism, and other categories of oppression in black women’s everyday lives (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990; 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; 1990). That “systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape black women experiences and, in turn, are shaped by Black women” (Collins, 2000, p. 299). The issue of the intersection between the different categories of oppression has been deeply interrogated by those scholars who studied the experiences of black women in the United States. In this study, in addition to discrimination based on race, gender and religion, accented speech represent one of several other variables that affect the participants’ educational and career experiences.

Most of the women pointed to language and their accented speech as the initial challenges confronting them when they first arrived in the United States. They explained that people used their accent as grounds for discriminating against them. Munro (1998) defined foreign-accented speech as “non pathological speech produced by second language (L2) learners that differs in partially systematic ways from the speech characteristics of native speakers of a given dialect.” (p. 139). Additionally, Lippi-Green (1997) argues that there is discrimination, stereotype, and bias associated with foreign accents as “a bias towards abstracted, idealized, homogeneous, spoken language, which is...
imposed and maintained by dominant institutions and which names as its model the
written language, but which is drawn primarily from spoken language of white, upper,
middle class Midwesterners” (p. 64). Hence, accent diversity is rarely appreciated in
mainstream America.

The participants reported that, although they studied English back home, they
were not accustomed to speaking it every day. Therefore, their prior knowledge of
English was not helpful for at least three of the participants because they lacked the
confidence to communicate in English. Even when they had the courage and tried to
speak, they were often told that they were not understood. Then they would repeat what
they were saying and eventually spell the words out which was, according to Eman:
“very frustrating”:

One of my early challenges was the language. In Sudan we learn English as a
subject in school...we did not use it every day and when we speak it we use the
British English... here...when we speak they do not understand us. When I came
here I did not have the confidence to speak...I felt like it is difficult for me to
communicate in American English so it took me a while, almost a year to start to
speak and talk about myself ... just to talk in English...yeah but with an accent
which will never goes away...now I am here for 12 years and still sometimes they
(Americans) tell me that they do not understand me so I spell the words out to
them (Personal communication, 08/04/2011).

Currently, the numbers of people in the U.S. who are Black, of color, have
accents, and speak little or no English are on the rise (Kusow, 2007; Banks, 2006; Arthur,
2004; 2000; Djamba, 1999). These, minorities and Blacks in America continue to be the
target of institutional racism, discrimination, and stereotypes that pervade the boundaries
of public domains to plague our educational institutions and workplaces. In particular,
researchers found that racial divides are widening among students in higher education, universities and colleges (Singleton and Linton, 2006; Jones, 1997; Djangi, 1993; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976).

When a classmate remarked that Eman’s accent disqualified her as a teacher, Eman felt very angry and humiliated. During a class session that classmate said to the professor: “no offense to Eman...but I do want to know why Eman is accepted in this program with that heavy accent, how is she going to teach the students, why they are going to give her the certificate?” (Personal Communication, 06/22/2011). As Eman, the passionate teacher, recalled that incident, which happened more than four years ago, she became emotional and nearly cried. Eman’s experience at her school was heart-breaking because some of her classmates, these future educators, did not care about how much they had hurt her. It seems that they were not cognizant of the fact that their future students would more than likely reflect diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Eman believes that her classmate’s comments represented an obvious racism that was associated with her skin color and accent. She also believes that had it been a white person speaking with a French or German accent, her behavior will be totally different. Eman had come to recognize that the various and intersecting patterns of discrimination included assumptions about her ability to speak English “properly” and that these assumptions were linked to her identity as an African woman immigrant.

When I asked Eman if she was the only Black person in her graduate program, she confirmed that for three years she was the only Black African student there:
Yes, there was only me and for three years...I will never forget that...I said to that student who questioned my ability to teach due to my accent that I am not the one who does the acceptance here and that she can ask them why they accepted me but I think I can do the job and I will do it for the kids because they know the English language but they need what I can offer them and I feel healthy inside and I do not have any bad background or problem...there is nothing with me [sic]...everything is healthy with me...yes I have different experiences here... and I know I will succeed...it hurt me because I was not ready for that...but I said what I felt...and in the same class...the professor who was the chairman of the program...when they talk about and discuss questions and what it means to me...he said to them “do not judge Eman by her accent, judge her by the fact that she has two languages and all of us have only one language, think about how far she is going now and how low we are here. We all have one language and she is learning your language and she masters hers”...that was really comforting (Personal Communication, 06/22/2011).

When I inquired about whether that student apologized to her, her answer was “no, never, but each time such conversation came up, I talk about how much I was hurt by that person...in fact I did not even try to be mean to her...but I kept saying in front of everybody that somebody hurt me a lot by saying so and so”.

During her internship as a special education teacher, Eman’s students clearly showed her that they had a problem with her accent. Later on, her supervisor told her that she had to change her accent or otherwise she will take action against her:

My supervisor at that school told me that I have to change my accent in two weeks...I told her do not ask me to change my accent in two weeks or two years or two decades ...I said to her... my accent is never going to change...then she said “you have to change your accent or otherwise” and I told her I prefer to take the “otherwise” now since my accent will never ever change (Eman, Personal communication 08/04/2011).

All participants reported that because of their accented speech, most of the time, people perceive them as incompetent and less intelligent (Djangi, 1993; Matsuda, 1991). This was evident in Enas’ experience when the professor gave her a low grade on computer
science assignment. She fought back because she was certain that she did very well on that assignment. Enas went to his office to ask why he gave her a low grade. He told her that she had submitted her papers after the deadline and when she proved to him that she had sent her paper electronically before the deadline, he said to her “you have a language problem too.” That professor was judging her language abilities without any obvious reason. Enas is not the kind of person who shies away when encountered with injustice.

She knows that she is very good at working with computers and familiar with its jargon:

Yes English is a second language for me...I might not speak it like a native speaker but for that professor the computer language is a second language too...I told him that I usually get very good grades in classes that require language proficiency so why it is different in his class...I know well the computer language... very well...after that confrontation he changed my grade from C to A-... I deserved a straight A but I was ok with that (Personal Communication, 07/15/2011).

What happened to Enas has been underscored by scholars who researched racism in higher education. According to Djangi (1993) “Foreign students will often receive remarks on their use of language; such a comment is often warranted. However, it becomes racist when some professors will remark on a minority student’s report, “he needs writing help”, while other instructors will laud his writing abilities” (pp. 12-13).

Eman and Enas’s experiences demonstrate how they had to fight against forces that devalued them because of something that was natural to them, their way of speaking. Also, Eman’s contention that “…it is a kind of discrimination because I am black…if it is a German or a French accent she might have thought of it as exotic and exciting and for us it is an unintelligent enunciation... highlights the fact that because she is black and has
a foreign accent she is forced into the position of having to deal with skepticism regarding her abilities as well as to fight in order to dispel preconceived notions about being inferior.

**Encounters with Racial/Ethnic Discrimination: Higher Educational Settings**

“I usually get better treatment from black students than from the Whites...to me...that is natural...we deal with the same kind of treatment due to our skin color” (Eman, Personal communication, 08/04/2011)

Research reveals that racism and stereotypes that prevail in educational institutions and workplaces are natural reflection of racism in the society. Decades ago researchers such as Sedlacek & Brooks (1976) examined the different facets of racism in higher education institutions. They concur that racism in higher education is manifested through unfair standards of admission, low faculty expectations of minorities, a dearth of student activities developed for minorities, counselors who were not trained to deal with minority issues, a shortage of minority professors, and minority programs that had little financial or personnel support. They further assert that "unless whites are willing to change individually and collectively, through their institutions, white racism is likely to remain (p. 62).

Scholars who studied racism in the U.S. believe that “the racism in schools is naturally a reflection of the racism in society. Attitudinal and institutional racism are intricately related since each depends upon the other for sustenance (Djangi, 1993, p.9). According to Jones (1997) education is "a major contributor to the human capital necessary for continued growth and development of the United States" (p. 448).
However, in the U.S., education is historically linked to racism which has negative effects on the students. Various researchers confirm the existence of both overt and covert racism in our educational system (Singleton and Linton, 2006; Tatum, 2003; Jones, 1997; Ladson-Billing, 1994; Djangi, 1993). The participants shared with me their various experiences with racism that happened through deliberate mortifying acts and painful comments made by their classmates, faculty, and staff members.

All the women in this study reported unequal treatment and sometimes public humiliation at their programs of study. They recalled times when they were evaluated unfairly, perceived negatively, and stereotyped by their white professors and staff members. Nadia’s experiences with discrimination were very severe. She told me that she still has flashbacks from her negative experiences in dental school:

I used to have nightmares long after my graduation...my deceased husband used to tell me that I look sad and worried in my sleep...you know I quit the school for a year because...I did not want to go back...I could not take it anymore...the stress was so intense...I swear to God that I was at the brink of a nervous breakdown (Personal Communication, 09/06/2011).

Nadia believes that she had been treated unfairly for much of her time in school in the U.S. She recalled how three faculty members and an administrator made her life “hell”. The memories of her experience at the dental school have remained with her until now. When I asked Nadia to elaborate on that experience she paused, and I felt the pain in her voice while she tried to collect her thoughts and tell what actually happened. She then continued:

There were three professors in dental school...they are friends...they hated me for no reason...actually one of them failed me in a term assignment and when I got
upset and complained to my department administrator...she went and told him...probably said negative things about me...I think from that time he targeted me...but I did not have any problem with the other two...I think...because they are his friends...and they talk...so they hated me and treated me badly...you know they used to scold me...humiliate me in front of my classmates...the tension between me and those professors escalated...I tried to avoid them as much as I can...not of disrespect but I was scared that they are going to say something that will hurt me deeply...because that professor continued talking negatively about me...you know this happened in the clinic in front of all the students. At this time all my colleagues even those who did not believe me at first... they believed that this professor was targeting me they told me this is harassment...you know... from that time and whenever I see any of them (the three professors) I just run away...they took my avoidance as lack of respect and showed obvious enmity towards me...it was “the last straw that broke the camel's back”...I just decided to quit school...I quit and came back home and was not thinking of going back (Personal Communication 09/06/2011).

Nadia’s ordeal continued for more than a year. Eventually, she quit the school and went back to Ohio. She told me that she was serious about leaving behind two years of hard work and thousands of dollars in student’s loans. She emphasized that she “could not take it anymore”:

As I told you before...what happened to me in the dental school was torture...yes it was torture [I can feel the pain in Nadia’s voice]...I haven’t experienced such awful things in my entire life...I recall it even now after all these years...oh my God... during that time and even after I quit... I had nightmares about what happened to me there...it was painful...you know my late husband used to tell me “you look sad and frightened in your sleep”. Actually I was ready to sue them...they put me under a lot of pressure and delayed my graduation...they did not want me to graduate...I quit...yes I quit school...then I hired a lawyer...he told me it is hard for him find proof...but he sent them a letter asking about what happened...I couldn’t take the pressure anymore...they were torturing me...I said to “Hell” with this degree...I do not want it...I stayed at home for a year without any intention to go back...they made me hate the school...the dental profession and my life... after a year I went back because I asked for an extension for another year...they told me either I come and finish my degree or I will be dismissed...I had to go back...I had no choice after all the investment of time and money...You know when I was going back to school I felt as if I am going to hell...but I thank God for making my return much easier. I think my prayers and my lawyer’s letter
asking about what happened...he had told me that if he filed a case probably he is not going to win... anyway I believe the lawyer’s letter scared them...I was supposed to spend two trimesters in school but they became easy on me...they made me do one trimester...they are convinced that I am good and the whole story was a discrimination act (Personal Communication 10/14/2011).

I inquired if Nadia was treated differently when she returned to school and her response:

It was ok...I think the lawyer’s letter was effective... that white professor was a sick person...he was fired because he did the same thing to another student...Iranian...after I went back...I saw the same Iranian student and I asked him why you are still here you should be graduated long time ago... he told me that the same thing happened to him and by the same professor...he had to quit school for a year because ...like me he suffered from pressure and depression due to the ongoing discrimination against him...I said to him “you are telling me my story”...the same guy did the same thing to him and like me he thought of quitting school altogether...he left the dental school for a year and then he decided to come back ...fortunately that professor was gone when we both returned to school(Personal Communication 10/14/2011).

Every time Nadia recalled her experience at the dental school, it was obvious that it was a painful memory which was observable in her voice and facial expressions. She told me about how one of those professors intentionally and repeatedly humiliated her in front of the class and undermined her self-esteem and confidence:

Once I did an excellent job in one of the practicum where I have to fit a bridge for one of the patients...usually it did not fit the first time...but fortunately it did for me and instead of congratulating me...that professor... he was one of the three professors who hated me but still I expected him to praise me because usually it can rarely be done right the first time...he looked at my work...and then said to me...in front of everybody..."you know that was just by luck” and I said to him that I am glad that luck was on my side (Personal Communication 10/14/2011).

Nadia believes that an administrator in her department was the reason why one of the professors hated her:

You know what actually happened with that professor in the beginning...at that time I used to like him and I did not have any problem with him at all...and I
never imagined he was going to fail me in that assignment...I did well but he failed me...I was upset... a lady who was working in the office of academic affairs saw me sitting outside sad and crying... I was thinking about what happened and about my children who were not with me...she approached me and said to me if I need somebody to talk to about anything at any time I can go to her...at that time I do not have anybody around and I started to question my abilities as a dentist... I went to her office and told her how frustrated I am about that class...she suggested that I talk to one of the professors there...actually I went to his office but he was not there so I didn’t have the chance to talk to him. That terrible lady who pretended to be a caring person told the professor...the one who failed me...that I was complaining about him...she changed the whole story...in fact I didn’t say anything bad about him...what I said to her was that I am not doing good here, that I want to transfer to another university since my acceptance there was still valid...I went to the other professor’s office to seek his advice only and not to complain ...but that awful lady changed the whole story...she told him I went there to complain about him...from that time he hated me so much that every time he sees me he will say something hurtful...but I had to take his class...I had no other options (Personal Communication 10/14/2011).

After sharing her experience at the dental school, Nadia told me that she is now much stronger than before and learned to assert herself and not let people take advantage of her, besides she firmly believes that not everyone who pretends to be a friend is trustworthy. She also gave me the following advice:

*I tell you...never talk to a professor or administrator or anybody else about a problem with another professor because they go and tell and maybe fabricate things... you know...you have to be careful about what you say to them even if they pretended to be your friends...honestly...I tell you...this educational experience is still vivid in my mind and it causes me a lot of flashbacks...I wish I could erase it from my life (Personal Communication, 09/06/2011).*

Conversely, Mona’s early educational experience was much better than what happened later on when she attended a college of pharmacy. At that time she had just come from the Sudan on a scholarship for her master’s degree in business administration. She was not that aware of the existence of racism in educational settings and did not
encounter “or was [not] aware” of acts of racism in her college. She also mentioned that Black students were the majority in that University which might explain why she did not feel much racism against her. In addition, she had minimal communication with other students since she had come directly from the Sudan and did not know anybody there “I just used to go to classes and back to my room”.

It was not until recently, when Mona returned to school to study pharmacy that she was confronted by racism from classmates, faculty and staff. Mona’s negative experience during her study of pharmacy continued for a while. She believes that at universities most of the professors were exposed to foreign cultures through foreign students, but in her pharmacy program all of the instructors have gone to pharmacy school, they have pharmacy degrees, but they had not had much contact and exposure to foreign students. Consequently, they did not know how to deal with them and handle things properly. Even some of the instructors, as soon as they finished their pharmacy program, they have been appointed as assistant professors. Therefore, they did not have the experience because they were just students. Mona recalls the time when she had to go for a practicum in one of the pharmacies and realized that there was a time conflict between her practicum and her exam which happened to be on the same day. When she tried to change the time for the practicum because she did not want to miss her exam, her advisor got mad at her and decided to penalize her:

*I asked the advisor if I can switch my practice day and she said no...then I went to the other one who is my previous associate and asked her and she said “no I can’t change it”. I told her that “I could have changed it myself without asking you but I wanted to go through the proper channels”...She said you can come early...so I...*
talked to the preceptor and I said “I have an exam the same day and I will be leaving early can I make up later” and she said “yes I understand that, we have students all the time, you can make up for it next Friday if you want” …then I said to her “ since it does not matter to you instead of coming for three hours only I can just come for the whole day next Friday”. She said “yeah, then we will see you next Friday”. Then I went back to the school and at first I did not pay attention but I felt that the advisor is acting weird but I did not think about it and went home and found that she called to see if I went to the practice. Usually they did not call to check on you whether you came or not. They told her I did not come and instead of asking me why I did not go...that I made arrangement with the preceptor...she sent me a letter telling me that ”you did not report to your site and I am going to remove you from that site and you have to find your own practice and I notified that site that you are not coming and I am going to take 5% of your grade”. For me 5% is not important anyway but removing me from that site and she knows very well it is really hard to find a site like that was terrible...she let other students change their schedules but she would not let me do that...she discriminated against me...I noticed that they treat people differently. Other student change their dates of practice and they did not do anything to them. I do not know maybe their perception of us (Africans) as slackers...it is the stereotypes (Personal Communication, 01/20/2012).

Several studies that examined the experiences of minority students in higher education found that some professors and administrators treat their minority students differently and have lower expectations of them (Djangi, 1993). Mona, Nadia, Enas, Eman, and Amal all had harmful experiences where they were less respected and negatively evaluated by professors and administrators. Mona, who is not a traditional student, is a strong woman who learned how to fight for her rights. When her advisor wanted to penalize her for changing a training schedule that conflicted with her upcoming exam, she vowed not to let her do so:

I wrote an email to the head of the department telling him about what she did and he did not do anything about it at the beginning...then one day we had a meeting with the dean of the college of pharmacy...the head of the department noticed that the dean...when he was talking to me he refers to me as an example and he refers to me by my name and he shook my hand...so probably he realized that I might
use the dean and tell him about my problem... By the way the dean was black... so the next day the head department asked me if I have time to talk and I said I have a lab and he said let us go to the advisor’s office. I went there and she started talking and said that there is misunderstanding and I said I did not really care about the 5% but she can’t punish me twice for the same crime... then she said she is not going to take the 5% off... then she said to me “how about a hug”... I hugged her but I knew it was a fake hug... I think a lot them hate me now because she has bunch of friends there and probably gossiping about it... but do I care? No (Personal Communication, 01/20/2012).

Mona also had another encounter with the same professor:

Another time we had a survey where we have to interview patients... I interviewed the patients... after submitting my papers the same professor said to me “Mona you are not going to like your grade” It happened that in one paper she gave me 70 and in the other one she gave me one out of ten... that really made me mad and I went to her and said “you could have given me a zero why you gave me one out of ten. She said “because you did not turn it on time”. I said I did come to you and I told you I have trouble with the computer to upload the paper... and I told you that I sent the two assignments together. She said “I forgot” and I said, and what about the rest of them and she said “you did not write enough” I said, you did not tell us how much... it is a survey and I wrote what the person told me I am not going to add up things... it is a survey... it asks what kind of drugs do you use and what kind of disease do you have. You told us it is a survey you told us that the major thing about this class is turning the assignments in on time and actually I turned mine in before time. I told her that she is a good communicator and she could have communicated her expectations to us then if I didn’t do what she asked for then it will be my fault... then she said to me “how about you write that again” I said OK... I wrote one page and she gave me more than ninety... it was a bunch of crap... I wrote a bunch of crap... I do not know why she treated me like that... maybe she thought I am stupid or a slacker but she knows I am not... I think... maybe at the beginning she felt like vindicated and probably I defied her at the beginning when I reported her to her boss (Personal Communication, 01/20/2012)

When treated unfairly Mona became confrontational. Mona was not a traditional student and had a wealth of educational and work experience; it was hard for her not to retaliate whenever she felt mistreated or devalued.
During our last interview Mona recalled another incident that demonstrates how professors stereotype and discriminate against foreign and minority students:

There is another incident that I just remembered. There was a problem with cheating in our class...cheating by...almost everybody...most of the students who sit in the back do cheat...in order for me to protect myself I always sit in the front so they can see that I do not cheat...those in charge used to seat students randomly...OK...one day I came for an exam and I noticed that all the first row and part of the second row are foreign students. it did not look random to me ...I am smart...I asked the professor who does the seating... she is the one who complains about the cheating...the next day I asked in a way that they will think I am on their side...I said “Oh my God the thing you did (meaning the random seating) the other day was that random or by design?” and she said “by design”. All the foreign students...some of them are super smart...they were in the first and second rows, and the white students who actually cheat were not in that line because the assumption is that foreign students do cheat (Personal Communication, 02/15/2012).

I found Eman to be very articulate and open about her experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination during her graduate studies. After a long pause she started to talk about her experiences as a target of discrimination by her peers. Although these experiences occurred nearly two decades after Djangi’s (1993) statement, it attests to the continued existence of the divide between black and white students.

Actually I experienced so many incidences of racism during my MA studies...but some of them still hurt...it was a winter quarter...the university is in a nearby town...usually it takes about an hour or hour and a half from my house to the school depending on traffic. One day a professor told us to car pool together to save gas...at that time I did not even know what he meant by car pool...he explained that few students can ride together and each time one student drives all of us...here’s what happened next...you know...I asked all of the white students if I can ride with them and they all apologized to me...though they said it in a nice way but I felt that it is because I am black...all of them live close to where I live...they had space in their cars but they did not want me to ride with them...one of them said yes and then came back the next day and told me she can’t(Eman, personal Communication 04/12/2011).
I asked Eman if she was the only black person in that class, and if there were other blacks did they behave the same way? Her response was:

*There were two or three African Americans who live on the other side of the city and the rest were white...when I asked to ride with them [the Whites]...all of them acted as if they were surprised...maybe they were saying “how dare she asks to ride with us”...you know...at first when one group refused I thought it is normal and they might not have a space for me...but after asking three groups... I just stopped asking...actually one of them said “ok you can ride with us” then she came the next day and told me that the rest of the group have another girl but I figured that they didn’t want me to ride with them...the African Americans had a car and it was just full...actually there was one black couple and there was another three girls who treated me the best because I am black like them but the rest of them who were white did not treat me right (Personal Communication, 04/12/2011).*

Djangi (1993) cites a study which revealed that black and white students at Cornell University are so divided “even the most politically active cannot get together behind commonly held beliefs” (p.5). According to him the lack of communication and the divide between the Blacks and Whites might increase the misunderstanding and stereotyping “exacerbate racial fears and leads to split and hostile cliques among school students” (p. 14). In this regard, Mona narrated her experience with her American classmates:

*They (white students) do not mingle, I do not know whether it is fear or maybe because we are not their friends...I do not know...there is no interaction between us. Sometimes some of them do not even say hi...I interact with African Americans, but still some of the African Americans have that thing [meaning Americans attitude]. But African Americans in my class are not many and I interact with them. The young white students I do not have much with them. I have two friends...I interact with them because they are friends but the rest of them who are not friends is not easy to interact with (Personal Communication 01/15/2012).*
What troubled Mona were the covert acts of racism on the part of her white classmates that were directed towards her and other minority students. However, she was not sure if the white students in her program were intentionally prejudiced or they were not aware of their discriminatory actions. She reported:

_In the classroom during my study of pharmacy I noticed that we...African students...we had a bunch of South African and Asian students in the class...we had one or two friends who are white but the rest of them...you know...they avoid us....they do not talk to us.... they probably did not know our names....though it is easier to know my name [easy to pronounce] than the rest of the Africans...I do not see any interaction with white students and for us...foreign students we are by ourselves... they do not socialize with us_(Personal Communication 01/15/2012).

McKinney (2002) found that some White college students tend to ignore or deny the existence of racism in their schools as well as in their acts towards minority peers. However, by denying the existence of racism in their schools they assume that racism is “no longer a problem, or at least not their problem" (p. 130). They also become uncomfortable and judgmental if a black student brings up the issue of racism. That means, educators need not only combat racism and racial tensions in their institutions, but also challenge the uneasiness that is associated with discussing racism. In this regard Djangi (1993) reports the following incident:

At a common hour at the graduate school an African-American female openly expressed her feeling about racism. Later, several white students told a teaching assistant that this particular student was aggressive and uncaring. In contrast, at the same meeting, a Caucasian male student angrily talked about his feeling about racism, even resorting to profanity. Yet, he was not perceived by the others as being aggressive, but as “upset” (p.15).

On the other hand, Eman mentioned that she got better treatment from those students who looked like her than from her White classmates. When asked why, she
stated she believed that such behavior is expected due to their shared experiences with racism and discrimination. Eman viewed black students’ behavior towards her as natural: “I usually get better treatment from black students than from the Whites…to me…that is natural...we deal with the same kind of treatment due to our skin color.” Eman further clarified that, despite the fact that most of the White students in her class treated her badly she did not want to make a generalization “there are also some whites who treated me normal and everything…but most of them they did not.” Similar to Eman, Enas reported positive experience with her African American advisor who was empathetic. However, her general experience with other faculty and staff was mixed.

Djangi (1993) observes that covert racism persists among teachers where they “give more attention to their white students in class, seeming to favor these students’ ideas and their participation. The same paper could be written by a white student and receive an A, and resubmitted by a minority student and receive a lower grade. The foreign students will often receive remarks on their use of language, such; such a comment is often warranted… it becomes racist when some professors will remark on a minority student’s reports “he needs writing help” while other instructors will laud his writing ability” (pp.12-13).

What Djangi has noted speaks to what happened to one of the participants. Nadia wanted to prove that a certain professor was targeting her. So she took another student’s work to that professor. The same work that was submitted by that student and got praised was considered “rubbish” when she resubmitted to the same professor. A similar incident
happened to me. I remember that during my masters studies two white students and I did a project together and the professor gave the two students As and gave me a B. when I asked why she tried to justify her grading and eventually made me do extra work before she changed my grade. When I did, she still gave me an A- and not a straight A like the other two students.

Amal, as well, reported many challenges and had negative experiences when she started her studies. Although she attributed that to being black and a foreigner, she also thinks it was due to the fact that she was not a conventional student:

“When I came to the U.S. and went to school, I was not the traditional Sudanese woman. I already finished Law school and I was a lawyer for ten years at home...yeah...at that time...at least one professor thought that I was challenging and did give me a hard time... it was a research class and she knew that I was among the best but still she had to bring me down...I was attending conferences and meetings...I could have asked her what could I do to make up my grade, instead, I just confronted her and told her I do not need a makeup and I will take a B...but then also you have to put your foot through and as long as I am not disrespected I am fine (Personal Communication 05/10/2011).

Djangi (1993) asks a legitimate question which speaks to the participants’ experiences in their respective colleges, “Where can students go when they sense unfair or biased treatment from staff member?” He argues that in such instances there’s often no support for students with accusations such as the above mentioned. In most colleges the advisor is generally there just to advise the student on courses and not to help with their grievances. Consequently, when an unfair grade or remark occurs, the student cannot find support from the system. In addition, it is known that the faculty will, more than likely support a colleague when he or she is criticized by a student for bias treatment (p.17).
Eman recalled her first encounter with being stereotyped and discriminated against, which happened a few months after her arrival in the U.S. In order to enhance her ability in communicating in English she joined a school that teaches English as a second language (ESL) to immigrants and refugees. On the first day of classes the teacher started by saying “when you come here you have expectations that all American people are rich or why people come here and become fat…that is because there is a lot of food and nice food too”. For Eman, that was her first encounter with stereotype and prejudice:

What the teacher said hurt me a lot...at that time it was only three or four months since my arrival ...there was about twenty immigrant students... you know...despite my lack of confidence to speak in English... I told the teacher she is wrong... back home we have a lot of exercise... we did not go to the Gym but we do a lot of walking and moving and that is why we do not get fat...not everybody is coming from a hungry place...yes we do not exercise...we do walking...it was hard to express myself in English but...I responded to her...I can’t remember her name but I swear I remember her face and what she said as if it happened yesterday (Personal communication, 04/12/2012).

These early encounters with racial/ethnic discrimination demonstrate how the women in this study began to understand the racialized context of their experiences. These encounters also demonstrate how the participants began to interrogate and act against stereotypes and unfair relations of power that exist. Although they had already achieve higher education degrees before immigrating to America the women in this study had to fight against attempts to marginalize them because of their accents. In addition, they began to understand that the unfair treatment they received had much to do with the color of their skin coupled with their status as immigrants.
Racial/Ethnic Discrimination: Encounters in the workplace

In the U.S., being black in the workplace renders a common experience. Although discrimination in employment and at work due to race is against the law, the women in this study reported discriminatory treatment by employers and coworkers. According to Blumrosen and Blumrosen (2002) racism reduces black women’s chances of employment and promotion. Additionally, the Bureau of labor statistics (2007) confirmed research findings that Black women earn less than both Black men and White women (Collins, 2000). In Black feminist thought (2000; 1991) Collins, discusses the exploitation of women’s labor. She analyzes Black women’s victimization by the labor market which explains “how Black women’s work is organized within intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender” (p.45).

The women in this study learned quickly that racial/ethnic discrimination was not limited to their educational experiences. Amal explained how her race played a major role in how employers and people in general viewed her:

*I did have negative experiences...I see it in the way people perceive my abilities...If I am applying for a job in language or women studies, they tell me why I do not teach African-American literature. I do not teach literature but people have certain perception of me that I fit certain jobs, but you have to prove yourself (Personal communication, 01/2012).*

In answering a question about how they were perceived in their careers, the participants reported that they do not feel appreciated. They see this in the behavior of their supervisors and coworkers. Amal stated that “I always worked in educational institutions and there are many people like me. Sometimes you feel that you have been
patronized in a way that I do not like...like saying honey so and so.” In the same fashion, Eman emphasized that race is a major factor in her school and work experiences. She elaborated:

In different situations you feel like...hmm...for example...I feel it when I apply for jobs...in how much they pay me...when they lay me off or cut my hours...they usually apologize for some reason or another but that I do not get...but I know sometimes there is something behind it and they will not let you investigate why...but you feel that because you are black...immigrant...foreigner (Personal communication, 08/04/2011).

The participants believed that being black, immigrant, and a foreigner accounted for the marginalizing experiences described above and demonstrate how these identities intersect to help shape such experiences. Nadia shared an experience in which she felt discriminated against and treated differently from her white co-worker. They each had applied for vacation at the same time. However her co-worker’s application was approved immediately while she had to wait for a while until her manager intervened on her behalf:

I applied for vacation time...we have to apply online...at the same time a co-worker who is white applied for a vacation too and got a response very quickly while it took them a longer time to respond to me...another time...because I planned to go on vacation I asked them to let me work on the day that I was supposed to be off so as to compensate for the extra day that I am going to take as part of my vacation...they refused to let me work while a white dentist was allowed to do that...I told them I need that day because I already bought my ticket and I am travelling but they said to me it is my problem and I should not have bought the ticket before their approval...my manager... despite her negative attitude towards me intervened on my behalf and told those who are in charge that I felt left out and that was discrimination because they allowed the white doctor the same request while denying mine...however, I made arrangement to take the day off with or without their approval but his assistant called my manager and told her that I can work that Friday instead...maybe they thought
that I am going to quit…they know I am a good dentist and they do not want to lose me but they do not treat me equal (Personal Communication, 09/06/2011).

Nadia believed that she might have been treated differently if she was not covered or if she was white or a male. This concern was clearly explained by many researchers; the social hierarchy in the U. S. places Black women at the bottom of the ladder where white men come first, then the white woman, the black man, and last is the black woman (Collins, 2000). The situation is exacerbated when the woman is a Muslim and wearing hijab (Curtis, 2009; Basford, 2008; Zine, 2006). Mona agreed with what Nadia said that being covered leads towards further discriminatory acts against Muslim women. She also believes that wages at her workplace are influenced by race and gender.

Mona also noted that while working at a bank, some people who were hired after her and who had no more than a high school diploma (she has an MBA degree) were paid more than her: “I remember I talked to the manager and said, you know I have MBA. She said, your MBA is in forestry I said no my masters is in business... in general ...in particular monetarily I do not think I was equal, even when they promote you they just give you a title and responsibility; Maybe that was because I am black and a woman” (Personal Communication, 01/20/2012).

Mona admits that her experiences in the different jobs that she had since her immigration were a mixture of positive and negative experiences. When she came to the U.S and after finishing her graduate degree in business administration she worked at a pizza place. Her employer and co-workers did not know her education level because she
did not tell them. Her experience there was “not bad” and she was promoted to a shift manager, but according to her there was always a hint of racism in their actions.

When Mona worked as a bank teller she also did not tell her supervisors and co-workers about her MBA because she was afraid that she would not get the job if she told them. Mona talked about her double-edged sword experiences with racism and sexism at that bank “When I worked there the manager was good but the supervision was the worst. Every morning I say to myself...oh my God do I have to go there...they were so mean and ignorant. I hated the supervisor” (Personal Communication, 02/15/ 2012). It happened that we both worked at the same bank, had the same supervisor, and the same terrible experience, although I immigrated a decade after Mona. Mona’s experience at another bank was also worth noting:

Then I worked at [name of the bank]...as usual I was the only black in that branch...they were nice to me but still...the management...the person at the top I felt like she has some kind of racism...I noticed that because they always hire people...although I train the new people but suddenly they get promoted...you know my evaluation was always at the top...but even if they promote me they do not increase my pay that much...there will be a title but there is no money with the title... employees were nice but you feel you were not appreciated so I decided to change my career path and started to work part time (Personal Communication, 02/15/2012).

Eman supported Mona’s claim and considered it strange that in the workplace, “they do not want you to know how much people with qualifications as same as you get. Back home if you have the same qualifications and got hired the same day you get the similar salary...it does not matter whether you are a woman or a man” (Personal Communication, 06/22/ 2011). Eman recalled another work experience while she was
teaching at a public school, “they (the principal and the supervisor) treated me differently than the white teachers...I had been reprimanded because I asked a student not to lie...they treated me differently...if I did very small things they make a big deal of it while they treated other white teachers in a better way...that happened...you know because I am not white” (Personal communication, 06/22/2012)

Racism, discrimination, and stereotyping acts at the workplace have been reported by the immigrant women in this study. Many of them told me that their employers and coworkers often questioned their qualifications and their know-how despite the fact that they have earned them in this country and have worked hard to prove themselves. Researchers such as Reid & Diaz (1990) confirm that it is a reality that Americans undervalue minorities’ achievements. They explain:

In the United States a history of negative stereotypic beliefs and low status attributions have been documented as directed against Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native...Various the stereotypes portray the ethnic group member as possessing negative characteristics, e.g., they are sly, stupid, lazy, or barbaric. Paradoxically, popular beliefs also tend to undervalue accomplishments or positive traits held by ethnic groups, when they cannot be ignored” (p. 400).

Most of the participants confirmed the lack of healthy relationships with their White supervisors and co-workers, which they considered one of the challenges that faced them in the workplace. Mona reasoned why she did not have relationships with her White co-workers:

You know our social life is different...the entertainment and the things they do and the events they go to are different. Consequently, the things that they talk about the next day are different too from my daily live events...so when they talk you feel you are left out, but also they talk about their personal life a lot...and in
front of everybody which seems strange to me...their talk about very personal issues and family things seems odd to me (Personal communication, 02/15/2012).

The participants also noticed that, in the workplace, they often encountered people who underestimated their intelligence and assumed that they did have the ability to do or understand things. Mona told her co-workers at the bank that she is going to school to study pharmacy and her co-worker said to her “oh that is nice are you going to be a pharmaceutical technician?” That co-worker could not imagine that Mona is capable of becoming a pharmacist so the highest she is allowed to aspire to is a “pharm-tech.”

Eman described her experience during her teacher training job when she was assigned to an all white school. There, she was faced with resentment almost from everybody, in particular the class teacher. When Eman tried to help the special need students in that school by providing learning materials, organizing and decorating their classroom, something which was praised by many staff members, the teacher thought Eman was planning to take over her class. The classroom teacher was not shy from showing her disdain, so one day she yelled at Eman “this is my class not yours” and Eman responded to her:

I told her I did not come to take your class and I am not planning to work at that school...you know...instead of thanking me she hated me for doing that...in fact I transformed that class from a dumpster to a class...I paid for stuff from my own pocket and stayed for hours trying to organize and display the materials...the teacher did not like that... they hated me without any reason (Personal Communication, 04/12/ 2011).
Eman believed that the whole school was against her including the supervisor who evaluated her positively at first and then changed her grading from pass to fail, which cost her another year in the school and a repeat of that training:

*During my teacher training they placed me in that school where I had a terrible experience. I was supposed to have eight students but the class had eighteen students... in that school I faced many difficulties... there was a weekly or twice a week evaluation of me as an intern teacher... but the class teacher did not evaluate me for the whole six weeks... in fact she evaluated me once and the supervisor evaluated me once and in one visit she did not evaluate me but she talked to me... other times she evaluated me positively for the whole six visits... when you evaluate me positively in the six visits what is the final result?... it is pass right... it is pass or fail grading... but she failed me... that supervisor at first gave me a pass and then changed my grade to fail... yes she changed all her grading from pass to fail and I have the proof... you know what... at that time I did not have the money to sue them... but I vow to do so even after ten years... they delayed my graduation... I had to repeat that training all over* (Personal Communication 04/12/2011).

Fortunately, Amal who works at a university, regards her current work environment as positive: “I work with women and gender studies... they are very understanding... we talk a lot about the disparities, our differences, and about racism, sexism and discrimination and how we could get over it” (Personal communication, 05/10/2011). Nadia also considers her work environment friendly and pleasant, her only grievance being that, her American co-workers who are under her supervision do not respect professional boundaries and treat her as a boss. She believes that their behavior would have been different if the boss is a White person:

*You know... all the hygienists and dental assistants in the facility are whites... yeah... all those who work under us (dentists) are whites... but sometimes I feel that if we are white doctors we would get more respect... but I am not complaining... because the girls (hygienists and dental assistants) are very respectful to us... we have a nice team but I think they are treating us the same as...*
their level...I think if we were white they will treat us much better...but I am not complaining...we have so much fun...we joke...we laugh...we go out for dinner and we do potlucks (Personal Communication 10/14/2011).

In addition, Nadia reported that it took her a long time to convince her co-workers that she is not the stereotypical uneducated African woman that they seem to imagine and that rather she is a smart and informed lady:

*In my work...my job... my co-workers... sometimes I have to tell them...many times about myself...about the places I visited...that I am a classy lady...that wearing hijab does not mean that I am retarded or I do not know anything about life. It took me a while to tell them stories about my travel around the world and the experiences that I have...now they respect me...they know I am better than them...so now they are convinced...but it took hard work and time to prove to them that I am qualified...you know most of my co-workers are under my supervision...I am the doctor there...they are hygienists and dental assistants...in a way I am their boss so I had the opportunity to express myself and convince them otherwise about me...but at college it was impossible to convince them that I could do better (Personal Communication, 10/14/2011).*

Enas worked with a supervisor whom she labeled as “racist”. One day when Enas witnessed her supervisor mistreating a black customer she promptly reacted, which created a tension between them. Enas asked the supervisor why she was suspicious and treated that lady badly while treating other white customers with respect. She did not keep quiet because she felt she had to stand up to her:

*I told her that she has a problem because she hates me and people who look like me...I said to her that I do not have a problem...she is the one who have a problem and she has to work on solving her problem...I also told her that I do not hate her because hatred and racism are diseases and she needed to cure herself and treat people as human beings (Personal communication, 11/02/2011).*

 Likewise, some participants reported disrespect at their workplace where people make fun of their ethnic names which is something I also experienced. A co-worker
suggested that I needed to change my name to an American name because my real name sounds awkward and too difficult to pronounce. This is similar to other studies’ findings. Okpalaoka (2009), for instance, found a link between her participants’ foreign names and their being stereotyped, which might subsequently have a negative effect on their educational evaluation and performance. Studies report a link between foreign names and students’ low attainment in that “there were significantly lower achievement scores given by raters whose descriptions used an African-American sounding name rather than a Caucasian-sounding name” (in Okpalaoka, 2009, p. 327).

Many participants reported mistreatment by the clientele at their jobs. I personally experienced hostility and disrespect from customers. While I was working at the bank, a customer-white male- was very rude to me because I could not cash his check. I told him that I was just following the bank’s policy but he continued to be disrespectful to me. Similarly, Eman complained that people like her are always faced with racism and unjustified hostility whether by employer, staff, or customers. She recounted one friend’s experience:

*My friend worked as a customer service associate in a retail store...a customer wanted to return something after the allowed period of return had expired...so my friend told her that she cannot return the item because it is against the store’s policy...that she is not allowed to return items after the expiration of the return date...you know...that customer, a white lady...threw a pen at my friend’s face...I do not think that she could do that to a white person...that was what we deal with here...my friend got scared...but my friend did not want to press charges or create a scene...so she did not press charges” (Personal communication, 08/04/2012)
Another experience was reported by Mona. She was working in a banking office when a regular customer who is white said to her “Aunt Jemima what is cooking?” Mona understood what he meant. Aunt Jemima is the black women pictured on a pancake box, a stereotypical African American character. Mona explained: “I was the only black person in the bank… what he said was not funny at all… that was rude.” I asked Mona what was her reaction? And she said “I just looked at him…he is a stupid person who does not deserve my response…he knew that was inappropriate so the next day he brought me flowers…you know you can’t change how people think…that is why sometimes I do not respond” (Personal Communication, 01/20/ 2012).

When Nadia started her job in the dental clinic in a public facility her patients were prejudiced towards her and unwilling to let her take care of them. According to her, there was no reason for them not to trust her other than the fact that she is a foreigner, a Muslim who wears hijab. It took Nadia a while to gain their trust and to prove to them she is “really a good experienced DDS.” Eventually, they realized that she is the best in that clinic and started requesting that she takes care of their dental problems. That explains why Nadia repeatedly said “you need to work hard…you need to prove yourself and change people’s stereotypical perception about you” (Nadia, Personal Communication, 10/14/2012).

Amal supported other participants’ claims about the negative perceptions and stereotype of Black women in America. She raised an important point which helps her to move beyond those kinds of acts:
You know...all the time...there will always be someone who say something or behave in a certain way that offend me...there is very little I can do to change that person. However, I usually... I learned not to make it a big issue... these things happen...so I am fine as long as the general atmosphere is not intimidating” (Personal communication, 01/20/2012).

Black feminist scholars have long criticized the stereotypical images of Black women that pervade culture and public policy (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1990). Collins (2000) argues that:

In the U.S. “certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes…negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women’s oppression” (p.5).

It is worth mentioning that some of the participants experienced a positive work environment with open-minded employers and co-workers. Eman worked as a cashier at retail stores, and although she was not wearing hijab at that time, her employer accepted that she does not ring alcohol at her register because her religion does not allow her to do so. Her employer and co-workers were fine with that arrangement. However, one time a customer got angry because she told him she can’t ring his liquor. He asked her why not and when she explained to him that her religion does not allow her to sell alcohol he yelled at her and said, “why you do not get the f*** out of here and find another job”.

For the participants in this study, and black women in general, it is a reality that racial, gender, and religious discriminatory attitudes will continue to be key factors in the work place. It is evident in the disparity of wages, access to jobs, granting of interviews, as it is in overt and covert racism that manifest in how they are treated, promoted, and in
the low expectation of them. No matter how educated they are or how hard they work, they will still make less than white men, black me, and white women.

**Encounters with Gender Discrimination**

*In our culture...the difference in treatment between girls and boys is considered equality...that gender role has to be specific...but the equality in the feminist world...that we talk about...that is not recognized (Amal)*

Initially, I assumed I would be examining the participants’ experiences with sexism during their educational pursuits and at their workplaces in the United States. However, while examining the women’s stories, I realized that the women had shifted our discussions to their gendered experiences while they were in the Sudan. All the women in this study except one reported that they did not feel that sexism has played any role in their oppression and differential treatments in the U.S. Conversely, they talked at length about their experiences with patriarchy, sexism, and lower status at their home country. Listening to these women’s stories brought back my own memories of how we girls were treated differently with extreme restrictions that were imposed on us. It is true that we had been socialized to believe—as Amal observed—*that “in our culture...the difference in treatment is considered equality (Personal Communication, 05/01/2011)”.*

Although there is gender preference in Amal’s original culture and even within her extended family, Amal believed that her parents treated girls and boys equally or, at least in her view, in a less preferential way.

*I was not treated differently...actually I was treated better because I was expected to help in the house since I was five years old...doing the light house work and help with my siblings which gave me a little bit of status...but...like...in other Sudanese families boys have special status because they are expected to carry the family name and care*
for their parents when they get old...though usually the girls do more for their older parents than boys (Personal Communication, 05/10/2011).

In general some of the participants’ attitudes towards their original cultural traditions, in particular those affecting women, seem contradictory. For instance, Nadia’s views regarding the equality between men and women were disturbing and involved oppositional visions. Although Nadia firmly believed that women and men should be equal, and that culture plays a major role in whether we see ourselves as subordinate, she also insisted that,

_We [women] are weaker and cannot protect ourselves...because women are naturally weak...as I told you...back in the Sudan that is our culture and that is how we are brought up and now I came here I feel that it doesn’t have to be applied... Really that time I took it fine because that is the way I was raised and it does influence how boys and girls are treated... I do believe in it in a way definitely...biologically there is differences...Let me tell you something... even here in America...yes we have more equality but when you watch any program or any show...they take advantage of women physically... because they are weaker...we can’t deny this...that is why I am telling you I do not mind the differences...some restrictions on females... not less rights not less freedom... definitely not but different ways in dealing with life...they are biologically and physically built differently from men...we are weaker and we can’t protect ourselves...I can’t see myself coming home alone at 2 am (Personal Communication, 09/06/2012).

When I asked Nadia if she thinks that her daughter, who is a college student in a nearby town, will not able to protect herself, she answered “yes...and I am worried about her.” Nadia’s views about the weakness of women made me think of the complicated nature of our upbringing which is reflected in the contradiction in the beliefs of both Nadia and Eman who alleged that a woman needs a man to protect her and they themselves are both capable, independent, educated, professional women.
It is true that in societies such as the Sudan “we had been socialized as females by patriarchal thinking to see ourselves as inferior to men” (hooks, 2000, p.14). The internalization of sexism that stems from original cultural practices is apparent in the participants’ narratives. Eman reported that while she was in the Sudan, and whenever she wanted to go out, she used to take her brother- who was 12 years old at that time- with her for protection. I asked Eman what a 12 year old brother who accompanies a grown-up woman could do to protect her, and she responded with conviction:

*People think that even a young boy can defend his sister...can fight any man who comes close to his sister or mother... he can speak their language. My father is well educated and has a lot of experience with girls...what I want to say is that it is not my dad or parents’ beliefs that discriminate against girls...but definitely my younger brother who was ten years younger than me I take him with me wherever I go...especially my younger sister could not go out by herself unless she takes him or our youngest brother with her. My parents believe that we are free to do what we want but at the same time they care about what other people will say about us*(Personal Communication, 08/04/2011).

Evidently, many women have internalized the underlying assumptions that they are the weak, emotional, and irrational sex, and consequently, deserve a lower status. This is clearly reflected in the Sudanese proverbs “a shadow of a man is better than a shadow of a wall” meaning that a woman need a man to take care of her, that any man is better than being alone, and “even if a woman is an ax she will never be able to cut a throat”. It means that, it doesn’t matter if a woman claims that she is strong because she will always be weak and need help from a man.

While in the Sudan, most of the time Enas abided by her society’s cultural norms. She strongly believes in the equality between men and women and in women’s abilities
despite the fact that her cultural traditions tend to limit women’s aspirations. However, sexism is not a big concern for Enas: “in America...as a woman...I do not think that sexism is an issue for me...I know sexism does exist here but I did not see it as being an issue for me whether at school, at my job, or elsewhere” (Personal communication, 07/15/2011). Similarly, Eman, Nadia, and Amal reported that they did not recognize sexism as part of the issues that perpetuate their oppression and discrimination in the United State.

Enas sadly recalled her own experience with sexism back home, how it prevented her from realizing her dream of becoming a musician, and how it still affects her. Enas shared that both her immediate family and the society prevented her from following her dreams of pursuing a career in music. Researchers found that, in societies such as the Sudan, women are deterred from pursuing certain fields of study such as music, arts, and engineering (Alghamdi, 2006). In particular, the Sudanese society’s negative perceptions of certain careers were the main cause that many women were not able to follow their desired career paths. Since Enas told me earlier that her father is a liberal who believes in the equality between men and women, I exclaimed “but your father is a liberal why he did object to your aspiration to study music? Is it about culture or is it religion?” Enas reiterated:

Yeah...he did object...my parents were not happy about my choice and they did not think it is suitable for me as a girl...yes I wanted to study music...considering a religious point of view... I believe that my religion does allow me to join the music and theater institute ...but it is the culture...our cultural traditions are mixed with religion...it is hard to know which is which (Personal Communication, 11/02/2011).
Enas acknowledged that the patriarchal nature of Sudanese society prevents women from reaching their potentials and enhancing their abilities. Through the telling I noticed that Enas is self-confident and daring. I asked her if these traits are a result of her being in America, her response was:

"I have been always like that...since I was in Sudan...I always question things...my dad is a liberal and never treated us differently because we are girls...so I owe a lot to him...but back then I was not always able to apply what I believe in and make my own choice .... you know our society...as women we are treated differently...but I was an out spoken whenever I get the chance...may be here I found more space to actualize what I believe in...as they say...I am able to practice what I preached for a long time (Personal communication, 11/02/2011)."

Enas’ frustration with how women are treated in her culture of origin was obvious. She clearly expressed her opinion “women are considered second class citizens...in the name of religion we are relegated to private spheres...no voice...no decision...but we women are to blame for accepting that.” It is worth mentioning that, Islam is very specific about gender equality, and sustains an egalitarian status for women (Barazangi, 2004; Hassan, 1999; Wadud, 1999; Ahmed, 1992). However, in most Muslim societies and due to the patriarchal interpretation of religion, women occupy inferior positions, are oppressed, lack authority, and are not part of decision making processes (Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1987).

Six years ago Mona went back home to visit her family after living in the U.S for over fifteen years. Her experience there affirmed her belief that having fundamentalists in power have perpetuated the domestication of women and imposed further restrictions on them. She hilariously narrated her experience:
Well...while in Sudan, one day I put “Henna” on my hands and feet and I was supposed to leave it until it dries which takes couple of hours... then a guy that I knew during my school years came to fix the air conditioner at my mom’s house. As soon as he stepped in the room my mother demanded that I cover my hair and legs because this guy is a fanatic Muslim...I was wearing my regular attire that covered most of my body...I am not used to cover my hair in Sudan or in the U.S. besides I had henna and I can’t move without ruining it. So I said to the guy “if you are a fanatic Muslim just do not look at me because I am not going to remove my henna to cover the rest of my body” he was surprised...then laughed because he was not expecting me to say so...my mother was not happy about that but I told her that I am old enough to decide what is right...you know most of Sudanese women are afraid of those fanatics because they have the power and they can make their lives miserable if they are not covered or subservient (Personal Communication, 01/20/2012).

Lorber (2005) argues, “Religions legitimate the social arrangements that produce inequality, justifying them as right and proper. Laws support the status quo and also make it impossible to redress outcomes” (p. 7). In the same train of argument, Sarroub (2005) clearly explains how sexism is perpetuated in most of Muslim societies “gendered practices are strongly influenced by school, religion, ethnicity, and language (p.7). In the same fashion, the late Senegalese writer and Muslim feminist Ba (1989) asserts that traditions and Law dictate women’s behavior and status. She adds that, the Senegal Law codifies the lower status of women within Islamic religion and perpetuates their subjection. Thus, Muslim feminist scholars such as Barazangi (2004), Wadud (1999) and Ahmed (1999) became aware that the existing patriarchal interpretation of the Islamic

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50 Henna tree scientific name is (Lawsonia inermis). The powdered leaves of this tree is used as a dye to color the hair and decorate the body. Married Sudanese women usually decorate their hands and feet with henna.

51 Senegal is a secular republic, where 94% of the populations are Muslims, 4% Christians, and 2% traditional religions (Bop, 2005).
holy text continues to maintain women’s subordination and relegates them to second class citizen’s position. Accordingly, they proposed a re-interpretation of the holy text from a Muslim woman’s stand point.

On the other hand, Mona is the only participant who experienced sexism in the United States, primarily at her workplace. Mona worked at a pharmaceutical company and before that in the banking business for over 15 years. She reported that while she fortunately did not notice any sexist acts towards her in college or in society generally, she did experience sexism while working at (name) bank:

*I worked in banking...in banking they call them what...yeah... ‘old boys club’...there is sexism...for women in science and other jobs there are differences but still not that huge...but in banking it is obvious...you start working and there is a guy doing the same job...and he get paid a lot more than you and you are not supposed to talk about how much you get or he gets...because it is different...you know my experience as a foreigner and a black woman at the workplace led me to go back to school...because at my job, my performance was always high and used to exceed expectations but I get far less than the others and even when I get promoted I feel it did not match my performance. I train people and then I find that they gave them an executive job while I was still in the same job (Personal Communication, 05/10/2011).*

In answering a question about whether their beliefs about equality between men and women have changed or shifted since their immigration to the U.S, most of the participants reported that their beliefs did not change. Nevertheless, the only change was in their ability to practice what they believed in. Their responses suggest that they were able to “come to voice” where the deeds match the beliefs. It was obvious that Amal is one of the participants who experienced a shift in her understanding and practice:

*I am actually in educational institutions since I came here...I went to different universities. Women studies attracted me despite my legal background...although*
since I was in the Sudan...I was doing women’s rights...women’s legal rights...and Muslim women’s rights...what I found here is that...the area of women studies opened for me new windows...new ideas and areas and helped me conceptualize what I was thinking and writing about. Also it affected me as a person in the sense that I am living two lives... in a country foreign to me....and I wanted to keep some of my cultural and Islamic traditions. In that way it creates some tension...besides as I continued to live independently here...it has changed me too in the way I behave (Personal communication, 01/20/2012).

Conversely, for Nadia the shift was in what she used to see as normal behavior while she was in the Sudan, such as accepting that women are entitled to fewer rights than men and the “taken for granted” sexism and inequality that prevail there:

I came from an educated family...my parents are very open minded so we (daughters and sons) were almost treated the same...but you know...our culture...it is so conservative about girls more than boys...we were treated equally...the only difference...I can’t stay late at night while my brother can. Those are small differences which we consider OK...it was fine with us because we know our culture and how it goes. When I was in the Sudan it was ok for me to take the differences and accept that men have priority and have more advantages...it was ok with me because that was the way I was brought up...when I came here I found that women could be treated equally...also because of my experience here I think...I became more open minded....you know we just take it for granted ...I am just thinking...I am a widow here...I am thinking what would be my life like if I am in Sudan? Maybe it might be much easier in some aspects...yes I will have much help from family and friends...but at the same time there would be a lot of cultural pressure on me as a widow which I do not experience here (Personal Communication, 10/14/2011).

Another example is Mona who experienced some perception changes. She used to believe in separate roles for men and women. After living in the U.S. for nearly two decades, now she believes that women and men can do the same things and with the same perfection, and that both men and women have to share responsibilities inside and outside the house:
as an example...as a pharmacist I have a decent earnings...more than my husband who holds a PhD...he works in another city and we only see him during weekends...so I asked him to quit his job and come and live with us until he finds another job here (where she lives)...you know...if I am in the Sudan I would never be able to suggest such a thing...I am the one who is supposed to follow him...I remember back there (in the Sudan)....my brother used to hide in the bathroom while washing his clothes because he doesn’t want anybody to see him doing that...also my cousin’s husband used to help her and wash the dishes and people always made fun of him for doing that...because washing the clothes and dishes, cooking, and cleaning the house are considered a woman’s job...here my husband and his friends do all these things and nobody laughs at them

(02/15/2012).

Clearly, the patriarchal interpretation of religion (Barazangi, 2004; Ahmed, 1999) and cultural tradition in Islamic societies maintain females’ domesticity and the superiority of men over women. Research reveals that in most Islamic countries religion and cultural traditions are intertwined, which makes it harder to separate between the two (Alghamdi, 2006; Badawi, 2002; Ahmed, 1999).

Enas’ allegations that her religion does not prohibit women from certain areas of study such as theatre and music indicate that cultural traditions play the major role in the repression of women in these societies. Enas had a firsthand experience with the limitations that were inflicted on women where they could not make their own decisions or chose career paths that complimented their aspirations:

*I do not think there is influence of religion because that depends on you...but I could say our society has great influence because after I finished high school I was planning to study at the institute of music and theater in Sudan... I applied and got accepted but there was objection...you know...I believed that I fit in that institute and really wanted to study music...but it was our cultural norms that used to view people in music, theater, or nursing professions as loose individuals who lack moral values...they look down on families who let their daughters pursue these kinds of studies... most of us have been raised to believe the same...though living here have changed my views towards such issues...we have
been brain washed about what women should do and not to do…now I even feel more comfortable to discuss loudly and have an opinion on issues that used to be taboos back home (Personal communication, 11/02/2011).

Enas still has regrets conforming to her family’s and society’s restrictions that prevented her from realizing her educational vision and following her dreams:

Yeah… until now I wish I had joined the music and theater institute and followed my dreams to be a musician…but back then we (girls) are not allowed to choose our future since we are supposed to be what our parents and society wanted us to be…I am trying to avoid these things while mentoring my kids…what we have been forced to comply with was wrong…I am determined to change that and not to let my children suffer the same regrets from not pursuing their dreams and choose their desired field… you know here things are different and even in the Sudan…now things started to change…it is a gradual change…lucky for them (Personal Communication, 11/02/11).

Amal observed that social expectations for women in the Sudan are different and accordingly, they are treated differently. Men have unlimited freedom while women are expected to conform to patriarchal traditions that restrict their participation in the public sphere and limit their choices and mobility:

In our culture boys can do whatever they want. It is different for girls. It is only, in the 1980s and 90s when single women started to move alone without men to take care of them…our culture is considered part of religion. Even my coming here was met with objection. To this date when I go back to visit every one say “when are you coming back to settle” I tell them I am not an expatriate I am an immigrant and I am carrying an American passport but they still think of me as an expatriate (Personal communication, 05/10/2011).

Mona agreed with Amal and added that not everybody in her country believes in equality between men and women. Mona did not think men are better but similar to Amal, she knows that the expectations are different for men: “there are different family expectations…men are supposed to be the providers for their families…for example my
mom...she still expects or supposes that my brother have to send her money every month...but she does not expect the same thing from me or my sisters...for my brother it is an obligation” (Personal communication, 05/10/2011). Mona, who believes in gender equality, appreciates the fact that women have a better position in America. Still, despite her criticism of how women are positioned in her country, she is still nostalgic about what she had left behind:

"I miss many things in the Sudan...I miss the same pay for men and women...I do not find it here...I do not find the things that we have in the Sudan...we women fight a lot for our rights there which I do not find here...I really miss that part...females struggle to have rights...Maybe females’ struggle to have rights is done here...I do not know if they had the same thing here...yes...in the Sudan they treat women differently...imagine...I am a married woman and was in my late forties when I went there to visit...every time I go to my sister’s house...her husband is always critical of my clothes by saying this dress is short...this is revealing and so on...even for his sixteen years daughter...she can’t wear those sun dresses unless she wears a sleeved shirts under them...I believe he is not that strict...but I think he is afraid of what people might say (Personal Communication, 5/10/2012).

Thus, women in places like the Sudan find themselves in critical situations; they either have to conform to what is considered normal and socially acceptable, or risk their reputation. The pressure on women in these societies becomes so intense that they choose conformity over rebellion, albeit some educated Muslim women are exerting effort to change the status quo and break the chain of male dominance (Abdel Halim, 2006; Barazangi; Abusharaf, 2002; Ahmed, 1999; Wadud, 1999; Mernissi, 1987), whereas many are still trapped between “a rock and a hard place”.

A case in point is what happened to Enas. Despite her relatively liberal upbringing, and strong personality, she was not able to cross the societal and traditional
barriers that prevented her from following her dream and joins the Music and Theater Institute in the Sudan. She regretted her submission to her society’s attitudes that look down on women who pursue certain professions on the premises that a good Muslim woman must not join such institutions. As a result of her parents’ objections, Enas opted to study accounting instead leaving behind her dream of becoming a musician. After relocating to the U.S. and despite the odds of life, Enas was able to compose a new dream in the Diaspora and become a computer analyst. I asked Enas why she did not follow her desire of becoming a musician since her immigration to the U.S. She took a deep breath, and then said:

*I do not have an answer to this question...maybe I have internalized my family’s objection to that...but I am glad that my son followed his dreams and studied theater... definitely I am now open to any career path that my children decide to take...he is a brilliant actor [her son] he graduated last year from the school of music and theater...I am always his biggest supporter and fan...I usually attend all of his performances (Personal Communication, 11/02/2011).*

Likewise, Eman observed a shift in how she perceives the relationship between girls and boys. In the Sudan and Islamic culture in general there is a separation between the sexes as soon as they reach puberty. Growing up Eman was not allowed to bring her male friends or classmates to her parents’ house. That seemed not a big deal since, in the Sudan, girls and boys attend separate schools and co-education is only permitted in kindergarten and some colleges. Eman reflected on this point by disclosing that since she is raising a daughter here, she does not mind that her daughter invites her male friends to the house. She recognizes that this is not permissible in the Sudan and could ruin a girl’s reputation. Although she has no problem that her daughter befriends male classmates and
brings them home, she will still have to abide by Sudanese cultural traditions and norms whenever she goes back to the Sudan:

For me it is different because back home maybe my sister or my neighbor will say why I am letting my daughter brings her male friends to the house. My father could do the same thing...not because he believes it but because of the society and what people would say about her (Personal Communication, 08/04/2011).

The gendered position of the women’s experiences in the Sudan- and not the United States- was the dominant discourse in the participants’ narrative about sexism. I sensed that these women are constantly comparing women’s status here in the United States with their status in the Sudan and from this standpoint tend to see their current position in the U.S as relatively better. Somehow that explains to me why these women did not feel the sexism and gender oppression which is a reality cited by many scholars (Collins, 2000; 1990; hooks, 1990; 1989; Harding; 1987). For the participants, the position of women in the U.S is so “heavenly.” They feel that in the U.S., they have finally attained their voices and can now “practice what they used to preach.” I struggle to make sense of this type of thinking because it is clear to me that sexism is deeply ingrained in American society. I believe, however, the participants’ views are based on a comparison between gender discrimination and sexism in Sudan and the United States. While the participants did not perceive sex discrimination as a significant issue, they did speak at length about religious discrimination which in many instances was also gendered. For example, hajib discrimination is also a gendered religious discrimination.

According to Mahmoud (2005) “… [Muslim] women’s support for socioreligious movements that sustain principles of female subordination poses a dilemma for feminist
analysts. On the one hand, women are seen to assert their presence in previously well
defined spheres while, on the other hand, the very idioms they use to enter these arenas
are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male
authority (pp. 5-6)."

This point underscores the conflicted views of the women in this study. While
they are very cautious about preserving their Sudanese, Islamic, and to some extent the
Afro-Arab identity in the Diaspora, they constantly speak about the importance of
maintaining this identity and passing it on to their children. They are eager for their
children to learn to speak Arabic, practice Islam, know their heritage, and consequently
maintain ties with where they are from. Thus, they participate in their ethnic
community’s activities. They also organize celebrations of religious and national
occasions. During these gatherings, they dress in their colorful Sudanese garments, share
ethnic food, dance and listen to indigenous music, exchange news about what is
happening in their original country, and keep closer ties with family and friends back
home. Clearly, they define themselves as Sudanese in the context of the United States.
However, while most of the women appear to endorse the Sudanese cultural and religious
tradition of “separate but equal” roles for males and females, they also (eventually)
acknowledge having experienced shifts in their views since immigrating to America.
These shifts in perception have made them more accepting of Western views regarding
women’s rights and equality. In America these Muslim Sudanese professional women
live lives that compel them to employ a certain “double consciousness”, always mindful
of their traditional roles and duties but open to egalitarian rights and freedom of expression that living in America has to offer.

**Encounters with (Gendered) Religious Discrimination: Stereotyping and Negative Perceptions of Muslim Women**

Generalized media messages enforce misconceptions about the world outside the U.S. People are bombarded by visual and printed media that depict Muslims, all Muslims, as terrorists and aggressive (Curtis, 2009; Basford, 2008; Rana, 2007; Said, 1981). As a result, Americans have negative attitudes towards Muslims, in particular Muslim women who wear *hijab*, the visible marker of their Muslim identity. Additionally, Muslims in the United States continue to experience the repercussion of after the September, 11, 2001 terrorist attack. In particular, it is becoming much harder for those who could easily be identified as Muslims. Curtis (2009) explains: “in the immediate aftermath of September 11, Muslim Americans also feared a backlash against them. In the past, some Americans had physically or verbally assaulted Muslims and those who “looked like Muslims” as a reaction to events overseas” (p.99). As a result, many incidents and harassments were reported in which Muslims were interrogated, imprisoned, or killed. Curtis (2009) explicitly pinpointed this growing animosity against Muslims in post 9/11 America:

As many as seven people, including an Arab American Christian, were murdered in revenge for 9/11. Other hate crimes included violent assault against Muslims, attacks against places of worship, and personal harassment. Some Americans told their fellow Muslim citizens to “go back to where they came from” and sent anonymous e-mail messages threatening to kill them. A few Americans actually spat on Muslim American women wearing headscarves. On the whole, anti-
Muslim hate crimes in the United States increased 1,700 percent during 2001 (p.100).

Several studies have captured how Muslim women have been racialized in their schools (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Zine 2001; 2006), in particular those who wear the Islamic dress ‘hijab’. It is true that, for most Americans, the hijab represents oppression, backwardness, and terrorism (Haw, 1998) and consequently heightens the islamophobic notion that spread among them after September 11/2001. While most of the Muslim women who wear hijab show increased pride in affirming their Islamic identity, in particular, after September 11, 2001 (Basford, 2008; Subedi, 2006; Haddad, 2004), they also became aware that their hijab made them more noticeable and vulnerable to hostile reactions; “a few Americans actually spat on Muslim American women wearing head scarves” (Curtis, 2009, p. 100). Eman who recently wore the hijab revealed that being covered exposed her to various acts of discrimination both at college and at work:

*Sometimes they talk to me directly and say that Muslims are killers, they do bad things, they hate Western people, and they hate Americans, or they start talking about what they saw or read on TV or the press...they start talking about that and try to find out about your views, understanding, and what side you are taking (Personal Communication, 06/22/2011).*

The participants’ encounters with religious discrimination and stereotyping vary. It ranges between severe encounters for those who wear hijab (Eman and Nadia), and relatively less for those who do not wear a specific Islamic dress (Amal, Mona, and Enas). However, in general, all the participants have been affected by the after 9/11 rising enmity towards Muslims. Those who wear hijab, that associate them to Muslims, have been harassed and labeled as terrorist and enemies (Curtis, 2009; CAIR, 2005). It is true
that during the war on terrorism American Muslims’ lives became open to the bright light of self-examination and at the same time vulnerable to the venoms of prejudice (Curtis, 2009, p.107)

Nadia started to wear the hijab while she was in dental college in the Sudan. I asked Nadia why she decided to wear the Islamic dress despite the fact that she was brought up in a less strict Muslim family. Her response revealed that her parents were not thrilled about her decision to wear hijab, in particular, her father who thought “it was ugly”. Nonetheless, and since that time she is very proud of her choice and always wear the hijab:

I was covered before my immigration to the U.S. I started my hijab when I was in college...you can say it was peers’ influence...my mom did not object that I cover...but my dad did not like it...he was not against it but he thought it was ugly. He also said that since it is my choice he was fine with it...it was not very strict hijab...you know...at that time... you just put a scarf on your hair and wore short sleeves...I just used to cover my hair... my dad was also angry at my sister’s hijab (Personal Communication, 09/06/2011)

Nadia who is fully covered considers her Islamic dress as a personal choice that is liberating. According to her the hijab “never hindered me from achieving my educational or career aspiration...though I was frequently treated unfairly because of my hijab.”

Unlike the popular discourse that alleges that Muslim women are forced into hijab, Nadia’s narrative confirms the counter-account that most Muslim women consciously chose to wear hijab. Despite her enthusiasm towards the hijab, Nadia maintained that she will never judge a Muslim woman’s religiosity by what she wears. In fact, Nadia’s
daughter who is a college student does not wear hijab and Nadia will never force her to do so because “it is up to her to decide”.

Nadia was subjected to frequent acts of discrimination and animosity because of her hijab. She felt it in her dental program, when applying for jobs, at her workplace, and by the general public. Referring to her experience at her dental college, Nadia insisted that she was harassed mainly because she is a Muslim. She added that “I was not the only Muslim student who was the target of that discriminative acts...my story was not the only one...but there is also an Iranian Muslim student who had to quit school as well...and maybe others...I heard that similar things happened to other Muslim students too” (Personal communication, 10/14/2011).

Nadia became convinced that, being a Muslim and covered played a major part in the hostility against her. According to Nadia it was the combination of her race and religion, the “double jeopardy” that made her school faculty and a staff hated her that much. Even though Nadia views this as “double jeopardy” the fact that it involves Muslim women’s attire makes it also gendered. She added that because she wears the Islamic dress she always finds herself in a situation where she has to sacrifice her rights so that people do not perceive her as a terrorist and aggressive.

Amal who does not wear hijab, dresses conservatively and sometimes covers her hair. In answering an interview question about what she thinks about the hijab, she reiterated:

*The way I dress since I was a child, a sort of a dress that covers most of the body... and as you know I was used to wear the Sudanese dress that rap around*
the body. Here in the U.S. it is not practical to wear our traditional “toab\(^2\)” so I put a scarf...although I do not put a tied scarf around my head and sometimes I go without it...I am at an age even within Islamic religion being over 50 years old nobody cares that much about how you dress. I always quote Quran exemption of older women from the restricted Islamic dress code...but I keep a scarf just as an identity...you know sometimes you have that connection with that identity. People get confused because they have this certain picture of Muslims and if in any way you have not fit within this picture you have to explain yourself...if I am travelling I do not want people to look at my name...how I dress and say you are a Muslim your name is a Muslim what are you trying to hide...so I just take off my scarf (Personal communication, 01/20/2012)

Amal did not have anything for or against the hijab because she believes that women have the right to dress the way they want. She did not believe in forcing women into it and also did not believe in forcing them out of it because either way they are denied the choice. On the contrary, Enas, who respects people’s choices does not like the hijab and will never wear it or recommend it to anybody.

For Enas, her classmates treated her badly and distanced themselves from her after the incident of 9/11. In such incidents some people tend to blame a whole group or community of the deviant acts that committed by the few. Following the 9/11 incident Muslims have been attacked, chastised, and excluded by their classmates, co workers, and in public areas (Curtis, 2009). Enas recalled her experience a week after the incident of 9/11/2001 when she was excluded by her classmates:

> It happened after 9/11...I remember at that time I was taking a class about general education...the course was about world religions...we were asked to introduce ourselves and our religions so as to compare religions...then ...you know the 9/11 incident happened...a week after the incident I noticed that all of my classmates have attitudes towards me as if each of them was pointing at me as being part of the attack on the U.S...I suffered a lot during this period of time...I

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\(^2\) Toab is a Sudanese women’s traditional dress that resembles the Indian sari but worn slightly different
even couldn’t find the words to explain to them that they are wrong… media was focusing on the attackers’ religion and how bad is Islam and Muslims…that Muslims are violent and terrorist (Personal Communication, 07/15/2011)

Enas used to believe that educated people who are more enlightened and open-minded would not blame a whole group for the heinous act of the few who did not represent all Muslims but she realized that “they were like everybody else stereotypical and judgmental”. During that time, the professor gave the students in Enas’ class an assignment that requires them to work in groups. Enas tried to sign with one of the groups but nobody wanted to work with her, “I did not know if they were afraid of me or what? But it was very stressful for me…they acted in a weird way…no one agreed to work with me”. Eventually, the professor who was very supportive offered his help and allowed her to conduct a project by herself. Enas added that “I just wanted them to understand that, I am like the rest of them, a Sudanese American who got angry about what happened in 9/11 and saddened by the loss of the innocent lives” (Personal communication, 07/15/2011).

In the same fashion, Eman’s classmate publicly humiliated her and insulted her religion in front of the whole class. Eman revealed that being covered exposed her to various acts of discrimination at college. She is used to hearing accusations. “Sometimes they talk to me directly or indirectly…I know they want me to hear it…I was the only Muslim in the class…they say that Muslims are killers…Muslims do bad things…they hate Americans…sometimes they start talking about what they read or saw on TV…yeah…they start talking about that and try to find out my views and what side I am
taking (Personal Communication, 06/22/2011). So it is apparent that Eman, during the course of her studies, was singled out, humiliated, and considered as an outcast who does not deserve to be awarded a graduate degree. Eman reiterates her excruciating experience with prejudice and religious stereotypes which she traits to the ignorance and insensitivity of some of her classmates. She detailed an incident when a white classmate, blatantly attacked her in front of the students and the class professor:

\[ I \text{ was not wearing hijab when I started my graduate studies...at that time nobody can tell if I am a Muslim or not...but after I put on the hijab they started asking me questions and talking negatively about Islam and Muslims in front of me...you know that kind of stuff... One student said something to me that hurts a lot...he aggressively excused the professor that he wanted to ask me a question, and then he said to me “Eman, we never heard anything good about Islam or Muslims” you now I always talk back...so I said to him that Islam is a way of life and Islam does not approve that people behave badly...that it is the people who do bad things not their religion because all religions ask people to be kind and respect each other...there is bad people in every religion (Personal Communication, 06/22/2011). \]

All participants reported that it is hard to be a black and a Muslim in the workplace. The popular image of Muslims that is disseminating through the dominant discourse influences Americans’ attitudes towards Muslims (Haddad, 2004; Said, 1978). I will never forget how years ago a co-worker, after watching the film “Black Hawk Down”\(^\text{53}\) the night before, said to me “You Muslim Somali you killed Americans.” This co-worker did not know that the Sudan and Somalia are two different countries. For her we all just looked alike\(^\text{54}\). She did not even bother to remember where I am from although we had worked together for over two years. She was blaming all the Somali and those

\(^{53}\) The “Black Hawk Down” is an American film based on a true story of a U.S mission in Somalia on October 3rd, 1993.
\(^{54}\) According to Curtis (2009) An Arab American Christian was killed in revenge of 9/11 attack (p.100).
who look like them for the deviant acts of the few, and now all Muslims are blamed for the September, 11 attack and they have to live with its repercussions. This kind of stereotyping, the “otherings” and the dissemination of a distorted image of Muslims in America and in the West that have been cited by many scholars (Curtis, 2009; Haddad, 2004; Said, 1981) continued to prevail.

Mona would not be readily recognized as a Muslim because she does not wear Islamic women’s attire. However, her employer singled her out because of her Muslim last name:

*For me I think it is hard to tell that I am a Muslim. The way I look and dress is different than the perception that people have about Muslim women...also I do not look Middle Eastern...another thing I do not wear hijab...so people do not know I am a Muslim until I tell them and by that time... I think probably people by that time will know who I am so they might not have that problem anymore...but it is different after 9/11...I remember an incident when I was working at the bank. They found a name of a Muslim person on a piece of paper in the bank...on the floor...so they became suspicious and they tried to associate it with me...you know I was the only person who was asked about it as if I am supposed to know that person...nobody else was asked...that banking office deals with a lot of businesses and it could have belonged to anybody...but they singled me out...I was the only one who was questioned about it (Personal communication 05/10/2011).*

When I asked the participants whether it is harder for them to practice their religion at work, most of the women complained that, even though they have the freedom to practice their religion rituals in the United State, they usually have problems practicing their daily prayers at their jobs. Conversely, Nadia had a positive experience in this regard. She reported that, when she first started her job she told her employer and co-workers that she is a Muslim and it is very important for her to find a place to perform
her prayers. Nadia’s coworkers were supportive and helped her find a secluded space for her to pray:

Some might feel embarrassed to ask for accommodation…but I didn’t…from the first day I told them (her employer and coworkers) that it is very important for me to perform my daily prayers…I told them I need a quite place to do that and immediately they suggested some spots…I chose a storage room in the back… I have a prayer mat in my office I do not feel embarrassed…at prayer time I tell them I am going to pray and I will be back soon… I also read the Quran during breaks… actually they became aware of many things about my religion that they did not know before… they know I fast the month of Ramadan and every year they arrange a potluck before I start the fasting (Personal Communication 10/14/2011).

Amal, on the other hand, feels that she is now closer to her religion than ever because right now “I feel I am attacked because of my religion; that people are not comfortable with me because of my religion...that makes huge difference to me”. Amal is showing the same religious commitments as before, except that: “I am now into debate about my religion…I am reading more about my religion…and I am writing more about my religion”.

Amal usually asks her students to describe Muslim women. They refer to them as covered, being beaten by their husbands, excluded, and oppressed. Then, she will explain to them “most of the time that is not true…then I tell them I am a Muslim...they become in disbelieve assuming that it is not true...really it surprises them when I reveal that I am a Muslim...they tell me that I do not look like the traditional Muslim woman” (Personal communication, 01/20/2012). Amal asserted that her students’ views are a reflection of how Americans perceive Muslim women. That a Muslim woman is supposed to be
veiled, married, submissive, and probably abused. Once again, they are perpetuating the stereotypical image of Muslims which is enforced by the American dominant discourse.

In answering a question about to what extent being a Muslim and/or covered could affect the participants’ access to employment and promotions. Nadia made it clear that wearing hijab has exposed her to unfair treatment and limited her access to jobs. Mona agreed that hijab has a big effect on job opportunities especially when combined with race. Mona’s encounter with religion discrimination was less compared to the participants who wear hijab because “she does not carry herself as one”. Nonetheless, she was subjected to discrimination when her employer learned that she is a Muslim:

Yes it happened to me…but it depends on what kind of employer and the job and if they are open minded…because for some of them [employers] even if I am not covered and they knew I am a Muslim they will not hire me or if they do…they treat me differently…yes it can affect people…but I see people doing well in other jobs…physicians and nurses for example...yeah in certain places it is much harder...they do not prefer covered people in the business world but in places like hospitals I saw a lot of Muslims in my town (Mona, personal communication, 01/20/2012).

Eman believes that both her skin color and hijab were the reason that her employers did not treat her the same way they treat the white workers…“sometimes they look at you...as if saying you are not like everybody here...and even before you talk you feel a kind of prejudice...even you can read it from how they look at you or from their body language as if they are saying you do not belong here you are different from us” (Personal communication, 08/04/2011).

Smith (2002), who investigated Muslim women’s experiences in Canada found that twenty nine out of thirty two veiled participants had their prospective employers
point to their hijab when they applied for jobs, and twenty one of them were asked if they would be willing to remove their headscarves, while a third in that study were actually advised to remove their hijab if they wanted the job (Smith, 2002, in Zine, 2004). The findings of Smith’s study illustrate how discrimination, profiling, and “Othering” of Muslim women, especially those who wear hijab, encumber their access to jobs. These acts by employers could heighten these women distress and affect them socially, economically, and discursively limit their access to career opportunities.

Although, all the participants in this study believe that being Muslim exposed them to unjust treatment, sometimes it was difficult for them to tell whether they lost hiring opportunities due to their religion or their race. Eman and Nadia were the participants whose hijab renders them the most severe acts of discrimination:

_The problem is... I can’t hide it (hijab). When you do an interview they do not tell you ...well we did not take you because you are so and so...they just send you a letter or call you to tell you that the job is taken...you will never know why the job is taken by somebody else...you will never know that...and they will never tell you...but deep in your heart you know it...of course it always be a problem... being...a foreigner and a Muslim will always be a problem_ (Nadia, Personal communication, 10/14/2011).

Amal asserted that Americans are misinformed about Islam and Muslims, in particular after the September 11 incident that heightened the animosity against Muslims and labeled them as terrorists. Enas supported Amal’s claim and added “_there are a lot of terrorists’ acts done inside America by Americans such as Oklahoma City bombing that claimed many lives...I will never assume that all Americans are terrorists...but for us the_
case is different...we are blamed for every action done by any Muslim...even if she or he was insane” (Personal communication, 11/02/2011).

The truth of the matter is that, Muslims like their fellow American citizens were outraged at what happened in September 11/2001 (Curtis, 2009). In addition, some of the Muslims were killed or injured in the attack, others are paying their dues and joined the army and ready to defend the security of their adopted country, and for the rest of us we work hard, and as good citizens pay our taxes and contribute to the community. According to Curtis (2009) Muslim Americans “also reacted to the attacks with a determination to help the victims. Muslims contributed thousands of dollars to 9/11-related charities…the all Dallas area Muslim society dedicated its Friday congregational prayers to the victims and sponsored a blood drive…All major Muslim organizations and leaders condemned terrorism and the murder of innocent victims” (p. 98).

The participants, in particular those who wear hijab noted that 9/11 was a turning point where things became tough for them. They feel that they have to be extra nice and to give up some of their rights just to prove that they are regular people and not terrorists and just to counter what is in people’s minds about Muslims. In many instances, they wanted to fight for their rights but they back up and behave differently so as not to fit the stereotypical image:

Most of the time when I face hostility and discrimination I wanted to retaliate but because I wear the hijab...I did not want to be stereotyped...I kept silent although I wanted to fight back...most of time I have to give up my rights...so many times...to prove that we Muslims are not terrorists or aggressive people...it happened to me many times (Nadia, Personal communication, 10/14/2011).
Enas who does not wear *hijab*, has an interesting viewpoint “*I will never ever wear hijab…my point is...we are already different in many ways why I have to add more difference and stress myself…no offense to those who chose to wear it…but I personally…I do not like it*”. Amal as well was very articulate, in particular when the issue fell within her area of expertise. Her narratives reflected her many personas, the feminist, the writer, and the university professor of gender and women studies. She further shed the light on the influence of religion on the behavior of girls and boys in her family and in Sudan in general:

Well…religion for my family…I came from a very religious family…somewhat we were segregated and somewhat within close kinship and neighbors you find men and women mingling… but with someone who is distant relative or just a visitor the house is really segregated and men are separated from women and they do not mingle. However, in my country religious differences are within religion itself. Here the debate is different. The debate is that people might think other religions are not good or other religions are not as good as theirs…or other religions are made for terrorists so the debate is completely different (Personal Communication, 01/20/2012)

**Summary**

It is essential that one understands these women’s religious experiences on two levels. That is, the important role that their religion plays in their everyday lives in the host country, and their experiences regarding negative perceptions of them as Muslim women which caused them to turn to their religion for comfort and support against the challenges they face in this new milieu. For many, the *hijab* is a symbol of the oppressive Islamic culture but for Eman and Nadia wearing the *hijab* serves as a significant religious statement aimed towards reinforcing their Muslim identity which
they also find to be liberating. All of the participants who identify themselves primarily as Muslim claim feel that their religion is not respected by mainstream America in particular in the post 9/11 society, where many Muslims suffered from racial profiling, Islamaphobic attitudes, and otherness. They find themselves having to defend and answer for their religion. Because of this they are drawn to know more about their religion so as to correct misconceptions and inform Americans about Islam. Amal is now into debate about her religion, reading more about it and writing about it because she feels “*attacked because of my religion; that people are not comfortable with me because of my religion*...*that makes huge difference to me*”.

There are many Muslim immigrants who are socialized to exist in more than one world. Alghamdi (2006) found that immigrant Muslim women, in most cases, were able to navigate between the norms and values of their host country and that of their country of origin. For the women in this study it is in the world of mainstream American culture where they are seen as inadequate and the “other” (Collins, 1986; Said, 1978). Thus navigation between the two becomes inevitable, stressful, and intense at times. It is clear that the participants are resilient and strong fighters. They survived the odds with their strong personalities and the help of their network of family, friends, and the Sudanese community.

In this chapter I presented the findings based on the three research questions that I proposed at the beginning of this study. In chapter 5, as a summary of my findings, I will answer the research questions by discussing the participants’ perceptions of their
encounters with discrimination, the impact of these encounters on their experiences and how they navigate between two cultures and at the same time working towards carving a place of their own.
Chapter 5

Implications and recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how race, gender, and religion intersect in shaping the educational and career experiences of the five immigrant Sudanese professional Muslim women in the United States. In chapter 4, I reported the findings related to the three research questions that I introduced at the beginning of this study. The first question sought to identify how the immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women residing in the U.S. perceive their educational and career experiences in America.

The consensus among the women was that their experience was one in which they were faced with having to adapt to new identities that confronted them upon arriving in the United States. Prior to their immigration all of the participants in this study had earned higher educational degrees and achieved professional success. They also viewed themselves as thriving working women who possessed personal traits that would sustain them in the Diaspora. Upon their arrival to the U.S. they were faced with many challenges. They realized that their identities had been racialized and that they were positioned in a lower status where their skin color, gender, religion, accents, culture, and other factors became grounds for discrimination. The participants also became aware of the fact that any of these grounds of discrimination could occur simultaneously.
All the women in this study described race/ethnicity as being the major factor in their discrimination with religion being second and gender last. Nonetheless, the participants’ stories revealed that race/ethnicity and religion do intersect at different levels although they find it hard to distinguish when they are acting separately or combined. While race/ethnicity is the overriding factor in all of the women’s narratives, the participants agree that, most of the time, there was an overlap between the factors of (race/ethnicity, accent, and religion) where they converged to shape their experiences. Nadia’s experiences included the intersection between being black and hijabi. In other words she experienced the intersection between her race and religion and did not feel that she has been treated differently because of her gender. However for Mona, being black is much harder, and being black and a woman is harder than being a Muslim because she does not fit the stereotypical picture of a Muslim woman.

The varied locations of the participants at the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender and religious discrimination was evident in the accounts of their experiences. This was reflected in the negative evaluations, low grading, and unfair treatment by faculty, staff, and students as well as in job opportunities, interviews, and unequal pay. Also, there was skepticism regarding their abilities, and even when they excel they were not praised or at best considered exceptional which translated in a big “wow” as in Nadia’s case. Thus the participants in this study came to perceive their educational and career experiences in terms of the intersectionality of factors that were used as grounds for discrimination, namely racial/ethnic, gender, and religion.
The second research question focused on how the immigrant professional Sudanese women perceive the impact of their race, gender, and religion on their experiences as they carve their own space within their respective professions. All of the participants in this study described race as being the major factor in their experience with religion being second and gender last. Mona’s first challenge after her arrival in the U.S. was communication. She struggled with speaking the English language and making people understand her. The participants’ negative encounters due to their race, gender, religion, and accent have affected their access to services and jobs. They had to work harder than everybody and tolerate racist behaviors and humiliation in order to move forward and defy the negative assumptions about them.

Nadia and Eman painfully reminisced about their experiences. No matter how hard they have worked, when it came to evaluation, there was always something they did not do or did wrong. Although happy and fulfilled, Eman has experienced high degrees of stress as a result of her experiences with racism and Islamophobia at her graduate program and her workplace. Eman thinks about returning home whenever the situation becomes too tough for her to handle. She is nostalgic and misses her previous life around the people she loves most.

The participants tend to have different reactions when they encounter discriminatory acts. Eman usually retaliates “*If I feel it or somebody said something negative I do not wait…I immediately talk back*”. According to hooks (1989) “talk is the mark of freeing…challenging the oppressed to speak as a way to resist and rebel”
Conversely, when Enas and Amal encounter stereotyping, most of the time they use the occasion to counter people’s ignorance and educate them about their culture and religion. Mona always confronts the aggressor no matter what the consequences are, while Nadia, because of her hijab, most of the time turns a blind eye because she doesn’t want to be seen as terrorist or violent.

In answering a question about what advice they would give to somebody who is coming to live in the U.S., all the women agreed that learning the language, getting an education, and working hard are the most important things. Amal suggested that people should not be hard on themselves because it is hard to change the mentality of people here, therefore they have to learn to “let go” and try not to internalize the negative assumptions about them and move forward. Amal also offered new immigrants a very genuine and well worded advice that stemmed from her own experience as an immigrant and from working with women and gender issues. She recommended that, they be ready for the challenges which must not deter them from achieving their dreams. Indeed obtaining a degree from the U.S. was one way through which these women tried to counter their marginalization and carve a place of their own. While Mona gave me the following special advice “Don’t...don’t be too trusting of your white supervisors or coworkers because they will never show you their exact face”, She also has a valuable advice for the new comers which echoes Amal’s advice regarding the importance of education. She advice immigrant to be open minded and not to think that all Americans
are prejudiced toward them, because there are still good people among them who will be willing to help them.

The third research question examined what are the significant issues embraced by these women as they struggle to negotiate a place within American educational institutions and their professions? This study reveals the important role that networking, spirituality, and religion play in reducing the professional Sudanese Muslim women’s frustrations that result from everyday encounters with societal injustices. The participants use their faith and spirituality as sources of strength and power to handle life’s hardships in the Diaspora.

All the participants regard religion and spirituality as essential in enhancing their lives. However, not all of them consider themselves religious despite the fact that they all practice the major rituals such as prayers and fasting Ramadan. Religion and spirituality have positive effects in easing the participants’ stress that emerge from their experiences of injustice, alienation, and discrimination. However, despite the fact the mainstream America devalue these women’s original culture and knowledge, making their voices heard and their cultural values available to the public lend value to their cultural traditions and their ways of dealing with the differences between what used to make sense to them and what they encounter in the new milieu. However, it is important to realize that Sudanese men and women are socialized around different gender and role expectations are different too. This is clear in Mona’s narrative that men are expected to take care of the family “there are different family expectations...men are supposed to be
the providers for their families...for example my mom...she still expects or supposes that my brother have to send her money every month...but she does not expect the same thing from me or my sisters...for my brother it is an obligation”

In this context, Abu-Lughod (1998) criticizes Western feminism that tends to devalue the other cultures by suggesting that in order for the “other” women to be liberated they need to espouse a Western lifestyle. Thus, the same argument have been raised by Lazreg (1994) who rejects the “bias…embedded in the objectification of “different” women as unmediated “other,” the embodiments of cultures presumed inferior and classified as “traditional” or “patriarchal”. I believe that being an insider feminist and having knowledge about Sudanese cultural traditions and its attachment to Islamic religion privileged me with more understanding of the participants’ struggles and helped me make sense of their stories. For all of them Islamic religion is the primary identity location. However, the women are more concerned about their rights and respect for their religion, culture, and knowledge instead of being forced to integrate in the American culture, albeit their believe that integration is a personal choice that should not be imposed. Obviously the participants value their religion, and family is important to each of them.

Negotiating a place: Significant issues

The women in this study had to deal with the general issue of negotiating a place for them in American society. The participants were able to find a place for themselves between both the Sudanese and American cultures. This in-betweeness created a tension
which was articulated by Amal where she finds herself living two lives. Nonetheless, they managed to adopt new ways of living regarding gender equality and making their own decisions as well as commitment to their religion and cultural traditions that keep them in harmony with their Muslim community.

Another important issue was finding support in the beginning of that process. They came to depend greatly on their network of support to get to where they are today. Access to networks played a crucial role by providing these women with emotional support and self confidence which helped them to deal with the effects of discrimination, and negative stereotyping. All participants who relied on help from friends and family when they first came to the U.S. continue turning to family and friends during their most difficult moments. Mona had had both positive and negative experiences but her determination and the support of family and friends helped her through. Her sources of support during her master’s degree studies were the Sudanese families and students whom she knew when she first came to this country. After Mona got married her husband provided the main support, emotionally and financially. In addition, her brother who came after her as well continues to provide companionship and comfort.

When Amal first moved to the U.S, she sought help from her Sudanese friends who came here before her, “It is like a continuation of the family life we had back home”. Amal also befriended some Americans who helped her. Listening to Amal talk about her American friends, I recalled that, most of the participants stated that they did not have American friends and they do not know if that was because they do not want to befriend
them or because these women always find it easier to befriend within their own ethnic group. Amal believe that friendship with Americans is different from what we used to back home. She mentioned that, Americans can befriend you while you are their classmate, colleague or coworker, but they forget about you when they move to another state or country. For us Sudanese, a friend is a friend for life no matter where they are.

Another shared issue for all the participants was getting a job. All of the women, despite their university degrees and graduate studies, had to take odd jobs in order to sustain themselves and their families. Amal thought that she would never be able to find a job, but because she has a brother here she did not find herself totally affected by that. She knew that if things became difficult she could just go to her brother’s house and he will take care of her which is part of the Sudanese culture. She pointed that, these are some of the features of our culture and family life that we want to continue here because it is not just a nice gesture of her brother to accommodate her but her brother has duty towards her as well as she has duty towards him.

Amal’s sources of support, which continue until now, are her Sudanese and American friends and a brother who came here before her. Recently, Amal’s colleagues and coworkers became a source of support to her. They frequently spend time together and enjoy each other’s company. It worth noting that, Amal was the only participants who did not have a negative experience in her current job. On the contrary, she has a close relationship with her colleagues and enjoys a positive working environment.
On the contrary, when Enas came to this country, she had very little support from friends and from her husband who had to take two jobs in order to sustain his family. Her husband did not have time to help her so she mainly relied on herself despite her modest accented English. Likewise, Nadia who travelled to many countries before residing in the U.S. admitted that she was in need of a lot of help when she arrived in the U.S. However, she got very little help from the few friends that she has here. She believes that was due to the limited numbers of the Sudanese in her city of residence at that time.

According to Nadia, coping required a lot of prayers, meditation, and a network support. She relied on her faith which helped her to keep her “sanity” while fighting for her right to be treated like any other student. For Eman, when she came to the U.S her husband who came before her and has a good paying job provided her with all the support she needed, from opening a bank account, grocery shopping, to teaching her how to drive. In addition, she as well got little help from her husband’s friends whom she later befriended.

The participants’ narratives revealed that, these experiences inspired each of them to focus on advancing their education and careers and achieve success. They turned to their close network of family, friends, and ethnic community for support in resolving the issues that they faced.

Amal, Mona, Eman, Nadia, and Enas agree that there are many opportunities in this country and immigrants need to take advantage of what it could offer them and their families. They all came here with aspirations and big dreams believing that they could
attain them in a short period of time, which was not the case for most of us. Furthermore, all the women confirmed that, despite the challenges, hostilities, and skepticism about their abilities at their respective colleges and workplaces, they are content about their lives in the U.S. They frequently pointed with pride to what they were able to achieve here. They felt that, while they have no control on how people perceive them, they find gratification in their educational achievements, work, family success, as well as in their networks of families, friends, and Sudanese community.

Having the support of family and friends was the main source of strength to the women in this study. In addition, the women showed strongest ties to their religion and Sudanese cultural traditions. Overall, I believe that Abusharaf (2002) have expressively connoted the location of the participants:

In their migration to the United States…these women challenged stereotypes of female passivity and dependency. These are clearly political conscious women whose migration to the United States… is perceived by them as a necessary step…they viewed their migration as a forced movement carried out under the pressure of the state … Sudanese women have shown strength and self-reliance in remaking their lives and struggling to overcome the psychological and physical pressure of being refugee in another country (p.101).

After narrating their stories, the participants reported that they felt relief and validation after hearing that others have gone through similar experiences. They were appreciative and excited that this study gave them voice and the chance to share their struggles, concerns, aspirations, and achievements. In essence, this was gratifying since I align myself with narrative researchers who have advocacy and “libratory” hopes for their research (Bloom, 2002).
Black feminist theory provided the theoretical foundation for this study that examined the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women in the U.S. However, it is crucial that feminist researchers and black feminists in particular, who strive to bring justice to the oppressed women and realize gender equality, should take in consideration the distinct location of women who are from different cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs. By working with such diverse perspectives, they would be able to see the connection between women’s struggle worldwide and sought solutions that benefit all women (Collins, 2000). Thus, by bringing the experiences and the religious and cultural values of Sudanese women to the forefront of the discussion, people will enrich their knowledge and become less inclined toward injecting their own believes and vision on “other” women.

**Implications**

This study is valuable in that it addresses the gap in the research regarding the experiences of immigrant Muslim women from black Africa and professional Muslim Sudanese women in particular. The move to the U.S. has affected these women greatly. Their encounters with discrimination negatively affected their academic progress and career advancement. Conversely, and apart from their experiences with racial, gender, religion, and other forms discrimination, the participants appreciated living in the U.S. and the knowledge they gained even from their negative experiences. In addition, many
of them experienced shifts in their perceptions of gender roles and position and were brought closer to their religion, strengthening their faith.

The findings of this study have several implications for educational research and diversity studies. The study provided the participants opportunity and space to tell their stories as they lived it and thus contributes to our understanding of the kinds of multiple marginalities they experienced as women who are black and Muslim. A resulting implication highlights the need for further studies that critically examine the dominant ideologies regarding race, gender, religious and other forms of discrimination (Rana, 2007; Zine, 2006; Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Collins, 2000; 1999, Crenshaw, 1995; Hooks; 1990), and their influence on the experiences of professional Sudanese Muslim women who have immigrated to America. In addition, this study also draws attention to the complexities, contradictions and tensions that emerge from such experiences and highlight the need for developing strategies to address them.

Secondly, the findings of this study yielded several implications for the consideration of higher education professionals and workplace employers. The findings point to the need for higher education professionals and workplace employers to broaden their awareness of: 1) the lived realities of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women; 2) the significant issues that concern them; 3) the misconceptions and stereotyping about Muslim women. In addition, this study provides significant opportunities for staff, faculty, and employees to learn about the lived experiences and challenges of professional Sudanese Muslim women and might serve to produce
educational and work environments that are tolerant and culturally responsive to the needs of the U.S. increasing diverse populations.

Finally, Eman described her teacher training experience at a predominately white school as one where she felt alienated and mistreated. Eman’s experience points to the lack of academic and professional support systems for teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds. It also begs to question whether those persons charged with supervising such students have been provided adequate training and instruction. These findings suggest a need for teacher education programs to prepare teachers with the skills and attitudes required to meet the needs of culturally diverse groups of teacher candidates. Banks et al. (2005) suggest that the goal must be to design teacher education programs that make attention to diversity, equity, and social justice centrally important so that all courses and field experiences for prospective teachers are conducted with these important goals in mind (p. 274). Such programs and cooperating schools will also serve to benefit from environments in which educators and students are able to broaden their cultural knowledge and experiences.

Although this study is just a “scratch on the surface” I hope that, by making these women’s stories available to the reader, they will provide more understanding of this minority group and engender a degree of acceptance that supersedes differences. Finally, similar to black feminist scholars I hope that I have provided ample space for the participants’ voices to be heard with the conviction that “each time a woman begins to
speak, a liberating process begins, one that is unavoidable and has powerful political implications” (hooks, 1989, p.12).

**Recommendations**

Scholars assert that the lack of diversity among students, faculty, and staff renders a hostile environment for black students which tend to negatively affect their academic performance (Singleton and Linton, 2006; McKinney, 2002; Djangi, 1993). Diversity and the existence of blacks and other people of color among faculty, staff, students, and in the workplace facilitate people of color having positive experiences in school and work settings. Diversity in the school and work settings also provides them with role models who look like them. Moreover, commitment to social justice and equal treatment is needed at every level, from the faculty, staff, students, to employers and coworkers.

Djangi (1993) found that most of higher education diversity programs fall short from sustaining equitable environments. He recommends that in order for educational institutions to maintain a racially tolerant climate they must ask themselves the following questions:

- Are faculty members trained to help students accept other races and cultures?
- Does the institution adequately train students to live in a pluralistic society?
- Do administration and faculty recognize the racial tension in the school?

For Djangi, the solution lies with, school policies, faculty recruitment and awareness, student sensitivity, and curriculum opportunities (p.16).
A closer examination of diversity programs in most universities and colleges in the U.S. affirms the need for more effective approaches that sustain inclusion and tolerance (Singleton and Linton, 2006; Banks, 2004; Djangi, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1990). All the participants noted that higher education faculty, students, and staff lack the knowledge and the ability to deal with the increasingly diversified students’ body in their educational institutions. They suggested that more attention be paid to informing them about the different people that constitute the mosaic of their institutions which could be achieved through designing and sustaining comprehensive diversity programs. Such programs should foster greater cultural sensitivity among faculty staff and students. Likewise, as their numbers rise in institutions of higher education, black immigrant Muslim women’s culture and values in particular need to be considered in programs aimed at fostering diversity and the success and retention of faculty, staff, and students of color.

Researchers such as Singleton & Linton (2006) assert the need for educators to not shy away from discussing race in their classrooms and to challenge the existing racism within their institutions. Courses that teach about minorities’ cultures and religions could as well be beneficial. Finally, diversity programs within higher education should be reexamined, evaluated and monitored in order to sustain equal treatment and access to services by all students.

Although the Law prohibits any discrimination at workplace due to race, gender, age, religion, or country of origin, among others, whites continue to be the preferred
choice and accorded better treatment. The results of this study confirms research findings that the color of the skin and gender provide the bearer certain privileges over black people and people of color (Blumrosen and Blumrosen, 2002; Collins, 2000; Reid & Diaz, 1990; McIntosh, 1988). All of the participants in this study agreed that, in addition to their race and ethnicity, the popular stereotypical image of African and Muslim women has contributed to the way they were treated in educational institutions as well as in workplaces. Additionally, each of the participants mentioned being the only one or one of the few black women in the workplace which caused them to be easy target of unequal treatment, discrimination, and prejudice.

The participants also noted that, most of the time they receive better treatment from those students or managers and co-workers who look like them. Eman reported “I usually get better treatment from black students than from the Whites…to me…that is normal…we deal with the same kind of treatment due to our skin color.” Thus, having black coworkers will provide networks of support that offer guidance, advice, and camaraderie. This would be possible when employers become willing to hire minority women as well as recruiting blacks and people of color at management levels.

Likewise, employers need to be willing to evaluate and sustain diversity and equality in their workplace. A diverse workforce could enrich the workplace by introducing new perspectives, skills, and ideas that could improve the productivity. Equally, consideration of the cultural background of the minority employees and sustenance of a culture of inclusion will benefit employers and the participants and those
who look like them. Lastly, establishment of a system of accountability and responsibility for racial bias reduction; commitments by employers to equality and equitable performance standards; fair evaluation; and consideration of merits and skills as requirements for employment instead of appearances (race, gender, etc); and maintaining a friendly working environment would benefit this minority group.

Certainly, further research is needed in this area to unravel the challenges of African Muslim women’s experiences with other forms of discrimination such as class, age, and sexuality. Another area that needs further research is the role of education with respect to immigrant women’s perceptions of their gender role. For instance, my next project will be to examine the experiences of immigrant Sudanese women who are currently working in faculty positions. Another future study could compare the experiences of immigrant Muslim women from the Sudan with other immigrant black women both in educational settings and in workplace. A comparative study of the experiences of immigrant Sudanese men and women and their perceptions in regard to race, gender, and religion would also be valuable. Nonetheless, these proposed studies may benefit from a larger sample and more diverse participants or longitudinal studies that involve other methods of data collection. While there is a lot yet to be learned about the experiences of this minority in the U.S., I consider this study as the springboard for further investigation.
Closing remarks

*I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear I rise\(^5\)

Five wonderful women shared stories of their experiences with racism, sexism, and religious discrimination in their study programs and workplaces. The findings indicated that racism and religious discrimination were present for all participants, and to a lesser extent gender discrimination. Despite these experiences, the participants did not feel that their encounters with unjust treatment prevented them from having successful lives in the U.S. It is clear from their narratives that negative experiences have made them stronger, assertive and added to their growth. They valued the support that they received from their families, friends, their community, and their faith and belief in God which provided them with the needed strength. This study is valuable in the sense that it contributes to the literature and tackles the identified gap in the studies about immigrant Muslim women from black Africa and their experiences in the U.S. By far, it is the first study that examines the educational and career experiences of immigrant Sudanese Muslim women in America and the role that their race, gender, and religion play in these experiences.

\(^5\) Excerpt from Maya Angelou’s (1983) poem “still I rise”.

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Through the course of this study I developed an increased appreciation of how black feminist theory provides a unique lens for exposing the experiences, ideas, and the strengths of the women in this study. Bloom (1996) wrote about the “political, moral, and epistemological reasons for feminist scholars to collect and interpret women’s narratives” (p. 311). Therefore, it is crucial that women scholars exert efforts to improve their skills in order to uncover and dismantle the conspiracies against women (Fonow & Cook, 2005). I also believe that “there is always choice and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be” (Collins, 2000, p.237).

While listening to the participants’ stories, I heard the subtleties in their voices, the anger, and relief about their experiences in this country. I also realized that these “African women were rediscovering themselves again, re-creating themselves and their lives” (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p.3). For them, the straddle between the two cultures, and the discrimination they endured due to their race, gender, and religion, presented them with opportunity to find their voices and to say “enough is enough”, despite the fact that “the event of 9/11 threatened to silence such voices in Muslim America-or more accurately, made it impossible for some non-Muslim Americans to hear these voices” (Curtis, 2009, p. 107).

Through the narratives I learned that some of the participants used to be activists in their original communities back in the Sudan, fighting for their rights and raising the consciousness of their fellow women. Some continued their activism and joined the fight against discrimination in the U.S. Amal does that through her teaching of gender and
women studies, Enas and Mona through their confrontation with the perpetrators and use the chance to educate them about their culture and religion, and Eman and Nadia, through volunteering and hard work.

Indeed obtaining a degree from the U.S. was one way through which these women tried to counter their marginalization. It is true that for black women, education is a liberating tool that empowers and provides them with knowledge and carriage for resistance (Pierre, 2010; Collins, 2000) that carries them through life. They perceive “education as necessary liberating force” (Afshar, 1989, p. 269) that enabled them to assert themselves and achieve their long held dreams.

As members of three oppressed groups; black African immigrants, women, and Muslims, the participants’ life stories provided unique perspectives, values, and aspirations. Their determination “challenged stereotypes of female passivity and dependency. These are clearly political conscious women whose migration to the United States… is perceived by them as a necessary step…they viewed their migration as a forced movement carried out under the pressure of the state … Sudanese women have shown strength and self-reliance in remaking their lives and struggling to overcome the psychological and physical pressure of being refugee in another country (Abusharaf, 2002, p.101).

As participants narrated their stories, their responses were mixed with emotions and physical expressions. I also became emotional while listening to their collection of their traumatic experiences with racism, sexism, and religion discrimination. We shared
laughter and jokes, in addition to the pride and joy of what we have already accomplished, and the sense of agency and resiliency was blatant among us. Each of the participants articulated her appreciation of the chance given to her to “spell loudly” her frustration and success through this study. At the same time, they all showed how proud they are of me as I embark on finishing my PhD. Even, after the conclusion of the interviews and whenever I run into one of them they kept asking about when I am going to graduate. Eman once said to me “I consider your success as mine too…it is an inspiration to all of us...so you have to finish soon”. I am really privileged to have had the chance to work with such incredible women.

As a feminist researcher, I always have in mind Borland’s (1991) assertion that “we seek to empower the women we work with by revaluing their perspectives, their lives… in a world that has systematically ignored or trivialized women’s culture (p.64). Like the participants, this study provided me with the chance to find my own voice through presenting snapshots of my experiences, and while I found the self-reflection and telling about the self difficult, it was also liberating. I felt uplifted by the participants’ comments and their optimism about their future in this country. All of them, despite the negative experiences, still believe that living in the U.S. has afforded them and their families, great opportunities and rewards. They believe in MLK’s56 “having a dream” and

56 In his speech in 1963 Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) said that he has a dream about the day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin but by their merits and character contents. That everybody will be treated equally and we accept one another despite our differences.
their hope that “it gets better” has helped them to stay positive and optimistic in order to achieve their ultimate goals.
References


Guner, Elvan (2007) *Understanding Muslim girls experiences in Midwestern school settings: Negotiating their cultural identities and interpreting the social studies curriculum* (Unpublished PhD). The Ohio State University.


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U. S. Census Bureau www.factfinder.census.gov


www.Africanews.net

www.worlbank.org /sd


Appendix A: Recruitment letter
Recruitment letter

Date:

Dear ….

My name is Awatif Elnour. I am a doctoral candidate at The Ohio State University, in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership in the College of Education and Human Ecology. I am conducting a study that examines the intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of immigrant professional Sudanese Muslim women in the United States. This project represents a partial fulfillment of the requirements for my Ph.D. degree. By doing this study I would like to understand the role that race, gender, religion, or immigrant status plays in your everyday lives in America. The study aims to extend the research on the experiences of Muslim minorities in the United States. More specifically, it explores how race, gender, and religion intersect in shaping your experiences; how you navigate between two worlds: your native culture, traditions, Islamic faith, and the American mainstream culture; and how your formal and informal educational experiences in the U.S. impact your viewpoint.

I would like to solicit your participation in my study. You have been referred to me by a friend who is a member of the Sudanese association of Ohio to participate in this project. As a participant in this study you will engage in a dialogue about your educational and career experiences in the U.S. In telling your stories from your own perspectives, you will have a voice; feel empowered to counter the inequalities and resist
the dominant ideologies regarding race, gender, and stereotyping. In addition you will be provided the opportunity to contribute your perspectives to educational research and literature. By listening to your stories about your struggles to counter stereotypes, racism, and sexism, educators, employers, and social institutions could be enlightened and encouraged to participate in providing a positive climate of tolerance and appreciation of the “Other”. I also anticipate that, the study will provide information that could be incorporated in teaching about African Muslim women and enhance the diversity and inclusion endeavors in American society.

The data collection will approximately take 20 hours spread over 3 months (a minimum of two one hour informal interviews per participant, two hours group interview and it includes member checking meetings). Data collection will involve informal individual and group interviews between February and April 2011. The initial interview will last approximately for one hour. As well, two follow-up interviews and one group interview will also be scheduled. Participation in this study is voluntary; you may choose not to continue at any point. Interviews will be tape recorded and you will have the opportunity to review the transcripts. The data obtained will be summarized without using your name or the name of your institution in the findings of my dissertation.

If you agreed to participate in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form and return it back to me. After receiving the consent form I will contact you to discuss the details regarding the dates, times and locations for individual and group interviews. I value your participation in this study and thank you in advance for the commitment of
time, energy and effort this will require and if you have any questions about the study or your participation you can reach me at: or my advisor at:

Thank you for your assistance
Awatif Elnour
Ph.D. Candidate
The Ohio State University
Appendix B: The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research
**The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research**

**Study Title:** The intersection of race, gender, and religion in the educational and career experiences of professional Sudanese Muslim women in the United States

**Researcher:** Awatif Elnour

**Sponsor:** NA

**This is a consent form for research participation.** It contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

**Your participation is voluntary.**
Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

**Purpose:**
The purpose of this study is to extend the research on the experiences of Muslim minorities in the United States. More specifically, it explores how race, gender, and religion intersect in shaping the experiences of professional Sudanese Muslim women; how they navigate between two worlds: their native culture, traditions, Islamic faith, and the American mainstream culture; and how their experiences in the U.S. impact their viewpoint

**Procedures/Tasks:**
In order to illuminate the lived experiences and give voices to professional Sudanese Muslim women, this study will use method of narrative inquiry in order to explore the participants’ racial, gender and religion experiences. We will use narrative as a lens through which we can understand how you perceive your professional and educational experiences in the United States. Individual and group interviews will be utilized to collect data. Interviews will be held with a minimum of two one hour informal interviews per participant, and two hours group interview including member checking meeting between February and April, 2011. All interviews and meetings will be audio-taped.

**Duration:**
Approximately 20 hours spread over 3 months (a minimum of two one hour informal interviews per participant, and two hours group interview including member checking meetings).
You may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

**Risks and Benefits:**
We anticipate no risks to you from your participation in this study. However, during interviews you are likely to share information that might be sensitive or harmful in which case the shared information will not be recorded or included in research analysis. You have the right to decline answering any questions at any time during the course of the study.

In telling your stories from your own perspectives, you will have voice; feel empowered to counter the inequalities; resist the dominant ideologies regarding race, gender, and Islam; and provided the opportunity to contribute your perspectives to educational research and literature. By listening to your stories about your struggles to counter marginalization, stereotypes, racism, and sexism, educators, employers, and social institutions could be enlightened and encouraged to participate in providing a positive climate of tolerance and appreciation of the “Other”. We also anticipate that, the study will provide information that could be incorporated in teaching about African Muslim women and enhance the diversity and inclusion endeavors in American society.

**Confidentiality:**
Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):
- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

**Incentives:**
There are no incentives for participation in this study.

**Participant Rights:**
You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.
If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

Contacts and Questions:
For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Dr. Antoinette Errante at: errante.1@osu.edu

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.
If you are injured as a result of participating in this study or for questions about a study-related injury, you may contact Dr. Errante at: errante.1@osu.edu

Signing the consent form
I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed name of subject</th>
<th>Signature of subject</th>
<th>AM/PM</th>
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<td>Date and time</td>
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<th>Printed name of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)</th>
<th>Signature of person authorized to consent for subject (when applicable)</th>
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<tr>
<th>Relationship to the subject</th>
<th>Date and time</th>
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Investigator/Research Staff
I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

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<th>Printed name of person obtaining consent</th>
<th>Signature of person obtaining consent</th>
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AM/PM

Date and time
Appendix C: Sample interview script and questions
Sample interview script and questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this interview is to gather information on how race, gender, and religion affect your everyday life. Your response is appreciated and I assure you that what you say will be confidential. Please feel free to opt from answering any question for any reason and let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

**Background questions:**
- What is your name?
- How long have you been in the United States?
- Could you tell me about your family?
- Do people in your country believe in the equality between men and women?
- How have your beliefs about equality and interaction between men and women have changed, modified or shifted since you immigrated to the U.S?

**General questions:**
- Can you tell me about some of your early experiences in the U.S? If you didn't have any difficulties, do you know about any things that happened to other people?
- What do you think are the greatest challenges you face (or faced) as a Black Muslim woman in America?
- How did you know that someone viewed you in a particular way?
- Have you been stereotyped, can you give some examples of misunderstandings?
- What kind of advice would you give to a friend or somebody you know who is coming to stay and work in the U.S?

**Religion aspects:**
- How committed to the Islamic religion are you?
- What traditions and rituals do you keep from Islam?
- How committed are you to wearing the Islamic dress or the veil? Why and why not?
- Do you feel you are less Muslim if you don't cover your head or wear specific clothes?
- Do you think that the Islamic dress could affect your chances of employment or fair treatment?
- If you were asked about what it is like to practice Islam and be a Muslim in the U.S. what might you say?

**Professional experiences:**
- In order to achieve your current professional status, did you receive graduate level education or any training? If so, did you obtain it in the U.S.?
- What is your current profession or your job title?
- Can you describe what your typical day at work, who do you interact with, what do you do, and did you like what you are doing?
- What have been the most challenging aspects in the workplace?
- Do you feel that you have been stereotyped in the workplace? In what ways, please explain? Do you remember a particular experience?
- Give an example of a time when you felt that you were treated differently because of your race, gender, or religion.

**Educational experiences:**
- What is your highest educational degree?
- Have you obtained any degree in the United States?
- How did you get to where you are in regard to education and training?
- In regard to your educational experiences in the U.S. do you have any that were difficult or painful?
- Do you feel that any of these factors or obstacles/challenges are related to your being black, a woman, or a Muslim? Please describe how?
- What helped or hindered your ability to cope with these experiences?
Appendix D: Timeline for the study
The timeline for the study is illustrated in the Table below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Data Analyses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January-February 2011</td>
<td>IRB Process</td>
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<tr>
<td>March 2011</td>
<td>Recruitment of participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2011</td>
<td>first interview with Participant # 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>First interview with participant # 2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First interview with participant # 3</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Transcribing &amp; coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2012</td>
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<td>Transcribing &amp; coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second interview with participant #3</td>
<td>Transcribing &amp; coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February, 2012</td>
<td>Third interview with participant # 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2012</td>
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<td>Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May- October 2012</td>
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<td>Analysis and writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participant # 1 Eman, # 2 Mona, # 3 Amal, # 4 Enas, # 5 Nadia*