

**HONORABLE DAUGHTERS:
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CIRCUMCISED SUDANESE WOMEN IN
THE UNITED STATES**

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the faculty of the College of Education of Ohio University

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This dissertation entitled

**HONORABLE DAUGHTERS:
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THE UNITED STATES**

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**HONORABLE DAUGHTERS: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CIRCUMCISED
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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study of the experiences of circumcised Sudanese women in the United States. It is done to find out whether the immigration experience has affected the cultural perceptions of women, in particular their views about female circumcision (FC). Questions are focused on what exactly has changed in their lives that resulted in a change of attitude or behavior.

Three focus groups of women of different age groups participated in the research. One woman of each group was interviewed in depth. Open ended questions and semi structured interviews were conducted.

Participants were allowed to ask questions and answer questions during the meetings. Debates around gender relations and family relations inside the homes were quite useful to the analysis of information gathered during lengthy interviews with individual women. Literature from broad areas of immigration, human rights, FC, cultural studies and qualitative research methods and feminist theory was reviewed.

The study found that there is a change in women's perception of their culture and a high level of awareness of why the change came about. Change in gender relations inside the home is the main change for immigrant Sudanese women. Despite strong ties with the home culture these changes are accepted as good and necessary. There is an

activism side to their change of attitude towards FC; it is no longer lip service to change.

The married women's group is determined to use the acquired decision-making power to protect their daughters from the practice. The study found that this activism edge stemmed from their personal experiences of humiliation and horror during childbirth. Younger unmarried women saw FC as a practice that deprived them of their bodily integrity and took away their ability to make their own decisions. Older women did not change their mind about the "benefits" of FC but saw it as detrimental to their granddaughters' health and status in the United States.

Approved: William Stephen Howard

Associate Professor of Educational Studies

Dedicated

To my grandmothers Batoul bit Ibrahim Abu Ras and Ni'ema bit Alrigayyig,
who were feminists before the term feminist was coined

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Leaving Home

Immigration of Africans to North America and Europe has increased dramatically during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Among those who migrated to the Northern hemisphere in unprecedented numbers are the Sudanese people. For the first time, in its recent history, The Sudan saw the migration of single women. Traveling abroad was extremely difficult for women; female students seeking higher education outside the country was a 1970s and 80s phenomenon, but settlement of women without their families abroad was a 1990s event provoked by a military dictatorship that took an extremist Islamist path (Boddy, 1995; Hale, 1998; Abusharaf, 2002).

Immigrant women in general face all sorts of discrimination. Cultural constructs, new and old, determine how women accept or resist certain aspects in their new situation as immigrants. Racial discrimination and gender relations inside and outside the home are major hurdles that immigrant women face (Weatherford, 1986; Janyne, 2000). The fact that immigrants resist their assimilation but long for the best part of their new homes, complicates issues of identity for both immigrants and their hosts (Pikus, 1998; Noland, 2000).

When immigrants reproduce their culture, the host culture may find a justification for 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. One such cultural mark is female circumcision (FC), referred to by some as

female genital mutilation (FGM)¹. Prevalent in twenty-eight African countries and practiced in different shapes and forms, this traditional practice has added to the difficulties of circumcised immigrant African women and intensified their otherness.

Assimilation of the new cultures by the dominant one, is one solution for some members of the host cultures. Although many guest cultures are apparently resistant to attempts of assimilation, acculturation is a normal process that almost works on its own. Noland makes a clear differentiation between assimilation and acculturation,

Until recently the goal of immigration policies has been complete assimilation of immigrants characterized by an adoption of Anglo-American culture at the expense of a home culture. ... For some acculturation is still the main goal in current society. ... Rios (1994) defines acculturation as “changes in ethnic values, customs and cultural elements toward a dominant norm. It is important to differentiate between acculturation, the “cultural modification of individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture” (Webster’s Dictionary, 1993.) and assimilation. Assimilation is “to absorb into cultures or mores of population or group.”² (Noland, 2000).

Research on African immigrants in general was scarce until it surged in the 1990s (Kamya, 1997; Dodoo, 1997). Scholarship on FC has covered almost all aspects of the practice and is being done by more than one discipline. FC has attracted attention because when taken out of its cultural context it amounts to nothing less than a crime, and the need to suppress or explain it grows rapidly. In addition, prohibition of FC is usually

¹ The tradition of genital cutting has been given different terms according to the attitude and the perspective of the writer. Terms such as female genital mutilation (FGM), female genital surgeries (FGS) and female genital cutting (FGC) have been in use during the past two decades. I prefer the term female circumcision (FC) because it is, most of the time, a sufficient translation of what the local words mean. I believe that a successful communication with the affected societies starts from accepting their concepts not by telling them that they are wrong and have to conceptualize differently. By accepting the language used we can start to change it.

² Sudanese culture has been subject to acculturation even at home. E.g. wedding dresses European style has been the customary for over forty years now. It became part of the rituals in the wedding. The first day, the main wedding day is done European style the following day is Sudanese style.

followed by health and educational services that in turn needed research for proper distribution of those services. Such educational programs called for baseline research on prevalence and cultural settings.

This study is intended to find out, how the experience of circumcised immigrant Sudanese women, living in the United States, has affected their perception and understanding of female circumcision. Their lived experience as women living the consequences of their traditions in another culture, sheds a light on how and why their roles and decision making power are changing regarding their circumcision and the future of their daughters in the United States. As Smith (1998) said, “Capturing lived experiences can no longer be just for telling stories.” Capturing those experiences includes not just telling of certain incidents at certain times, but listening to the suggestions, expectations and how those women situate themselves in their new home.

Reporting and analyzing the experiences of circumcised women and framing some theories that are grounded in that experience adds a new dimension to the debate around FC. The debate moves from being an intellectual exercise that is subject to imagining what women should be feeling, into one that is dealing with realities expressly voiced by the affected women. In this study I report the participants’ own stories and their analysis of certain aspects of their life. I heard and encountered some of these experiences for the first time, despite my belonging to the same community. My experience as a researcher in this study confirmed for me the need for research that captures women’s experiences, if we are to build theories that would be beneficial to the women in question and beneficial to those mandated to provide services for them. Furthermore research methodologies stand to benefit from the changing techniques used

by researchers to open dialogues with women and make the results credible and trustworthy.

Adding a human face and voice to the debate brings the intellectual endeavor to the level of uncovering the real reasons behind the practice. Intellectual conversations should be taken beyond the formal theorization. Stories, suggestions and questions raised by those affected by any practice are extremely helpful in keeping up with the field and providing a good background for generation of new theories.

Women as Immigrants

The immigration of Africans to North America, Europe and Australia transformed the debate over FC from a local debate addressed by international voices into an international practice that goes to the heart of the status of Africans in their new surroundings. Africans have become one of the components of the multicultural societies of these regions. They have also become part of the claim made by other immigrants to the recognition of their distinct cultures.

In recent years, FC has become a cultural nightmare in the West. In the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, the increased awareness of the presence of FC, is an outcome of the growing wave of refugee and migrant populations from Africa. Asylum cases, instituted by women not wanting to return to their countries for fear of being circumcised, are another source of publicity (Bashir & Kasinga, 1997).

Immigrants who are faced with a law prohibiting FC in the United States have been known to take little girls “back home” and have them circumcised. The already circumcised women are shocked at the humiliation they face every time they seek

medical help in the United States.³ The United States found itself struggling with new unfamiliar ways of life of African immigrants, of which FC proved to be the most annoying. “Performed by new immigrants, veiled in deference to a cultural tradition of the developing world, FC is becoming an American problem.” This is how Linda Burstyn started her article “Circumcision comes to America” in the *Atlantic Monthly*’s edition of October, 1995.

It appeared during this study (December 2001-June 2002), that many women view circumcision now in a totally different way than they did in the Sudan, although they also protested against FC in the Sudan. However, this change of attitude is far from Cloudsley’s prophesy about Sudanese women’s psychological state. She speculated that,

The notion of sexual victimization is not felt while women and girls remain firmly within their own culture. However, unmarried girls who move into European circles are beginning to be conscious of it. It is difficult to assess the psychological damage of the tradition which is so universally accepted. Once education and emancipation bring realization of victimization, however, serious psychiatric breakdowns could occur in the Sudan (Cloudsley, 1984).

The continuation of the practice of re-infibulation among Sudanese women, after childbirth or just for renewing their sexual relations with husbands (Nawal Nour, 1998; Ahmed, El Balah, Dawood, 2000), shows that victimization is not part of the belief system surrounding FC in the Sudan. Services of re-circumcision are not available in the United States and are becoming scarce in the Sudan. This scarcity caused women to be innovative. For example, they introduced the use of powerful glue to hold flesh together to cause the desired vaginal tightness.⁴ One of the participants in this study told about

³ Personal communication with Asha Samad a Somali scholar and activist working with Somali women in New York City.

⁴ Communication with a Sudanese women group in New York City in April, 2000.

her devastation when the doctor refused to stitch her back to her “normal” state. Their stories on how they deal with their sexuality as immigrants and whether there are any innovations such as the above one, make for a good base for the growing field of education for eradication of FC, hopefully an education that addresses African women’s need, not the fears of the dominant culture of FC.

The Participants

This study was conducted among Sudanese women in a medium size city on the East Coast of the United States, that is fast growing. Its job market is attracting many who are in transition and seeking a source of income to settle down before exploring other opportunities. I set out to listen to the experiences of circumcised Sudanese women in this part of the United States of America (United States). This is a study of their experience as immigrants in general and their status and attitudes as circumcised women in particular; of what type of new information they have been able to access; whether their attitudes have changed about FC after living in the United States; how their experience has encouraged them to learn more about FC or not; and how their attitudes and what they learned could affect the situation of their daughters and other relatives who are at risk of undergoing FC.

An exodus of mainly educated women started out of the Sudan when the current government, that took power by staging a military coup in 1989, decided to pursue a legal system that reinforced a culture that sought to push women back into the homes. Watching their dreams cut short, they began to leave. Sudanese communities in the United States that used to comprise mainly men in pursuit of higher education or jobs,

gradually turned into communities of families and later on included single women. (Boddy, 1995).

Once in the United States, Sudanese women found themselves forced into explaining their condition as circumcised women. Those who gave birth lived the horrors of being spectacles and not knowing what would happen to them when attended to by doctors, midwives and nurses who had never dealt with FC before⁵. A tradition that was necessary for their inclusion in the community in their home country became an element of exclusion in the United States. (Toubia, 1998; Samad,1993).

Historical Background of Female Circumcision

What is FC?

During the last two decades, the traditional practice of FC has occupied an important place within women's and human rights movements and scholarship, as well as in the health sector. In North America and Europe, immigrants changed FC from being an exotic anthropological subject to a reality seen and sometimes practiced in the midst of Europe and America. Many health professionals, human rights scholars and activists attacked the issue as a social atrocity that needed to be erased from the lives of people through shaming or punishment (Alice Walker, November 4,1993).

FC is a traditional practice that directly affects women's social and economic status. That social status is attained by ensuring virginity through FC, which is believed to curb women's appetite for sex (Eldareer, 1983; Shell-Duncan, 2000; Dorkinoo, 1994). Generally, it involves partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other

⁵ Women told stories about telling the doctors what to do while they were suffering labor, others were lucky enough to be accompanied by other women who could explain to the doctor what usually takes place during a birth.

changes to the female genital organs. The World Health Organization (WHO) identified four types of FC as follows:

Type I - excision of the prepuce, with or without excision of part or all of the clitoris;

Type II - excision of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora;

Type III - excision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (infibulation);

Type IV - pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia; cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue; scraping of tissue surrounding the vaginal orifice (angurya cuts) or cutting of the vagina (gishiri cuts); introduction of corrosive substances or herbs into the vagina to cause bleeding or for the purpose of tightening or narrowing it; and any other procedure that falls under the definition given above (see annex A, WHO's Fact sheet on female genital mutilation)⁶

Another type that is not practiced in Africa, and not identified in the WHO Fact sheet is called introcision, which is practiced by native Australians (Anees, 1989). It is a more damaging procedure. According to Worsely, as quoted by Rogaia Abusharaf,

When the girl reaches puberty, the whole tribe, both sexes, assembled. The operator, an elderly man trained for the purpose, enlarges the vaginal orifice by tearing it downward with three fingers bound round with opossum string. In other districts the perineum is split up with a stone knife. This is usually followed by compulsory sexual intercourse with a number of young men, and even yet more disquieting practices, for the rejuvenation of the tribal aged and infirm. (Abdel Halim and Abusharaf, 2000).

Infibulation or type III of FC has grave consequences for the health of women and that of unborn children; it is the prevalent type in Northern Sudan. Childbirth could be one of the most dangerous times in the life of a mother and her baby. Health consequences depend on the type of circumcision that the woman underwent. The WHO pamphlet summarizes these effects,

⁶ A number of genital procedures advertised in the United States by the Laser Vagina Institute in Los Angeles are given medical names such as Laser Reduction Labioplasty, which includes procedures that can easily qualify for type four of FC. <http://www.drmatlock.com/index.htm>

The practice of FGM often leads to complications. Short-term complications include severe pain, shock, hemorrhage, urine retention, ulceration of the genital region and injury to adjacent tissue. Hemorrhage and infection can cause death. Long-term complications include cysts and abscesses, keloid scar formation, damage to the urethra resulting in urinary incontinence, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse), sexual dysfunction, urinary tract infection, infertility and childbirth complications.

Within Africa the practice prevails in at least twenty-eight countries.⁷ The countries of the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan) are the most affected by infibulation, type three above. Some minority groups in India, Indonesia, Micronesia and African immigrants to Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia practice one type or another of FC (Toubia, 1995).⁸

Procedures that qualify for type IV above are being advertised in the United States, by American practitioners, as aesthetic and sexual pleasure enhancement procedures⁹. In Africa FC has affected millions of women and girls. It is estimated that 100 to 130 million African women have experienced FC, and 2 million are expected to undergo it every year (WHO, 1998; Toubia, 1995).

The History of FC

FC has existed from time immemorial. Its origins in Africa are so far unknown. Africans of different creeds and ethnicities practice FC, but there is no evidence of how or why it started. The beginning can only be traced with groups that started to practice it

⁷ see appendix B

⁸ In 1998 the online magazine Salon ran a story titled “Mothers who think” in which the writer reported on a plastic surgery clinic where the fashion is for upper class American women to have their labia modified to look like any of the pictures provided by the clinic, according to WHO definitions this can be categorized as a non-African group that practices genital changes.

⁹ The Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Institute of Los Angeles, offers a variety of procedures to shape the genitalia including tightening of the vagina.
<http://www.drmatlock.com/index.htm>.

recently, such as the Mayabe of Chad (Lori Leonard, 2000). Some groups that found themselves in the minority, and surrounded by practicing communities that looked down on them joined the practice so as to gain the respectability of the majority around them (Dorkenoo, 1994).

However, many scholars and researchers were able to trace it for thousands of years back. It continues to be practiced by different ethnic and religious groups such as Muslims, Christians, Jews, and followers of indigenous religions. In the United States Physicians who practiced it, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, claimed that it enhances sexual performance and enjoyment. Rathmann, in an effort to indicate some uses for FC reports that,

Circumcision of the female is not a new subject. Early writings testify that this problem was known and discussed by physicians of the Roman Empire. Bryk in 1935 compiled a comprehensive book on the history and practice of male and female circumcision. The 265 references abstracted in his text cover the circumcision of the female from the ancient Egyptian era (approximately 1500 B.C.) to the present day. The value of this procedure in improving function has been accepted by various cultures for the past 3,500 years. Although this subject is not new, there are indications for its use that are being overlooked by some modern physicians (W. G. Rathmann, 1959).

FC, among other sexual surgeries, was performed in the United States and Europe in the late nineteenth century and continued through the 1920s and 1930s of the twentieth century. Ben Barker-Benfield (1975), who examined the historical roots of modern gynecology, describes these practices,

In the U.S., however, clitoridectomy coexisted with and was then superseded by the circumcision of females of all ages up to menopause (it removed all or part of the “hood” of the clitoris), and circumcision continued to be performed until at least 1937. Both clitoridectomy and circumcision aimed to check what was thought to be a growing incidence of female masturbation; an activity which men feared inevitably aroused women’s naturally boundless but usually repressed sexual appetite for men. Men needed to deploy their sperm elsewhere for social and economic success in the gynecologic curbing of female sexual

appetite, for example. There is, by the way, ample evidence that gynecologists saw their knives cutting into women's generative tract as a form of sexual intercourse.

In further exploring the links of the medical practices to other aspects of American social history, and sexual morality of the period, Barker-Benfield (1975) found that circumcision and castration were seen as a remedy for various illnesses such as epilepsy, hysteria, masturbation, and insanity, in England, Germany, and France. The fear of female sexuality and its "danger" caused genital cuttings to be woven into the fabric of the history of those societies, including attitudes towards women and their "dangerous" sexuality.¹⁰

FC was used in the United States and Europe as a medical treatment for masturbation and excessive sexual desire. However, little attention has been paid by those who studied FC in African communities to understand the reasons behind it. Rogaia Abusharaf argues that if curbing excessive sexual desire was a primary motive behind excision in the New World, in Africa the rite is rooted in a broader ontological and symbolic configuration of interconnected beliefs, including the elimination of sexual desire (Abusharaf, 1995).

Munawar Ahmad Anees (1989) followed the history of FC and was able to find indications that the practice existed in ancient Egypt and Arabia. He reiterated anecdotes that take the beginnings to the time of Abraham and Hagar. One of the stories Anees told was from O.H.E. Brmester, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 1936. The story tells that

¹⁰ NOHARMM, an American organization working against male and female circumcision republished on its web site an article by an American physician condoning FC in 1959. Rathmann, W.G. [online]. 2002 *Female Circumcision: Indications and a New Technique* [online] 1959 [cited June 15 2002]. Available from <http://www.noharrrm.org/femcirctech.htm>.

when Ishmael, Abraham and Hagar's son [considered the father of Arabs] was about to marry, Hagar said to the women, "We are a circumcised people, both the men and the women of us, and we do not marry, except with those like us." Women then circumcised themselves and Ishmael married them" (Anees, 1989). Still that story does not tell us when the Hebrews actually started to circumcise women.

Since the history has faded in the memory of people and no one actually knows its beginning, that history is going to be of little help in combating the tradition. It will take a concentrated focus on the present experiences of women, men and whole communities in the light of other issues that emerged within African communities. These are issues of rising levels of education and the non-stop movement of people in and out of those communities, bringing with them new ideas and participating in the socio-economic changes in those communities. Immigrants are expected to bring into their home countries financial resources and new ideas. Human rights, democratization and grassroots movements are going to be responsible for effecting the anticipated change.

FC and Islam

Those who practice FC are people of different religions and beliefs. However, Islam is treated as the culprit where FC is concerned. Despite the absence of any reliable evidence that Islam condones or advocates FC, Islam is at the heart of the debate. One reason for the allegation that Islam is responsible is how Muslims managed to integrate FC into their religion. Whether the practice is advocated, supported or condoned by Islam or not, has been a huge debate among Muslim scholars for years now, especially after the attacks of non-Muslims on the practice. While there is near- consensus on male circumcision as an Islamic rite, there is a spectrum of opinions on FC. The absence of any

mention of circumcision in the *Qur'an*, whether male or female, led to speculations by those who wanted to keep it possible.

Support for FC in Islam was drawn out of what could be termed unreliable *Sunna*¹¹. Male circumcision was strongly advocated by the prophet although it was not made a condition for becoming a Muslim (Eldeeb, 2001). The circumcision of girls is even less obligatory; it is said to be a *makruma*, a nonobligatory practice, that is not part of the duties of Muslims. However, the mention of FC in the opinions of scholars at different times in the Islamic history has lent some strength to the allegation that it is an Islamic practice¹². Many prominent Muslim scholars including the current sheikh of Al-Azhar,¹³ Shiekh Tantawy, doubted the authenticity of the *Hadith* that reported that the prophet told a circumciser called Um Habeeb not to cut deep. A light cut makes the face of the woman beautiful and it is satisfying for the husband. Many writers (Eldareer, 1982; Gruenbaum, 2001, Toubia, 1995; Abdelhalim, 1992) quoted the *Hadith* in question and emphasized its weakness as evidence of making FC part of Islam.

One of the main rules of interpreting *Hadith* is to test its consistency with *Qur'an*. The *Qur'an* expressly denounces deliberate infliction of harm and deplores changing

¹¹ Sunna is the deeds and sayings of the Prophet Mohamed (PPUH). Muslim scholars developed a meticulous procedure to sift the Hadith and sort out what had been inserted into it for different political and sometimes personal reasons.

¹² A Hadith attributed to the Prophet Mohamed, Peace Be Upon Him (PBUH), is said to indicate that he did not object to FC but called upon the circumciser not to cut deep, just the tip of the clitoris. Despite this alleged *Hadith* there is no evidence that the prophet had ordered the circumcision of his daughters or any of his wives.

¹³ Al-Azhar is the oldest university in the Muslim world. It was established in 977 A. D. as a Mosque and became a university teaching different sciences in 988 A. D. It remains the main spring for Islamic jurisprudence for Muslims worldwide. As it is the rule in Sunni Islam opinions or fatwas by any scholar is not binding but Azhar Sheiks' opinions remain to enjoy a strong persuasive power.

God's creation. A verse in the *Qur'an* clearly states, "We created human beings in the best form." (The *Qur'an*, 4:95). Yet the bodily integrity that is central to Islam and actually rates as the first priority in the good life sought by Islam, is being sacrificed because FC continues to serve the purpose of control of women's sexuality¹⁴. FC seems to make sense as an Islamic practice because Islam did not do away with control of sexuality, rather it instituted new measures for that control. Ruth Benedict (1934) rightly argues that,

If we are interested in cultural processes, the only way in which we can know the significance of the selected detail of behaviour is against the background of the motives and emotions and values that are institutionalized in that culture.

Aside from removing pubic and underarm hair, clipping nails and trimming hair, *Sunna* does not advocate any change of the human body. Sami Aldeeb presents strong arguments to prove that even male circumcision that is insisted upon by Muslims is not a confirmed *Sunna*. Hygiene and good clothing are the major adornments that both the *Qur'an* and *Sunna* advocate. In many Muslim societies in the Arabian Peninsula and Asia, circumcision of women is virtually unknown, yet it is widely practiced by Muslim societies in Africa. Attributing the practice to Islam may be explained by looking at the nature of the spread of Islam throughout the world.

While people converted to Islam they continued to practice age-old traditions alongside their new belief.

Pre-Islamic beliefs were preserved and were gradually abolished or became part of the new religion. In other words, the expansion of Islam did not take place simply as a rupture with tradition or as a revolution in prevailing mores, rather it came to coexist with other aspects (for example, polygamy) that might have

¹⁴ The three pillars of that life are: preservation of life, preservation of religion and preservation of property, in that order.

existed in what was essentially an anarchical setting (Abul Fadl 1993). With this in mind, we should take cognizance of how the integration of pre-Islamic customs and cultural sensibilities came to be embedded in local religious interpretations. Geertz (1968) acknowledges that in this respect “religious faith, even when it is fed from a common source, is as much a particularizing force as a generalizing one, and indeed whatever universality a given religious tradition manages to attain arises from its ability to engage a widening set of individual even idiosyncratic conceptions of life and somehow sustain and elaborate them all.” In other words, within the newly Islamized communities, “Islam began as a stem, then doubled, then divided into many branches. But of course the common stem remains, which holds together all differing interpretations.” (Abusharaf & Abdel Halim, 2000).

A quick look at the countries where Islam spread will easily confirm the view that during the spread of Islam, any country that practiced FC before Islam continued to do so and attached it to religion.¹⁵ Any country that did not practice it before did not receive FC as an Islamic practice and remained free of that tradition.¹⁶ Furthermore the mixture of rituals that Muslims perform during FC may prove the pre-Islamic existence.¹⁷

A court case that was finally settled by the highest appeal court in Egypt may have finally brought the matter to rest at least at the scholarship level. Recently a

¹⁵ Practicing communities in Guinea-Bissau clearly considered it a mark that differentiated them from the “*Christo*” who are the Christians and other religions (Michelle Johnson, 2000).

¹⁶ Recently, when some Muslims specifically in Egypt started to advocate FC as an Islamic right, information about other groups practicing started to surface. E.g. Indonesia. In its newsletter “Awaken”, vol. No. 3, Equality Now published a report on FC in that country.

¹⁷ A mixture of superstitious and religious rituals is performed to insure safety of the child during and after the operation. Angels are said to be guarding her (or him in case of a circumcised boy) as in the case of a bride and groom in their first forty days. Despite the presence of angels and the Holy text of the Koran being kept as guardians, rituals that are expressly forbidden by religion are also practiced. The operation is absolved of any responsibility of life threatening complications. Some traditional rituals are practiced against the evil that must have caused all the problems. *Mushahara* is a ritual that includes a visit to the river Nile, wearing a gold British Sovereign and even have a cross, a Christian symbol, put under the bed. Only when these powerful rituals fail will the child be taken to the hospital. The power of Angels, religion and rituals interweave to create a whole social life style.

controversy around FC ensued in Egypt. The Minister of Health prohibited FC because it was a health hazard. Realizing that FC is losing support as a means of control of women, some Muslim conservatives quickly imported religion to silence the voices against FC. Sheikh Gad al Haq, the former head of Al-Azhar university, the first Islamic university and one that has been considered a source for Islamic *fatwas* or opinions for hundreds of years, issued a long *fatwa* that addressed both male and FC and stressed that FC was mandatory in Islam (Gad al Haq, 1415 Hijri). The *fatwa* depended on the unauthenticated *Hadith* mentioned above. The *fatwa* focused mainly on male circumcision and added FC without adding much proof to support the suspect *Hadith*. Later on the current Sheikh of al-Azhar would give an opinion to the contrary.

Ironically, Muslim conservatives resorted to the courts of Egypt and used the mechanisms available in a state that they consider un-Islamic and sinful. They invoked their version of religion against the law of the land. In the intimidating atmosphere created in Egypt by Islamists during the past ten years, the lower court used every technicality it could find to strike out the decision of the Minister of Health that banned FC. Later the highest appellate court would, supported by religious opinions and testimony, upheld the Minister's decision to ban FC in medical facilities.¹⁸ At this stage of Islamic revival one would be inclined to use religion not just as a shield to shun the practice of FC, but also as a tool to eradicate it.

The arguments put forward by proponents of FC have all depended on arguments for male circumcision. Yet the scanty evidence found in the *Sunna* in favor of FC did not prevent scholars such as Abdelsalam al-Sukkari (1988) from trying to prove the

¹⁸ Several Women and human rights organizations in Egypt joined the Minister of Health in the court case.

legitimacy of the practice in Islam. He uses the differences between the early scholars to place his own argument as the correct one. Scholars such as Sami al-Deeb (2000), who did meticulous research on FC in the three major religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, came to the conclusion that there is no basis for saying that either FC or male circumcision is obligatory in Islam.

al-Sukkari made it mandatory to employ a surgeon who is a Muslim and knowledgeable to perform FC, for hygiene and health purposes. However, he failed to discuss the fact that in all practicing countries surgeons and their services are rare and expensive and their time could never be allotted to cutting off of healthy human parts. If, for the sake of argument, one agrees with al-Sukkari's view regarding hygiene and health, it is very easy to declare FC totally forbidden in Islam. Following the rule of necessity, in *Shari'a*, the unavailability of the highly sophisticated medical services the scholar mandated for FC, should render FC unwarranted and illegal.

Cultural Grounds for FC

Tightly knit African communities value group practices that strengthen identity, honor and kin relationships. The various African cultures that practice FC may or may not do so for the same reasons, but practicing for the purposes of belonging to the community always reigns as a reason. FC has been integrated in the lives of the people in various ways and for different reasons; in the end it serves the purposes of that culture. Ruth Benedict (1934) explains that,

A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each people further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneous items of behaviour take more and more congruous shape.

African women, like their counterparts around the world, live the subordinate status that has been assigned to them through the patriarchal configuration of cultures. They live under certain socio-economic dynamics that make any sudden or planned breakthroughs a difficult endeavor.

FC is one tradition that practicing communities succeeded in integrating into the culture. Even with major changes in behavior brought about for example by religion, FC served important functions and did not lose its meaning. Not only that but it has been integrated as a religious practice. FC serves multiple functions, it controls women's sexuality in a way that fits the myth about that sexuality; serves the needs to assure lineage in offspring; and assures the valued virginity of women.

Grisaru, Lezer and Belmaker (1997) give an account of how Ethiopian Jewish women integrated FC in religion so as to serve the same cultural purposes as in other cultures,

All interviewed women agreed that RFGS [ritual female genital surgery] was normative among Jews in Ethiopia. None felt that the custom was a result of assimilation into Christianity. Attitudes were different in the group from Tigray and the group from Gondar. In Tigray the ceremony is done on Day 14 of life, in the hut where women remain after childbirth. The ceremony is performed by a special circumcizer. The mother is present, as are respected female guests. Males are not allowed. While the ceremony is not considered religious, only a Jewish woman is allowed to perform it on a Jewish infant girl. The infant is dressed in white new cloths. ... Blessings are said in the ancient Geez language holy to Ethiopian Jews, including the Biblical Ten Commandments. A feast is then had. The purpose of the RFGS, in the view of the interviewees, is not to reduce female sexual pleasure but to create adhesions that prevent premarital intercourse.

Through time FC became the delegated power from the patriarch to women, a power that women should use, not just to guard their virginity, but also to regulate the

sexual relations and behavior in the whole society. However, it will be a mistake to regard FC as women's business that is totally under their control. Society is the watchdog that allows or disallows the continuation of the tradition. Women who choose to abandon the practice suffer ostracism, and suffer the most damaging punishment of being unmarried in a society where a woman's main and sometimes sole value lies in her being married and fertile.

Some of the reasons for performing FC are universal within the practicing groups. The two most cited reasons are: (1) protection of virginity and (2) reducing the sexual desire of women; identity, to differentiate oneself from others, is a third reason. The tradition is so entrenched that it persisted for millennia even when its ritualistic nature disappeared. In Egypt where all tribal signs are blurred by urbanization and there are hardly any rituals that accompany FC, it persists as an ancestral tradition that gets strongly attached to religion (both Christians and Muslims claim it as part of their religion). Dorkeeno (1994) explains the deep belief in FC

Beliefs surrounding FGM often run very deep and may appear to many people outside that particular belief system to be irrational. For example, African animist beliefs surrounding FGM have been dismissed simplistically as mere superstitions, whereas deeper analysis points to a complex set of ideas which underpins a social system.

One of the traditional beliefs that survived within ethnic groups, Muslims and non-Muslims, in Mali and Burkina Faso, is that the clitoris will kill a baby that would come in contact with it during childbirth. The same groups believe that the clitoris is the male part in a woman and the foreskin is the female part in a man, as such they have to be removed so that both sexes can be complete. Muslims quote the *Hadith* mentioned that is claimed to have stipulated that, circumcision keeps a woman's face clear and beautiful

and makes sexual relations enjoyable for both sexes (Eldareer, 1982; Cloudsley, 1984; Toubia, 1995).

For many communities FC is a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. The maturity of a woman is decided by whether she is circumcised or not. An uncircumcised woman is considered a minor no matter how old she is. She may not perform funeral rituals or make any decisions in the family. The renowned Kenyan leader, Jomo Kenyatta, stood in the face of the British and rallied Kenyans against the British attempts to ban circumcision. Kenyatta(1965), lays down the dimensions of FC and its place in the lives of the Gikuyu tribe in his now famous anthropological study, *Facing Mount Kenya*.

It is taboo for a man or woman to have sexual relations with someone who has not undergone this operation. If it happens, a man or woman must go through a ceremonial purification, korutwo thahu or gotahikio megiro—namely, ritual vomiting of the evil deeds. A few detribalised Gikuyu, while they are away from home for some years, have thought fit to denounce the custom and to marry uncircumcised girls, especially from coastal tribes, thinking that they could bring them back to their fathers' homes without offending the parents. But to their surprise they found that their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters, following the tribal custom, are not prepared to welcome as a relative-in-law anyone who has not fulfilled the ritual qualifications for matrimony Besides being a mark of identity, a sign of maturity, and a rite of passage it was insisted on as a political stand against the colonizers. In their quest to “civilize” the “savages” they made laws against circumcision.

Churches tried to denounce the practice but they ended up alienating those who joined them. Kenyan girls circumcised each other in opposition to the ban by the British (Thomas, 2000). The British failed to reverse the situation and did not try to imagine their reaction if they were to be forced out of their centuries old customs. They just imagined the “other” molded to be like them. Put in its historical context, Jomo Kenyatta’s defense of FC targeted the British interference with cultural life and used the tradition as a weapon against the enemy. I think the British failed to see that the meaning of FC in Africa did not fit the medical usage of FC by the British during the last century. In other words the British saw just the medical side of FC and that is why the first eradication efforts concentrated on health consequences.

A somewhat similar political stand took place in the Sudan in 1946. When the

British legislated a law in 1945 to ban circumcision and punish those who practiced it.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, who would later become famous for his progressive interpretation of Islamic norms and for being executed for apostasy in 1985, led demonstrations against that law. Unlike Kenyatta, Taha was against FC, but he deplored the fact that the colonizer wanted to meddle in people's lives and abolish their customs against their will (The Jumhuri Brothers, 1976; Howard, 2001).

Survival or Assimilation?

Is FC Worthy of Recognition as a Cultural Practice?

In an internationally acclaimed long essay, Charles Taylor, a Canadian professor, worked out a compromise between the relative and universal approaches to rights in a multicultural democratic society (Taylor, 1994). He gives examples of two forms of liberal government, one that assimilates all cultures under the rubric of ensuring the rights and welfare of all its citizens, and one that maintains a dominant culture yet also protects the basic rights and welfare of citizens who adhere to different cultures. Taylor prefers the second type of state which avails citizens a right to their specific cultures and recognition by others of the same. He argues that, "Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human *need*." (Emphasis added). Taylor rests his argument on an assertion of a universal human potential that all humans share. This human potential is what deserves respect.

How can a nation honor all cultures and practices and remain a nation? What standards of human rights can a state adopt to protect all citizens of all cultures? In his attempt to answer, Taylor does not dismiss paradigm shifts, known in human history, to achieve a certain standard of human rights. He also recognizes that new understandings

and new meanings may be invoked. His main argument though is that the real challenge is in dealing with the tension between the sense of marginalization minority cultures feel and the basic political principles that guide the state. It is not enough to just allow cultures to fend for and protect themselves, there is a further demand that there be an “acknowledgment of their *worth*.”

What Taylor is proposing is not a fragmented society in which each group is isolated in its own world. He puts great confidence on voluntary fusion of cultures, a known process through which cultures grow or even disappear. Taylor is advocating a shared platform where embarking on the study of the “other” presumes an equal worth in that other’s culture.

Taylor does not rule out a change in the culture of the groups in a given country, he just does not approach that culture with the predetermination that it has got to change if not sooner later. A presupposition that a culture has to end is a failure to recognize that culture. When a culture changes on its own terms the change then becomes part of it.

Abdullahi An’Naim (1993) argues for recognition from the point of view of the marginalized cultures, Taylor is arguing from the side of the marginalizing cultures. Both scholars meet at the point of the validity of recognition of different cultures. An’Naim argues that if the international standards are to take any important place in the lives of people living in specific cultures, then we have to mediate the international through the cultural. Taylor argues for a room for the specific within the dominant mainstream culture. Both scholars alert the world to the high cost of turning a blind eye to difference.

Immigrants may find the host culture willing to recognize many parts of their cultures and respect resistance of assimilation. However, FC has brought in some

inflammatory discourse if not a contradictory one. One discourse is that of radical feminists and universalists, the other is culture specific, relativism. The former is concerned with the rights of the sovereign individual, while the latter is inclined to give priority to the rights of the group, to a collective identity grounded in cultural solidarity. Taylor tried to device a middle ground between the two discourses. Although Taylor does not give a concrete solution to the problem, he starts out from an informed and a well-articulated understanding of the politics of multiculturalism.

Recognition of the worth of a culture does not necessarily mandate participation by outsiders in that culture, nor does it entail refraining from entering the discourse about it. Recognition avails each group an equal amount of respect that makes for a healthy interaction with others. Such recognition eases the tension for immigrants and they are likely to look into their own culture and seek change without feeling subordinate.

African immigrant women will not just be struggling with the contradicting notions of the individual right to bodily integrity, and the right of the group they need to be satisfactorily integrated into. In addition they must forge a relationship with a new culture that denies their traditions recognition. Although immigration may be a deliberate act of breaking away from “home”, that home still provides an identity and a right not to be marginalized. Taylor lays down a theory that brings some relief to the tension between dominant cultures and specific cultures that should work out in favor of a multicultural nation.

The main question remains: how much of any specific culture should the state tolerate? So far the already circumcised women in North America and Europe found some services after much struggle with the states. Those states drew the line: they said

that they will be compassionate to the circumcised women but will not provide the tools or the venues for immigrants who practice FC. Not only that, but they will also punish those who practice. FC is controversial and it has to be recognized as a harmful practice but the law is a sign of seeking forcible assimilation.

The visibility of the various categories of gender, race, class and sexual orientation, lead us to try to identify what is worthy of recognition. Children of immigrants stand out as the group that has more in common with the children of the dominant culture than they have with adults in their particular culture. Liberal democracies avail adults of all cultures the right to bodily changes and sexual practices; such freedom may ease the tension between the host and guest cultures. Adult immigrants may actually accept the legal protection of children from a certain practice that does not have the same value in the host culture, with the hope that it may be practiced when their children become adults. Adults' right to practice FC on themselves is preserved, for the law applies to circumcision of children under age 18. However, since acculturation as a voluntary process is affecting the behavior of the second generation of immigrants, that generation may voluntarily give up FC without any state or NGO intervention.

Politics of Recognition as a Useful “Tradition” in Cultural Interaction

The world is not in agreement on how to deal with FC. The following are examples of how various groups express their stance on FC. Amnesty International emphasizes that FC is not a cultural practice but a mere violation of rights masquerading as culture. Following that argument they have no doubt that their version of rights is the universal one, and that, practicing communities do believe in the same version except that

they are in the habit of being cruel to children and use culture as a shield. Therefore a human rights perspective is a way to uncover that cruelty.

A human rights perspective affirms that the rights of women and girls to physical and mental integrity, to freedom from discrimination and to the highest standard of health are universal. Cultural claims cannot be invoked to justify their violation (Amnesty International, 1998).

In a joint statement by the World Health Organization, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and UN Population Fund, dated February 1996, the three international agencies expressed their respect for people's culture, but they also expressed their hope to change that culture. They are a step ahead of Amnesty International.

It is unacceptable that the international community remains passive in the name of a distorted vision of multiculturalism. Human behaviours and cultural values, however senseless or destructive they may appear from the personal and cultural standpoint of others, have meaning and fulfill a function for those who practise them. However, culture is not static but it is in constant flux, adapting and reforming. People will change their behaviour when they understand the hazards and indignity of harmful practices and when they realize that it is possible to give up harmful practices without giving up meaningful aspects of their culture.

The UN does not want to remain silent and take no action because that is "a distorted vision of multiculturalism". Yet they recognize the *worth* of the tradition for those who practice and promise to bring them to a realization that it is a meaningless aspect of their culture.

A third type of an attempt at recognition is the official United States policy regarding FC. It works at two levels. Domestically FC is treated as a crime. In its work as an aid provider, the United States recognizes the practice as a cultural one, and shows sensitivity in providing support for its eradication. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), adopted a policy last year that is culturally sensitive and recognizes the fact that the term FGM is judgmental and pejorative. Under current policy, USAID uses the neutral term, Female Genital Cutting (FGC). They explain why

they adopted this term:

This decision has been prompted by the rejection of the term FGM by many practicing communities and activists who consider it judgmental, pejorative and not conducive to discussion and collaboration. Those who link activism against FGC to the colonial period consider the term FGM to be evidence of cultural imperialism (USAID, 2000).

The United States official policy shows tolerance for FC in Africa. Without such tolerance the Agency knows that educational programs will not succeed. Domestically, the federal government as well as many states show complete intolerance for FC in the United States.

What's in a Name?

Intolerance of FC extends to the terminology used in the discourse about it. FC is contested in the West at all levels: as a culture, a ritual and even its being called “circumcision.” The terms “circumcision” and “genital mutilation” are the subject of a heated debate. The local word used for FC, in many of the societies that practice it, is the same word that is used for male circumcision (male circumcision is practiced wherever FC is practiced, but the opposite is not true). Many African immigrants to the United States, who are from societies that practice FC, strongly oppose the term FGM, and see it as being judgmental, pejorative, indicative of cultural imperialism, and unnecessary (Awaken, 1998).

Some feminists deliberately dismiss the fact that FC is highly regarded in societies that practice it, and of the social and cultural underpinnings of the practice (Robin & Stienem, 1980). Those who use the term FGM ignore the opinions of women who accept and embrace the tradition and see it as an act that is necessary for the inclusion of their daughters in their communities. Practicing women see the social and

economic benefits of being circumcised. Women think of FC as a right in itself, for it includes them in their society; lack of it excludes them. In some cultures FC has an esthetic value and is treated as beautification. To call those women mutilated insults them.

Ellen Gruenbaum (2001), claims that the term FGM has become widely accepted and thinks that mutilation is technically correct. However, she uses the term “circumcision” because some of her friends “have been deeply offended by the term.” Organizations such as Research, Action and Information Network for the Bodily Integrity of Women (RAINBO), use both terms as “FC/FGM” so as to “acknowledge the validity of both expression; that the intent is circumcision and the effect is mutilation.” (Hadithi, 2000).

Feelings against the choice of the term FGM are further complicated by the fact that the movement against FC is linked in the minds of many Africans to the colonial period. Charges of cultural imperialism and the hegemony of Western culture have found their way into the local discourse about traditional practices. Some writers in the West see FC as a “barbaric” act that cannot be explained. Bibbings noted that,

Generally, non-practicing states look down from above upon (practicing) Third World peoples and their cultures and attempt to argue or imply that the Western way is best. (Bibbings, 1995).

No matter what the practice is called a description of it is needed. What we call it depends greatly on our intentions. Those who work with the grassroots find it necessary to respect their terminology. People work best with what they know (Hadithi, 2000).

Feminist and Western views of FC

There is little understanding of FC as one of the feminization processes that exist

the world over, including the western cultures. Therefore the Western approach is sometimes crippled by this lack of understanding. I think the contextualizing of FC as merely a cruel act goes back to the history of clitoridectomy in the west. It was used only as a medical procedure to cure certain ailments and has never been an act that is a source of identity and social prestige. As such it does not have the same meaning that it has in Africa.

Lack of such understanding prevents the overwhelming change that some feminists are fighting for. Some people are offended by the correlation between FC and other painful forms of body changes that have aesthetic value for those who practice them. Tattooing make up on the face, which can cause irrevocable damage, or silicon implants that African women could not believe that women in the West are undergoing are some examples. African women regard breast implants as mutilation of sensitive parts of the body that are held in most African cultures as the symbol of womanhood and motherhood. (Babatunde, 1998).

The reaction of some Western feminists to FC, and that of African women to body changes practiced in the West is similar. The non-practicing group decries the inhumanity of the practicing one. For example, those who do not practice male circumcision, view the circumcision of men as,

... a barbarous practice that leaves male disfigured. This is much the same view that an American might have toward female circumcision in some cultures. (Harris, 1985).

Janice Boddy, who expressed one of the rare Western views that came to understand the cultural roots of FC, started out where many Westerners did, but she ended up with an understanding of why FC is practiced.

Initially I felt numbed by what appeared to be the meaninglessness of the custom; yet as time passed in the village, I came to regard this form of female circumcision in a very different way (Boddy, 1989).¹⁹

Such sensitivity is lacking in the work of some Western feminists for they, intentionally or not, neglect the social and religious aspects in the beliefs of the people, and the whole issue of gender relationships in Africa, and launch an attack on the practice as torture (Walker, 1993).²⁰

Lois Bibbings quotes the renowned feminist Mary Daly's statement, in which she labeled FC as, "unmentionable manifestation of the atrocity which is phallocracy." Like Alice Walker, who reduced the practice to a mere issue of torture, Mary Daly reduces the complex issues of FC to a mere phallocentric argument. The fact that FC increases women's bargaining power, or that it is seen as a means of inclusion in the society completely skips feminists such as Daly, because their analysis is done within the parameters of sexual relations.

Statements that label Africans as "barbaric" and women as "mutilated" or at the verge of a nervous breakdown will disappear from the feminist discourse only when the human nature of African people is not in question and FC is identified as part of the human behavior. In other words the debate should be between equals.

The question as to whether or not women truly have a choice or not when they undergo FC is a valid one. It may be argued that subjecting oneself to pain and suffering is not actually voluntary, albeit it has all the appearances of being a revered act (Slack,

¹⁹ Janice Boddy came to know about the practice in a village, in Northern Sudan, where the practice is prevalent.

²⁰ Alice Walker. Derek McGinty show NPR, November 4, 1993. Guests were Alice Walker and Pratiba Parmar, talking about the Documentary *Warrior Marks*.

1988). However, this argument is not invoked against Western women. Leonard (2000) rightly points out that western women are considered to be in control of their lives and there is nothing wrong if they endure pain and suffering for beautification purposes.

One of the feminist approaches that may be useful in addressing the issue is the framework of violence against women. This is possible if FC is proven harmful by citing the same culture that practices it. Muslim scholars and activists were successful in using Islamic texts and traditions to prove that FC is neither mandated nor necessary for the practice.²¹ For those who practice FC it is vitally important to have the right or the violation thereof argued and formulated from within the culture itself, where it is connected and entangled with other breaches or respect of rights. This is not to imply that only those who belong to the culture can do such analysis, but a suggestion that both groups be committed to the same standard of rights. Understanding the “meaningfulness” of the practice is not equivalent to legitimating the tradition, rather it is a means to developing the right strategy.

The antidialogical nature of some Western interventions turned them from tools of liberation to means of domination. Paulo Freire clearly laid down the difference between dialogical and antidialogical cultural actions.

Antidialogical action explicitly or implicitly aims to preserve, within the social structure, situations which favor its own agents. While the latter would never accept a transformation of the structure sufficiently radical to overcome its antagonistic contradictions, they may accept reform which does not affect their power of decision over the oppressed. Hence, this modality of action involves the *conquest* of the people, their *division*, their *manipulation*, and *cultural invasion*. It is necessarily and fundamentally an induced action. Dialogical action, however, is characterized by the supersedence of any induced aspect.

²¹ It is only recently, that African women started to have their own voice internationally, the wave changed from “telling” Africans what to do, to asking them “how can we help?”

The incapacity of antidiological cultural action to supersede its induced character results from its objective: domination; the capacity of dialogical cultural action to do this lies in its objective liberation (1995, new revised edition).

When some advocates reduce the practice to a mere policy issue and/or a political stance that should be solved by the African governments and human rights organizations (Rosenthal, 1993), the complexity of FC is once more ignored and only one aspect of it is dealt with. A call to stop aid to countries that allow the practice to continue is easy to make by those who failed to undertake any research on the fact that the practice is neither government imposed nor expressly encouraged. Perhaps a call on those governments to attend to women's rights as a whole is more effective than an economic sanction against them. Omission by governments to seriously deal with eradication of FC is but proof of their failure to address women's rights. An attack on the practice for fear of losing aid from developed countries hardly serves women's interests or help in the eradication of FC.

Babatunde (1998) and Bibbings (1995) make the point that Americans like to put issues in their own American perspective and explain them accordingly. Emmanuel Babatunde argues that there is a:

... need to understand the cultural logic behind the genesis and continuation of circumcision. That will not be achieved by politicizing the issue of female genital surgery. It will be achieved through qualitative cultural analysis that is neither derisive nor apologetic.

Qualitative cultural analysis has so far been helpful to both researchers and participants (CEDPA, 2000). The various cultures are now exposed to each other more than ever. Scholars who refrain from molding the facts to fit the parameters of their own culture will succeed in attacking the problems of those various cultures.

The International Women's Movement

During the last two decades of the 20th century the international women's movement brought together women from around the world. African women found a chance to add their voices. Increased education especially higher education equipped African women with the necessary tools to stand as equals to scholars and activists from other continents. The era of anthropologists and travelers who tell exotic stories that their "subjects" have no voice in is gone, hopefully forever.

The new trend or wave in dealing with issues such as FC comes from the involvement of African women whose struggle has been submerged by the loud powerful voices of those who objectified them. Writers such as Hanny Lightfoot-Kline and Fran Hoskin²² tend to infuriate many African activists and scholars by their claims that they discovered the "secret" practice of FC. The international solidarity of women gave African feminists' and opponents of feminists a forum to join or counter voices from many directions. The universality of women's rights gained momentum when women became critical of their own cultures. Women the world over came to support each other as they struggled for their rights.

The failure of stopping FC through dealing with it as a health hazard, revealed the true nature of the act, that is, a violation of a right. Oppression for gender reasons and use of gender as a tool of analysis afforded a forum for looking into violations of human rights of women (Abdelhadi, 1999; Wassef & Abdalla, 2000; Abusharaf, 1999). When women from different parts of the world presented the violations against their rights a

²² Both are Americans who traveled to Africa and wrote about the practice. They rarely credit African women's struggle against FC that had started long before they traveled there.

simple and common thread appeared: they are subject to certain measures because they are women. The idea of universality of human rights and their indivisibility is a suitable ground on which we can use to explain these violations, i.e. human rights stem from a common human nature. This contention raises several problems that I will discuss under the human rights section.

The issues identified at different international meetings attended by African women may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Increasing the role of African women as educators and advocates in collaboration with nongovernmental organizations in the overall campaign to eradicate FC.
- 2) Stressing African women's expectations that the role of international organizations is one of aiding and abetting anti-circumcision efforts, not imposing them.
- 3) African researchers should be at the forefront of designing and conducting research due to their extensive insiders' knowledge of their own communities.
- 4) Encouraging networking and cooperation among African women to foster collaborative work and to avoid duplication.
- 5) Participants in international or regional gatherings should engage the policy makers and solicit their intervention. The Addis Ababa Declaration issued at a meeting, organized by the IAC, at the Organization of African Unity²³ in 1998, and the Dakar declaration, should be used to alert African heads of state to initiate policies and laws against FC.

The allegedly successful programs to eradicate FC are by and large home grown,

²³ The Organization of African Unity has changed its name to the African Union in 2002.

so to speak, but the international movement has at least provided funding for those programs. Without losing sight of the structural conditions of their countries, nongovernmental organizations, community-based activist groups, and academic departments are now leading efforts to stop FC. With financial and technical support by different governmental and nongovernmental organizations in Europe and the United States, local organizations are implementing various eradication programs.

The experience of Tostan, a local nongovernmental organization in Senegal, is a good example of international cooperation. Tostan developed an adult literacy program for women that is notable for its holistic approach. As implemented in various Senegalese villages, the program consists mainly of literacy, conflict resolution, feasibility studies, human rights and reproductive health lessons. The Tostan experience is intriguing because women were not tutored specifically on FC or its consequences; they were able to address the issue through discussions of reproductive health and of human rights. The women involved in the program decided which problems they wanted to tackle, and they resolved to stop FC. Molly Melching, director of Tostan, takes pride in saying that she actually told the women she did not care whether they practiced circumcision or not. It was the awareness they gained about their bodies and their rights that led to internationally applauded results. It is worth mentioning that men were not reluctant to join in spreading the word about the program and its message against the practice.²⁴

International organizations provide the valuable service of researching international organizations, such as the UN, and following up their actions. Before the Beijing conference, women's nongovernmental organizations detected a general failure

²⁴ Personal communication with men in Kuer Sembra village near Dakar.

by the United Nations to facilitate eradication through its health and education programs. Equality Now, a New York-based women's nongovernmental organization, reported that on September 20, 1993, the American television network ABC aired a 'Day One' report on "FGM" in which James Grant, then the Executive Director of UNICEF, acknowledged that of the \$922 million budget of the UNICEF, not even \$1 million (less than 0.1 percent) is spent on FC. During the past five years this neglect seems to have changed, and UNICEF, the United Nations Development Program, and the World Health Organization have actively engaged in programs in Africa.

The Law and Human Rights Debate

After two World Wars, the warring parties as well as other nations felt the need to work together for peace. One of their highest priorities was the protection of human rights. The Human rights standard set in the United Nations Charter and its subsequent conventions, covenants and declarations, contains basic rights for which all human beings are entitled. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948, is perhaps the most important document produced by the UN. It stipulates the basic rights, *inter alia* the right to freedom, health and participation in the community. Article 3 of the UDHR states that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."

The UDHR made a strong base for other documents addressing the rights of women and children. The demand for such rights grew with the human rights movement. The Declaration of the Rights of Child (DRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) saw the light in 1959 and 1989 respectively. Principle 2 of the DRC states that,

The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him [sic] to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in

conditions of freedom and dignity. In the enactment of laws for this purpose, the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration.

The CRC extends the necessary protection of the child in its Article 3(2),

States Parties undertake to ensure the child such protection and care as is necessary for his or her well-being, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians, or other individuals legally responsible for him or her, and, to this end, shall take all appropriate legislative and administrative measures.

During the UN's human rights conference in Vienna, 1993, the plan of action included an express demand to protect children from "harmful traditional practices."

The controversial Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) came to being in 1981. Article 2(f) of CEDAW calls on member states:

To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women.

Article 5 (a) calls for further protection of women,

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women

The human rights debate features two sides, the universalists and the relativists. Generally, the relativists argue that cultures are unique and no one culture should judge or impose itself on the other. Universalists argue that human rights stem from the common nature of the human beings, as such there are basic rights that should not be forsaken for culture or religion or any other excuse. Relativists argue that if we see FC as a transgression, then we need to address what constitutes human rights within a specific cultural context. Women's perception of what their rights are and the least costly way to

move to protest are not issues to be decided unilaterally by activists.

The debate over using the law to ensure women's rights raises complex issues surrounding the applicability and relevance of international human rights laws under specific cultural, political, and economic conditions, especially in the developing world (Cook, 1993). Abdullahi An-Naim rightly argues that,

Unless international human rights have sufficient legitimacy within particular cultures and traditions their implementation will be thwarted, particularly at the domestic level, but also at the regional and international levels. Without such legitimacy it will be nearly impossible to improve the status of women through the law or other agents of social change. (An-Naim, 1993).

Treating FC as a revered tradition and as an abuse at the same time presents a dilemma that opens the door for arguments from both sides of the debate. For those who thought of FC as a crime, solving the matter seems easy: a law is needed to prevent it. But forcing people to give up their tradition will have only a temporary effect. The tradition is perceived, by those who practice, as a right and not as a breach of a right. The anti-circumcision enthusiasts walk into the arena thinking that their position is crystal clear and should not be contested. Therefore, a quick talk to the community coupled with a few arrests should be enough. The problem with that stance is that activists and law enforcement agencies are not dealing with clean slates but with minds and feelings that are heavily steeped in the virtues of FC. Specific rights cannot be enjoyed in isolation of other socio-economic conditions. Women negotiate a stable social and economic life through waiving a right to bodily integrity. The international standards of human rights will be accepted only when we succeed in separating FC from marriage, virginity and maturity.

A chance to alert women to the international norms presents itself when the

oppressive governments of many African countries force the people to resort to the various UN conventions and other treaties to alleviate the injustices done to them. Such resort may open the door for incorporating the conventions into the law of the land. Furthermore an awareness of the several mechanisms that people can use may minimize resentment African people may feel towards human rights laws. The fact that the current human rights norms are the product of Western activism and scholarship cannot be denied. However, Africans recognize that their participation would shape the formulation and interpretation of these norms.

Treating FC as a human rights violation should lead to its prohibition. Once a violation of a right is proved there is no difficulty in legislating a law against it, but the efficacy of law alone as a tool of eradication is doubtful. So far criminal law is the only type of legal protection being advocated. The French prosecutor Linda Weil-Curiel stressed that the only way to stop FC is through enforcing the law, otherwise FC will not stop. She reports that the Chinese government threatened to shoot parents who bound their daughters' feet and that stopped the practice, "... because probably a few parents have been shot." (Vanity Fair, 1993). She expresses great confidence in the law as the only tool necessary for eradication. Undoubtedly, the law has an important role to play in the campaign for eradication, but it is not the only tool. When women's awareness of their right to bodily integrity is achieved, the law will be a tool to be used by women.²⁵

The call for criminalization of the practice received considerable attention in the

²⁵ When I asked Sudanese women why they felt less embarrassed using the law against forcible marriages and failed to use the law against FC, their answer was straight forward, they did not like forced marriage but they liked FC. They invoked the law only when they decided that they were going to stand against forced marriages and that the tradition of obedient women are the "good" women worked against keeping the social fabric rather than maintaining it.

1995 Beijing Conference Platform for Action. The demand that “women’s rights are human rights” expands the scope of international law by allowing women access to legal rights. Whether we pass laws is secondary to the issue of proving the legitimacy of the basic universal rights of women. The very use of law requires a conviction that the right to be protected is inalienable. It is also an important right of the people that governments do not pass laws that they have no intention of enforcing. An example of a law that proved politically difficult to enforce is an ambitious piece of legislation by the United States congress.²⁶

... as part of the fiscal year 1997, Congress enacted legislation requiring the US executive directors of the international financial institutions to oppose non-humanitarian loans to countries where FGM is practiced and whose governments have not implemented any educational programs to prevent the Practice.” (Rahman and Toubia, 2000).²⁷

The abovementioned law created confusion in the countries that receive loans from those institutions. It even confused American citizens as to the extent of the law.²⁸

The Treasury department has put this matter to rest, for the time being. They conducted a survey and decided that there were no FC practicing countries that had not

²⁶ The United States Congress has passed four legislations. 1) An amendment to the Penal Code that made FC a felony and mandated the Department of Health and Human Services to implement educational programs for the immigrants and the medical profession; 2) a section in The Immigration law that mandated the United States embassies to provide information about the American law regarding FC to visa applicants from countries that practice it; 3) a law mandating executive directors of international financial institutions to vote against extending a loan or aid to any practicing country whose government does not have programs against FC.

²⁷ Official reference to the law is: 22 USCS sect. 262k-2 (1996).

²⁸ As a technical adviser for USAID on female circumcision, I used to receive monthly letters and weekly phone calls from activist Fran Hosken who demanded that USAID furnished her and the public with a list of the countries that the United States has stopped sending aid to.

implemented programs to combat FC.²⁹ This legislation is expected to remain a dead letter until someone decides to use it against any country that would stop programs against FC. Even if that happens it is not known whether the United States would sacrifice any of its strategic relations to enforce this law.

African nations have been struggling with enactment of laws to eradicate FC for over fifty years, with minimal results. As stated earlier in this chapter the Sudan enacted a law to punish practicing FC in 1945. When a woman was arrested for performing FC in his hometown, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and a group of men in that town demonstrated against the law and forced the British authorities to release the woman. The arrest was considered a degradation of Sudanese women's honor. Dr. Mohamed Mahmoud (2001), thought that,

In winning this battle in the name of the "honor" of Sudanese women, Taha had inadvertently contributed the single greatest damage to the welfare of the Sudanese women. Circumcision had never been a "Sudanese" tradition in the sense that *all* Sudanese practiced it, Taha's opposition served the interests of those sections of the population who adamantly clung to the practice, refusing to see its harm and brutality.

Dr. Mahmoud gave the incident undue weight and gave tradition another dimension. Taha was not acting within a community that was ambivalent about FC. Actually he was among the very few who were against the tradition at that time. He did not demonstrate in support of FC but rather in contempt of reshaping the lives of the people by a colonizer who was not participating in or sharing that life. Further, it does not take practice by a whole nation to make an act a tradition. The Sudan was and still is not a homogeneous nation. Rather than blaming the opposing stand, the blame should lie

²⁹ An official of the Treasury Department made a presentation at the State Department in November 1998 and declared the findings of the Treasury Department.

with the British blind intervention in the lives of “their subjects.” Dr. Stephen Howard (2001) rightly argues that,

Rather than joining the British colonial officials in *their* “progressive” stance against female circumcision, Ustadh Mahmoud [Taha] spoke in measured terms of social equality for women at “such a time when they have reached intellectual equality with men” (Taha, 1976). At the same time, he worked on the means to provide that equality, by trying to eliminate obstacles to women and girl’s access to education. The Republican message about social change was always wrapped in the sustainable solution of attention being paid first to the human person who is the vehicle for such change.

In the 1940s the British administration in the Sudan thought that a law passed by a legislative body that had Sudanese men as members would be the answer to FC.

Exaggerated reports to the British Parliament, in 1949, of the effect of the law prompted Mr. Basil Neven-Spence to protest such reports in a short article to the *Lancet*. He protested Mr. Hector McNeil’s, Minister of State in Britain, statement to the House of Commons that, “although it was difficult to get accurate figures, he was assured that the practice of Pharaohnic circumcision had decreased by 75% in the Khartoum area during the last 20 years.” Mr. Spence suggested that proof of such a statement “could only be obtained by carrying out a medical examination of all the female children now attending school in that area.” He further stated that the United Kingdom and Egypt who were jointly ruling the Sudan at the time, have “appended their signatures to this document [UDHR] a trifle prematurely.” (Spence, 1949.)

A group of Sudanese doctors, who were at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine at the time, responded to Mr. Spence’s article decrying his suggestion to examine girls and reminded him that Sudan had its own Legislative Assembly “whose members are conscious of this problem. They are best qualified to find the most acceptable solution, and can be trusted to do so.” (Abu Shama, et al, 1949). Their final

statement clearly shows that they were either unaware that the Legislative Assembly had already taken steps or that they hoped that it would revise its position. Abu Shama et al were all doctors, as such they were concerned that continued publicity “often ill-informed, might well be interpreted by the Sudanese as interference in their own affairs, and undo much good that has already been done.” It is amazing how the situation is still the same after more than half a century of attempts to eradicate FC.

Until women came to the forefront as active advocates of eradication and injected their arguments into public debates, no one took eradication efforts seriously. Laws banning circumcision will be effective when women demand their passage and enforcement. Only then will there be no doubt in anybody’s mind that women are going to obey those rules.

The Significance of the Research

Information released by the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), reports that among immigrants to the United States, Africans have the highest educational level. Dodoo (1997) quotes the percentages,

African immigrants have considerably higher levels of education compared to the others. This is best exemplified in the distribution of respondents who have college degrees; while 13.1% and 14.6% of African Americans and Caribbean immigrants, respectively, have obtained college degrees a substantial 58 percent of Africans are thus endowed.

Research in Africa found that the level of education affects the decision made by parents regarding FC in the Susan (M. Mazharul Islam and M. Mosleh Uddin, 2001). All the participants in the first and second groups of this study had at least high school education. Even the older women’s group participants had an education that ranged between a Master degree to elementary school education. Such levels of education will

make it easy for immigrant Sudanese women to access the literature and services of any programs in the United States for combating FC.

In this study circumcised immigrant women reveal some of their intimate interactions with the American medical profession and others. A candid express telling of stories will ease the tension between the two groups, health professionals and immigrants, and increase understanding of how immigrants view their culture. Any generalizations drawn from this study may be of use to those in public health to design programs that are informed by realities and culturally sensitive. Not only that but I expect these experiences to give program designers enough confidence in African women, who are recipients of those programs, to involve them in the design of the programs. There is proof, in recent studies, that programs designed with active participation of women, around an issue of human rights or reproductive rights, including FC, have attracted women to collaborate with the programs (Population council, 1998; CEDPA, 2000).

Summary

FC is a practice that has a long history and it is of unknown origins. It has been practiced in different parts of the world but continued uninterrupted in 28 African countries. This continuity has given the practice strength to be linked to all the religions that exist where it is being practiced. Resistance or eradication of FC proved difficult as the practice became interwoven with issues of virginity and honor and even reproduction and social duties.

The sudden attention to FC in the West and in the affected countries brought uneasiness to those who practice. Advocates for eradication seldom looked into the socio-cultural underpinnings of the practice. The fight against FC turned at times to a fight

between two camps, each claiming efficacy of their methods. Lately the grassroots gained grounds and forced researchers and advocates to treat FC as a human behavior not a barbaric practice by people who are bent on hurting girls. The human rights approach in the recent programs proved successful in at least involving those directly affected by the practice in the debate.

In the rest of this study I present a literature review and use qualitative methods to analyze the stories told by three women. The methodology chapter explains how I went about pulling apart the data collected from interviews with three women, chosen for this study, and wider discussions with three groups that comprised women from the same age group as the woman interviewed in depth. Chapter four reports the stories and the analyses of the experiences told by three generations of women living now in the United States. Having these various groups as immigrants is a situation hardly envisaged ten years ago. Chapter five includes conclusions and the main findings that added to the literature in the field.

The following chapter, chapter two, reviews the literature for this study. Some of the literature emerged as I was collecting the data, especially new articles and news pieces about female circumcision. I had to review a wide range of resources regarding FC as a cultural practice and its consequences, as well as literature that tried to trace its origin. The intertwined issues of religion, culture and gender brought about a huge body of literature that I had to choose from in conjunction with other major issues in the study, such as immigration. The data had to be collected through some known techniques, albeit I added to and expanded such techniques. Literature on techniques and methods for

qualitative research and for feminist ideas of how women's experiences may be conveyed and used was also reviewed.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study documents experiences of immigrant Sudanese women through the stories they tell about their new life in the USA. The interviews with them were done with a focus on the traditional practice of FC. The study is mainly concerned with whether the experiences of women have added to their knowledge and helped or hindered their efforts to cope with change in their new home. Women acquire knowledge and act upon it under various settings. The experiences in this study are documented from personal stories as well as group discussions.

Individual experiences of immigrant women have captured important parts of the social and economic status of the whole immigrant group. Those experiences are essential for women's awareness of their culture, their rights and their history (Gerda Lerner, 1979). Moreover those personal stories reflected a whole spectrum of historical, social and religious issues that surrounded and shaped them. As such they became an important source of theories and of material for plans to better women's lives.

I reviewed literature from, but not limited to the following areas: literature about Sudanese women and their history; immigration, especially biographies or narratives by African women; women's human rights; medical, anthropological and cultural aspects of FC; and educational theory. For research methodology, techniques and analysis I used a wide range of qualitative research material. Literature on feminist and gender perspectives cut across all the abovementioned areas.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods well suited this study as it derived data from a narration or telling of experiences by individuals. The participants answered interview questions at their pace with little guidance. Qualitative methods are meticulous tasks governed by detailed rules. Many techniques were developed and are being developed so as to ensure the dependability of qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) explain in their *Handbook of qualitative research*, how qualitative research may mean different things to different people, yet it is an organized process. Isadore Newman and Carolyn R. Benz (1998) confirmed in *Qualitative-quantitative research methodology: exploring the interactive continuum*, that knowledge can be obtained and interpreted through qualitative methods. Situating this qualitative study on a feminist theory base afforded me the use of some different but closely related methods.

One method is grounded theory, which is widely used and has developed through its use as a method to analyze data as it is being collected and framing theories as they emerge from the data. In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory. They thought of it as a method to deduct theory from the data itself with no preconception of theory or hypothesis to be proven. However, Strauss in his *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (1987) conceded that researchers start out from some premise or a preconceived assumption, yet there is no hypothesis to be tested. Theory is built by explaining, from observation, what happens (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990).

Grounded theory remains a methodology in progress shaped and changed by its developers and the researchers who use it. In a recent article *A synthesis Technique for*

Grounded Theory Data Analysis, Yvonne D. Eaves (2001) concluded that,

In discussing the future of GT [grounded theory] Strauss and Corbin (1994) envision that: (a) researchers in a variety of substantive and professional areas and countries will experiment with and use or adapt the methodology, (b) adaptation will include combining GT with other methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative and (c) researchers will expand on and make specific revisions to procedures outlined in the current GT literature in order to increase the utility of the method for a wider range of phenomena.

Later on differences arose between Glaser and Strauss on what grounded theory is as a method. Strauss and Cobrin authored *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques* in 1990. They wanted the theory to be more connected to the already established methods of research. In *Basics of grounded theory analysis: emergence vs. forcing* (1992), Glaser thought that a researcher "should simply code and analyze categories and properties with theoretical codes which will emerge and generate their complex theory of a complex world."

Reading both Glaser and Strauss the differences are minor and actually helped me in using techniques that otherwise I would have been reluctant to use. For example I found support from both writers, that the flow of data from participants was the core of the practice. Codification was an important part of the process and testing for reliability could be done, albeit not on quantitative basis. I constantly referred to the existing literature and data from focus groups to compare statements and analysis results. I combined grounded theory with other methods such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and used techniques of interviewing that suited the groups and the individual interviewees.

Interview techniques, such as the B. Dick's technique described in his article *Convergent Interviewing: a Technique for Qualitative Data Collection* (1998),

were used to conduct in-depth interviews with individual interviewees. There is no literature on interviewing through *Wanasa* (long group chats known among Sudanese women) per se, but the techniques of convergent interviewing were useful in turning regular *wanasa* into a process for gathering data.

PRA evolved from numerous research approaches, specifically from Rapid Rural Appraisal methods. It developed in agricultural research and agroecosystem analysis. Robert Chambers' *Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): Analysis of Experience* presents the techniques of PRA and the benefits of using it. Mainly it facilitates investigation, analysis, presentation and learning by local people; enhances investigators' awareness of their biases; there is personal responsibility towards the participants and over all it facilitates sharing of ideas and information. People's own perspective of their conditions increased the effectiveness of development programs.

PRA and feminist theory agree on the responsibility towards the participants and the necessity of having data not just as information but as experience told from the perspective of the participants. My own experience and assumptions took a back seat to the stream of answers coupled with participants' own perspectives. Women's articulation of their situation allowed a deeper look into their daily needs, from nutrition to schooling of their children to gender relations inside the home.

Medical Views and Health Consequences

My main focus in this study is not health issues; however the issue of health is inevitable when women talk about their child birth experience or embarrassment when visiting a doctor's office. Literature on FC, within the medical field was scarce, until about twenty five years ago. It was confined to notes by travelers through Africa such as

William George Browne who noted the practice in his *Travels in Africa, Including Egypt, and Syria From the Year 1792 to 1798*, published in 1799. The early 1900s saw publications of notes in the Sudan Notes and Records, such as Crowfoot, W. J. *Customs of the Rubatab* (1918) and in medical journals such as the British Medical Journal (1905). The Sudan Medical journal, started in the sixties, published medical articles about the health consequences of FC (1967). Health professionals outside Africa were not strangers to the practice as it existed in Europe and North America and they recorded their medical experiences in the African colonies.

It was necessary to review recent findings about health consequences. Fran Hosken, an architect turned public health practitioner, published *The Hosken Report on Genital and Sexual Mutilation of Females* in 1979. Before that she published several articles and continues to publish angry protests against the practice. Hosken concentrated on the health consequences of FC and published a manual on childbirth. She exaggerated the psychological effects without providing any evidence for her conclusions. Hosken was taken to task by Raqiya Abdalla (1982) for the uncorroborated assumptions she made about circumcised women. In her book *Sisters in Affliction: Circumcision and Infibulation of Women in Africa* (1982), Abdalla attacked the assumptions Hosken made about circumcised Somali women as being “unusually sad”, “always seem depressed”, “never smile”, and are of an “astonishing coldness” as,

These areas are not only inaccuracies but also present an unscientific analysis and result in a distorted view of the lives of the women of the whole nation. This type of information and misinterpretation can carry implications of racism and cultural imperialism that can only be counter-productive to our aims of change.

The above was valuable in reducing any tendency to impose assumptions based on personal experiences or from the literature. I wanted independent proof of which view was true of circumcised women. The views of Sudanese women agreed more with Abdalla than with Hosken.

The book that steered a versatile discussion of FC, is Asma Eldareers's 1982 book, *Woman, why do you weep?* It has graphic pictures and full description of the three types of FC and a long list of after effects or consequences of FC. Her presentation that cited her own case of circumcision brought the issue closer to reality, the book is widely cited in the literature I reviewed. Written from a Sudanese perspective it uncovered what Sudanese women just lived with as necessary pain or unavoidable pain. Eldareer's perspective gained strength from what the participant's said was their experience as projected before them in a different culture. Written in English and distributed mainly outside the Sudan, Sudanese women did not have the benefit of being acquainted earlier with its contents.

Books and articles published by medical professionals about FC dealt with the health consequences of the practice and its prevalence around the world (Koso-Thomas, 1987; Toubia, 1995). The WHO paid attention to the practice and held its first international conference in Khartoum, Sudan in 1979. Ever since, WHO managed to publish many booklets and pamphlets such as *Female Genital Mutilation Report prepared by WHO Technical Working Group in Geneva, dated 17-19 July 1995*. It also published *Female Genital Mutilation: Information Pack*. Their latest publication is an evaluation of the programs implemented in Africa, *Female Genital Mutilation*

Programmes to Date: What Works and What Doesn't, (1999). Although many of the consequences mentioned in the publications were not experienced by the participants, e.g. keloids, women felt that they do not have the same desire to brand these consequences as exaggerations, as they did at home.

Research, Action and Information Network for the Bodily Integrity of women (RAINBO) made a much needed contribution to the medical profession in the USA by publishing their, *Caring for Women with Circumcision: A Technical Manual for Health Care Providers* (1999). This book serves as a manual for training medical professionals, as well as a source for information about all the known consequences of FC. This another publication by a Sudanese physician that injected a cultural perspective the participants thought was much needed.

The Ahfad Journal published by the Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman, Sudan, devotes a sizable space to results of research done by its faculty, students and other researcher. Dr. Ahmed Abdelmageed has recently published his findings from a quantitative research on adal (recircumcision) in the Sudan. The participants in this study reflected on the experience of adal from their own social and sexual perspective, a qualitative part that complements Abdelmgeed's quantitative study.

The debate on whether to reduce harm by medicalizing FC is still going on. Two American doctors recently debated this issue in The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) issue of Sep 4, 2002. Peter Moschovis in his *When cultures are wrong* declared that, "FGM is wrong because it violates universal moral values and harms the physician-patient relationship." In the same JAMA issue Natalie Catharine Moniaga countered that,

One harm-reduction strategy is to medicalize FGM by having trained practitioners perform the procedure under sterile conditions. Opponents of medicalization argue that FGM is unacceptable even under sterile conditions because it would not prevent many of the long-term health consequences and that such medicalization would legitimize the procedure. Proponents of medicalization counter that FGM is already viewed as legitimate by those who believe in it and that not medicalizing it would endanger the health and lives of women. Denying FGM in this case will not necessarily protect the patient from harm, as she is likely to undergo the procedure in her homeland, with increased risk of infection and other complications. In returning home, the patient is choosing to abide by the norms of her culture.

I was surprised when the women said that while they understood the culture they do not see any reason for its medicalization. “Making it better” worked for them in the Sudan, but when they moved out of the culture, some hidden “inconveniences” were clear to see. In the USA the practice lost the legitimacy it had for them while they were back home. The older women thought it was a good idea but they were not comfortable with the fact that their granddaughters will become a spectacle in America.

This debate between medical professional leads directly into the debate of human rights and culture and the confrontations between the relativists and universalists. These debates are closely relevant to the campaigns against FC.

Culture and human Rights

The above medical/cultural debate is of course in regard to adult women wanting to undergo FC. The American federal law prohibits FC for anyone who is under 18 years of age. Sudanese immigrant women draw the lines carefully and do not address culture as a monolith. They carefully chose what they wanted to change or give up and what they wanted to keep. A total transformation was not contemplated; even the participants in the

young women's group, that advocated the most radical change, did not see themselves as revoking every cultural or social tie with their home culture.

The intensity of the debate between universalists and relativists is well captured in two chapters of Mahmud Mamdani's book *Beyond Rights Talk and Culture Talk: Comparative Essays on the Politics of Rights and Culture* (2000). On the one hand Martin Chanock's chapter titled *Culture and human rights: orientalisering, Occidentalising and authenticity*, sought to defuse the contention that human rights are the making of the west and refused to accept culture as purely local. He maintained that it was constructed and reconstructed by colonialism, as such it is nothing but hegemony to justify certain human rights violations.

On the other hand Thandabantu Nhlaop's chapter, *The African Customary Law of Marriage and the Rights Conundrum* argues for the legitimacy of culture and its being real and not just a constructed abstract. Abdullahi An-Na'm (1998) argues a middle passage, i.e. international law finding legitimacy in the local culture.

Within the human rights framework activists and scholars argue about the law. While Toubia and Rahman (2000) argue in favor of the law they draw the ethical map of legislation and its efficacy in ending FC. Jessica Neuwirth's review of Rahman and Toubia's *Female Genital Mutilation: a Guide to Worldwide Laws and Policies*, in *Human Rights Quarterly* (August, 2001), reflects the American feminist stand on how FC should be treated as torture and tries to place FC within the definition of torture. Neuwirth took the authors to task for their reluctance to see the law as an essential part of the strategy of eradication. Not only that but she decried their failure to see it as torture

and dismisses their argument as regarding the intention of the parents who circumcise their daughters.

The authors argue that because the pain and suffering are not inflicted solely to cause harm, but rather by well-meaning parents who want social acceptance for their daughters, the definition is not applicable. The practice of FGM is clearly intentional even if it is not done with intent to harm, and the creation by the authors of an exception justifying a perceived greater good falls outside the human rights framework in which they say they are positioning FGM (Neuwirth, 2001).

A rights discussion that assumes that culture is not a reality but only either a colonial or male imposed construction will, sooner or later, come face to face with the reality that a theoretical replacement of that culture with a purely rights discourse must seek legitimacy in the very construct that it is seeking to replace.

Anthropological and Cultural studies of FC

Missionaries and colonial powers in Africa decided to eradicate FC in the colonies on their own terms. In 1938 Jomo Kenyatta, an African anthropologist who led the rebellion against the British in Kenya, wrote *Facing Mount Kenya* (1953) new edition 1965). Kenyatta was faithful to the cultural relativism that was common among anthropologists. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban (1998) maintains that, “Historically, anthropology as a discipline declined to participate in the international dialogues that produced conventions regarding human rights, mainly due to philosophical constraints stemming from cultural relativism.” Cultural relativism was not the only reason for Kenyatta’s support of FC. The Political ends of the Kenyan leader can be served by

utilizing FC to insight a movement against the British within the grassroots of different creeds.

Writings such as Ina Beasley's, *Before the Wind Changed: People, Places and Education* (1992), gave detailed description of women's status in the Sudan during the 1940s including FC practice. Ina Beasley wrote her book in the 1940s when she was in the Sudan but it was published many years after her death, in 1992 edited by Janet Sharkey. Beasley gives a historical side of women's lives and educational development in the Sudan. The wide strides that Sudanese women took during the past sixty years, reveal that it is no surprise that Sudanese women at the beginning of the twenty first century have reached a stage where they are critical of their own culture.

Hanny Lightfoot –Kline wrote many articles on the subject. Her main contribution is her book *Prisoners of Ritual: an Odyssey into Female Genital Mutilation in Africa* (1989). The book is a compilation of her visit to the Sudan in the 1960s. Her account tends to be from the perspective of discharging the "white man's burden" and earned her the contempt of many Sudanese and other African women. She is credited though with bringing out the fact that circumcised women are not frigid and enjoy their sex life. Anne Cloudsely's book *Women of Omdurman: Life, Love and the Cult of Virginity* (1983), is a mixture of medical and anthropological research that does not seem to fulfill either. Cloudsley's most significant contribution is her prophesy that Sudanese women would suffer breakdowns once they discover that they were "victimized." So far research has not proven that she had any grounds for making that statement. The laughter her comments drew from the participants in all group is an indication that the writer did not actually consult Sudanese women, she volunteered her own perspective. All the more a

reason to see PRA and ground theory as some of the best techniques and methods to have participant's own experiences as the core of research.

Studies that more often than not missed the cultural values that kept the practice alive for millennia, have also gained international fame. Some tried to project the "primitive" nature of the African people in order to contextualize the practice as a barbaric act of uncivilized people, or the result of male sexual mania (Lightfoot-Kline, 1989; Mary Daly, 1991; Alice Walker, 1993).

By contrast Suzan Kenyon's *Five Women of Sinnar* (1991) situated women as active participants in their societies. Janice Boddy's *Wombs and Alien Spirits* (1989) explored their demons and everyday lives, and how traditional life had a strong hold on them. In most of the parts of the country traditions and religious beliefs form the backdrop against which women's lives are shaped.

Joining them on the opposite track are other anthropologists, who advocated an understanding of the culture and the status of women before passing a judgment on the practice (Ellen Gruenbaum, 2000; Sondra Hale, 1997; Janice Boddy, 1989). Leslie Obiora (1997) advocated a middle way to

... reconcile conflicting positions in the circumcision controversy by elaborating a middle course underscoring how an acute sensitivity to cultural context and indigenous hermeneutics balances efforts to protect the interests of women. This assertion of local context compensates for an emerging radical feminist consensus that overwhelmingly ignores the incommensurability of cultural motivations and meanings by projecting Western understandings of female circumcision onto African cultures.

In line with efforts to encourage culturally sensitive research Nahid Toubia and Suzan Izzet published a research guide, *Learning about social change* (1999). They used FC as an example. The guide details research types, ethics and methods for doing a

culturally sensitive research with immigrants and in the field in Africa. This book is a valuable resource that drew a graphic picture of culture and how it may operate to hamper research.

Studies about FC increased dramatically in the 1990s. The past two decades witnessed the African women's voices. Most of their writings are in edited books (Bettina Shell-Duncan & Ylva Hernlund, 2000; Meredith Turshen, 1999; Bridgeman and Millns, 1995). Shell-Duncan & Hernlund book *Female "Circumcision" in Africa: Culture, Controversy and Change* (2000) presented a spectrum of views including a controversial article *Rites and Wrongs: An Insider/Outsider Reflects on Power and Excision* by Fuambai Ahmadu who was born in the United States but returned to Sierra Leone to undergo FC. Ahmadu found western criticism of FC to emanate from the male centered biases.³⁰

Ahmadu found a meaning in FC as it "essentializes womanhood." It was not just culture to be practiced it is something that relates to womanhood that Ahmadu does not restrict to any specific culture. The older women group is in agreement with Ahmadu. However the other two groups of younger women found that discounting the harm of FC to uphold the culture is not any less weak than washing hand of culture and dealing only with the medical consequences. This seemingly contradictory position was explained by Serene as "Not at all being contradictory but understanding. If I want to communicate to women in the Sudan the change of mind I have now it will not be at the expense of depriving them of the culture. Something just like what happened to me, not necessarily

³⁰ In the introduction I made reference to M. Daley's phallocentric argument which discusses FC only in the light of sexual control by men.

immigration, is needed in the lives of women to ensure a transformation of the cultural beliefs.”

Uma Narayan gives an illuminating discussion, in her book *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Tradition, and Third World Feminism* (1997), of how sometimes the ideas of fundamentalist nationalists and Western feminist authors hold similar concepts of culture. They meet at the premise of treating culture as immutable and uncontestable. She argues for opening culture and treating it as diverse and dynamic. Many other writers agree with her (Marina Lazreg, 1994; Suha Sabbagh, 1995; Margot Badran, 2000; Lila Abu-Lughod, 1998). Chandra Mohanty (1991) and Gayatri Spivak (1999) point out the anomaly of confining analysis and solutions to problems introduced by outside elements, such as the international financial institutions, to local resources as if they are problems of that local culture.

The writers in the above paragraph make it easy to see outcries in newspapers such as the writings of A. M Rosenthal, a columnist of the New York Times (N.Y. Times, 1993 December 24) in their real context. Mr. Rosenthal called on the US government to stop aid to the countries that do not pass laws against FC. His view of FC is devoid of any cultural or historical sense of FC. The prevalence rate reported in the recent census of some countries (Dara Carr, 1997), sparked comments such as those made by Mr. Rosenthal.

Several country specific studies that analyzed the place of FC in certain cultures have been published. Emmanuel Babatunde published, *Women's Rites Versus Women's Rights: a Study of Circumcision Among the Ketu Yoruba of South Western Nigeria* (1997). In 2001 Ellen Gruenbaum published *The Female Circumcision Controversy: an*

Anthropological Perspective, which is a case study of Sudan. Gruenbaum posed questions about why other problems, such as poverty and lack of health services do not find the same attention as FC does. The same view was expressed by the participants who felt that they need help with getting higher education more than talking about their circumcision.

Within the cultural debates the religious debate is taking a new dimension. In the past it is usually the grassroots that claimed that FC was part of their religion. The new literature brought the elite, specifically Muslims, who remained silent for a long time, to claim that FC is part of their religion. The Egyptian case is reported mainly in newspaper articles in Egypt and around the world such as the Los Angeles Times (25 June 1997), Cairo times (Vol. 1, Iss. 10, 10 July 1997), and specialized newsletters such as *Awaken* (1998). The Egyptian case was a case of trying to impose extremist religious norms and force the courts to accept them instead of the law of the land. Participants' views supported the findings in the latest census from the Sudan (Carr, 1999). The results showed that Sudanese people rarely see FC as a religious practice. The participants shrugged off the Egyptian claim to religion and did not see it as worthy of any discussion that may contribute to bringing in a new strong dimension to FC in the Sudan as the existing government is trying to do.

In *Khitan al-dhukur wa-al-inath inda al-Yahud wa-al-Masihiyin wa-al-Muslimin: al-jadal al-dini* (Male and female circumcision among Jews, Christians, and Muslims: the religious debate) Sami Al-Dhib addresses mainly the religious debate regarding circumcision of male and female. This book consists of 500 pages of arguments from the three Abrahamic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Al-Dhib's main objective is

to refute any claims that any of these religions condones or mandates male or female circumcision. He did meticulous research in the three religions and augmented it with interviews with some prominent religious scholars. So far it is the largest and most comprehensive study on the subject of circumcision. He gave proof that neither male nor female circumcision is required by religion.

Feminist and Gender Studies

Use of gender as a tool of analysis of cultural practices and women's experiences is common in the writings on and about FC, by Africans and non-Africans. Valuable work on FC and gender relations has been published (Wassef, & Abdalla, 1999; Hadithi 1999 & 2000). Issues of masculinity were discussed in details in Wassif and Abdalla's study of Egyptian men's attitudes. This is a useful addition since it is not usual for men to talk about FC. It has always been an issue of men's control and women's virginity.

Wassif and Abdalla provided a perspective that the participants thought should be explored to put to rest the belief that men get their satisfaction from circumcised women, who do not compete with them for sexual gratification. While women clearly stated that they do get sexual satisfaction they still want to know whether the above statement is myth or truth.

For the Senegalese activists issues of gender and human rights were at the forefront and they celebrate their success in addressing FC as a gender and human rights issue. *Breakthrough* (1999) issued by the Population council, Dakar, document the Tostan experience. It is interesting to note that Senegalese women who achieved an understanding of human rights at the grassroots level, have expressed the same sensitivity to culture expressed by Sudanese women. When the Senegalese legislature discussed the

law against FC, leaders of the campaign against FC testified before the legislator to plead that passing a law be postponed for two. Such postponement would assure compliance with rather than defiance of the law.

Feminist writings are witnessing a departure from their strictly theoretical nature.

Virginia Sapiro and Pamela Johnston Conover (2001), among others pointed out that,

Most conceptual research on equality revolves around theoretical texts or legal theory and decisions, thus reflecting the thought of legal, political, or cultural elites. But in a democratic polity, we must attend to the political thought not just of politicians and academics, but ordinary citizens as well. In terms of its political significance, "What does equality mean" requires answering the question: what does equality mean to the mass public?

Interpreting and presenting women's lived experiences is of specific interest to feminist writers. Feminist literature is used to resolve some contextual issues. In her book *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking* (1986) Jean Grimshaw contests a feminist idea that women's experiences are valid issues that just "need naming." Sudanese women did not have a name for their experience as immigrants. They saw it as a combination of education, exposure to a different culture, adaptation to their "children's time in this world" and other ingredients that they have no names for. Gayatri Spivak's, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) was helpful in avoiding such naming.

Further the feminist literature on culture and its interpretation differ according to the understanding or gender of the feminist writer or activist. Robin & Stienem, (1980) dismiss any cultural aspects as unimportant, while Amal Abdelhadi (1999), Hadithi (2000) stress the validity and the importance of addressing FC from a cultural perspective so as to find solutions and ways to combat it. Equality Now an organization active in defending women's rights have repeatedly sought in its newsletter on FC, *Awaken*, to minimize the effect of culture.

It is important to mention that feminists have also provided the framework of violence against women, which includes violations. This framework is elaborated in publications such as Schuler's edited book *Freedom From Violence: Strategies From Around the World* (1992).

Immigrants

Eleanore Hofstetter published *Women in Global Migration, 1945-2000: a Comprehensive Multidisciplinary Bibliography*, in 2001. This over five hundred pages book, listed studies and commentaries of all types and organized them under twelve categories including, personal narratives, education, health, economics, law and government, and demography. The bibliography brings out a wealth of material about immigrant women in the USA. This will be a useful reference to sources that are likely to publish more articles on immigrant women.

Living as an immigrant in the United States or Europe is not an easy life for African and Muslim immigrants. Issues of race and xenophobia are bound to surface and hinder the corporation of immigrants into the American society. Immigrant women find themselves living "on the boarder caught between two cultures" (O'Neill, 1992), unable to be incorporated in the new culture nor to live their original culture. The exclusion of immigrants strengthens their identity with their own culture but at the same time isolates them from the new home culture (Noland, 2000; Hedge, 1998).

The change in immigrant Sudanese women is significant. They said they no longer saw themselves as a repository of culture. They often referred to culture as a dynamic process that is changing according to people's needs. However they noted how they, the immigrants remain captives of the home culture as they remember it, not feeling

how rapidly it is changing at home. The grip of that culture on them is leaving them behind a paradigm that is masking the fact that in the new culture there will be little or no social protest to their change. As a participant in the married women group indicated “we still find comfort in being good girls.”

The cultural definition of belonging and what constitutes citizenship are the subjects of a serious discussion between the contributors to Noah M.J. Pickus edited book *Immigration and Citizenship in the Twenty First Century* (1998). For example Charles Kesler, a born American argued that the founding fathers, discriminatory attitudes of assimilation, are to be honored if the American culture is to survive. Kwame Anthony Appiah, another contributor to the same book and a naturalized citizen, did not find the history of treating immigrants in the United States to be helpful.

Charles Taylor in his *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (1993) tries to formulate a compromise between the host and guest cultures. He advocates recognition of the guest culture as a first step in whatever progress that culture may make while interacting with the host culture. While the participants did not see themselves as leaving behind all of the home culture, they show little resistance to their children’s acculturation. They see the continuation of other cultures such as the Jewish, Chinese or Japanese cultures as a sign that co-existence of cultures is possible and all they have to do is continue to instill the home culture while letting children freely participate in the host culture, except of course premarital sex. As Weatherford, (1986) puts it, Immigrant women who came during the past two centuries were determined “...to meet the new world on its own terms and to give tomorrow to their children.” The same determination can be seen among Sudanese women.

Carol D. Christiansen, in her doctoral dissertation *The Lived Experience of Circumcision in Immigrant Somali Women: a Heideggerian Hermeneutic Analysis* (1995), found that immigrant Somali women's desire to start a new life away from the traditions that usurped their control over their bodies, but without completely denouncing or feeling shame about FC. The sense of belonging that FC gave them while living in Somalia was vital in their lives and continues to be so even with the change of venue and in the face of a different dominant culture.

In its publication, *International Migration Policies and the Status of Female Migrants* (1995), The United Nations Expert Group Meeting, held in Italy in 1990, the UN recommended that, "Governments of receiving countries should ensure that all migrants, but especially women, are provided information about their legal rights and obligations in their own languages." Other recommendations by the UN suggest giving the immigrants special status at first and provision of means of assimilation after a while. Yet Obstacles to being considered citizens and not outsiders in democratic societies are formidable (Hoskin, 1991; Jaynes, 2000). Despite UN documents each country continues to have its own immigration policies.

Receiving societies showed little or no acceptance of FC, and labeled it with names that Africans rejected and objected to. When the laws against FC were stipulated by US congress and states congresses, the media showed little or no understanding of the culture surrounding FC (El-Issa, 1999).

African programs combating FC

Programs to eradicate FC during the past two decades have influenced attitudes of Africans, men and women, about the practice. There is influential literature coming out

of Africa, that helped immigrants rethink FC. Seeing change happening at home is an incentive for immigrants to participate in the change taking place. Some of the programs documented part of the local experiences of women who went through one type or another of educational programs e.g. “*Positive Deviance Inquiry*” in Egypt (CEDPA, *undated*); and the Tostan human rights program in Senegal (*Tostan*, 1999).

RAINBO has documented the experiences of organizations and individuals who work on campaigns against FC. In a series called *Hadithi*, two narratives about efforts in Egypt and New Guinea, were documented (Hadithi, 1999 & 2000). Amal Abdelhadi published her *Khitan al-inath (female circumcision)* (1999) in Arabic. It is full of facts about the consequences of FC and some suggestions as to how to convey the information to the affected communities. If the various communities are to access each other’s experiences an active translation effort is needed.

The population council provided recent studies that added some of the missing information about certain countries. Mazharul Islam M. and Mosleh Uddin M. published their findings about FC in the Sudan in an article titled *Female Circumcision in Sudan: Future Prospects and Strategies for Eradication* (International family planning perspectives, 2001). This study reported two significant findings, one is that some of the non-practicing southern Sudanese are practicing now; the other is that a wider spread of education and availability of higher levels of education are impacting the practice, it is decreasing among the educated. Such information affected the perceptions of immigrants and alerted them to the changes in the home culture. The areas that are witnessing change regarding FC are mostly the neighborhoods where many of the participants lived before

coming to the USA. Easy communications via telephone and internet is also bringing to the immigrants news of the fast paced change the country is undergoing.³¹

Other Sources

Electronic resources were as valuable to this research as the other sources. Internet web sites provided daily news and discussions among diverse groups of people. There are web sites that are devoted exclusively for circumcision, such as the site at <http://nocirc.org>. Other sites such as Dr. Sami altheeb's site at <http://go.to/samipage>, contain long articles authored by him on female circumcision. RAINBO and Tostan have their own websites that mainly include their programs. WHO, PATH, CEDPA and the Population Council provide elaborate pages on their sites on female circumcision. Rising daughters Aware is a site that lists resources on FC as well as provide links to other sites.

Marianne Sarkis, an activist against FC, provides a list-serve that is exclusively on FC. Islamic web sites provide commentaries on exonerating Islam from any responsibility regarding FC. Equality Now, an NGO in New York with an office in Nairobi, Kenya, issues a newsletter that is exclusively on FC, *Awaken*. The newsletter

³¹ On March 13th, 2003, many Sudanese, myself included received the following e-mail from Mutawinat Group, a legal aid group in the Sudan. The subject line was "Good news from Sudan" :

Dear all:

The Sudanese medical council issued a very important decree to ban all types of FGM practice in Sudan. According to Dr. Imam Siddig, the Secretary General of the Medical Association council, this decree was issued after a broad and wide discussion . He stated that the council will strongly follow the implementation of this decree and any medical doctor to violate this decree will be harshly punished and this punishment can be suspension of the doctor's license. Dr. Balgis Badri [a professor and activist] commented on that by saying that this punishment must extend to any medical personnel, particularly the midwives.

publishes news from around the world and a feature in every issue from activists in Africa. Once pointed out during the meetings all these sites were visited by the participants for more information on FC.

The literature review has shaped the methods I used and gave me a vast theoretical and experiential background to choose from. The methods in the coming chapter are a careful mix of what was in the literature and some new techniques that I found useful in gathering the data.

In my data analysis I looked for points that may confirm or contradict the literature reviewed. Some of the confirmed ideas and theories such as the fact that FC is practiced to benefit and not injure the girls was confirmed by the older women's attitude. They preferred stopping FC not because they saw no value in it, but because it is going to be harmful to the girls' future. In this study I found out that myths about sexuality are not just a western attitude towards circumcised women; an equally unsubstantiated myth about western uncircumcised women is held by African women.

The literature on Methodology enabled me to add my own contribution by using an indigenous way of communication between women to gather my data. *Wanasa* (long conversation between women) was extremely valuable and may encourage the use of other indigenous means as tools of research.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study investigates how the experience of living in the United States affected the perception and understanding of female circumcision among immigrant Sudanese women. The study looks at a combination of FC experience and immigration i.e. how a long treasured tradition is affected by living in another culture and different socio-economic conditions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The research takes a feminist perspective that makes use of various strategies of inquiry.

Feminists both Africans and non-Africans, have used various philosophies in their discourse. Neo-Marxism, post-modernism and even contemporary religious philosophies are part of the many faces of feminism. Regarding FC, some feminists and scholars from non-practicing cultures introduced the controversial ideas and theories in the discourse (Daly, Walker, 1994). Another camp of feminists and writers challenged those ideas. Having both camps in its midst, feminism is perhaps the best paradigm for entering the different cultures to do a study of women's views and hopes about FC.

The intimate relationship with the participants that feminist research requires suited my purposes of penetrating the lives of Sudanese circumcised women in the United States to document their experiences. I also wanted the participants to find the process empowering as well as informative. The groups I worked with managed to use the time they spent together to form a Sudanese women's organizations and contact other immigrant women's groups such as the Somali Community Organization. The group discussions were valuable in bonding the participants to each other.

Feminism as Theory and Perspective

Critique of Feminist Research

Feminist writing challenged the conventional ways of doing research, ways that are thought to be patriarchal in nature and as such favored men. Feminism claims that men have been the primary source of information and the primary target of results of research. Yet feminism did not grow out of a consensus of women and men who believed in equality and equity. Feminism as a theory grew out of writings and research done by white Western women, who mainly addressed issues of middle class white women, and did not provide any help on the status of women of color or women in the rest of the world. As such gender was the only variable that was taken into consideration, which resulted in treating women as a monolith faced with the same challenges (Narayan, 1997; Nussbaum, 1997).

Women of color in Europe and the United States met early feminist analysis and theory with strong criticism (Hooks, 1998) for it totally ignored issues of race and social status as basis for discrimination against women. Black women have to struggle against racial and color differences and their analysis brought in a new definition of feminism. Bell Hooks (1998) sees feminism as being:

... necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. Defined in this way, it is unlikely that women would join feminist movement simply because we are biologically the same. A commitment to feminism so defined would demand that each individual participant acquire a critical political consciousness based on ideas and beliefs.

Criticism of feminist writing did not stop at the issue of race and social status in the USA and Europe; research done by European and American women in the “Third World” was met by a barrage of fire by women from that part of the world (Mikell, 1997). Once women from developing countries started doing research and examining their own issues it became clear that the objectification of the developing world’s women resulted in biased and sometimes racist analysis of those women’s issues, especially in anthropological circles.

Women’s criticism of each other’s work and their ability to point out the shortcomings of early feminist theories may be credited with the rapid growth of feminist theories and the ability of women to challenge traditional research strategies designed without consideration of women’s lives. Feminists from different countries challenged each other in an open fashion that facilitated a better conceptualization of women’s rights in different countries and finding a common ground for women everywhere. For example Carol Quillen challenged Martha Nussbaum’s notion of liberal humanism and her collective contextualization of women’s issues. (Quillen, 2001, Nussbaum, 1999). She further criticized the “bracketing” of the political in arguments for social justice and equal dignity:

On basic issues of survival, issues about which there should be little controversy -- adequate food, shelter, and health care, for example-Nussbaum brackets the political question: how? Through what institutions, social practices, and methods of redistribution can we work to allocate resources so as to ameliorate material deprivation worldwide? (Quillen, 2001).

As it develops as a theory and a discipline, feminism tends to be a multifaceted methodology that first gives agency to women to act on their own behalf and address the practical and the theoretical aspects of social change that include them as actors. As

feminists themselves have proved, women are not a monolith, and the various feminisms that exist share fundamental values but differ in how to proceed with bringing about equality for women. Feminisms are open to employing methods and ideas from each other and developing and changing their ways of doing research and addressing their problems. As such feminism appears on the outset to be a fragmented domain that represents differing views and research paradigms. But that is not the case since a claim to universality of subordination does not necessarily call for a universality of the means to challenge that subordination.

Attempts to unify women's basic attitudes towards their subordination and suffering should not universalize solutions on basis of one perspective or explanation. By the same token differentiating them should not be according to culture alone to the exclusion of women's local realities. Uma Narayan gave examples of how women's issues in developing countries are analyzed on basis of a vague notion of culture; an analysis that more often than not, ignores the entanglement of many issues (Chandra Mohanty, 1991; Gayatri Spivak, 1999; Uma Narayan, 1997). Some of those issues were introduced by the consumption patterns of the developing world and the restrictions of the international financial institutions but research by those institutions treat them as local issues that have to be solved according to recipes made inside those institutions.

Narayan takes the example of what came to be known as "dowry burning" in India and sharply criticizes how this new crime has been attributed to Indian culture. She makes the point that for researchers from the developed world there is always a vague but static thing called culture that everything may be pinned on. Some of her criticism went to the explanation that dowry burning was part of the Hinduism and that fascination that

Indians have with fire. The crime of dowry burning, says Narayan, has nothing to do with Hinduism or any ancient culture, it came with the commercialism that became the norm in the world. Dowry, a once beneficial institution to women as “premortem inheritance”, turned fatal because of the commercial culture. To absolve the modern ways of life, globalization and financial practices in the world of women’s suffering happens only when a lopsided half blinded analysis or explanation is offered. Marina Lazreg contributed a critique of how Muslim women issues are portrayed according to the colonial ideas that Islam is the source of their oppression (Lazreg, 1988).

What sets women in developing countries and those in developed ones apart is how they politicize their issues. Sometimes women in developing countries are faster in articulating their issues as political arguments. Latin American women have taken the reproductive health issues that were started in the USA in the 70s and politicized them while approaches to the same issues remained unchanged in the USA (Burawyo, 2000). By so doing they proved their ability to go beyond culture to seek their rights. Furthermore feminism for women in developing countries meant writing and taking action for women taking a stand against men.

Feminist theories and perspectives enabled women to deconstruct their lives and analyze their status in the light of their real lives, not preconceived or imagined status. The status of the immigrant has, more often than not, been studied in a way that took into consideration their home cultures. Women authors gave impressive accounts of women telling their own stories (Noland, 2000; Arthur, 2000; Chin, 2000). Immigrant women’s own accounts of their status and what they gained and/or lost in their newly acquired home is slowly coming to the field. Eleanore Hofstetter who recently published a

bibliography about immigrant women, states that:

Because of linguistic reasons or lack of leisure, personal stories of immigrant women are few in comparison to the great numbers of women who have immigrated. However, these stories provide compelling evidence of the reception the women received in a new country and of their own receptivity to new experiences. (Hofstetter, 2001).

A feminist perspective is likely to tolerate research that attempts to explain not only some “cultural practices” from the point of view of the immigrants who practice them, but also reveals how the experience of immigration has affected those practices and the women’s ways of practicing or stopping them; in other words, research that is inductive without being phenomenological. The epistemological roots of feminism makes it less suspicious of subjectivity in research, situating oneself as part of the research may increase rather than decrease the “trustworthiness” of the research. Immigrant women’s narratives, when analyzed thematically, may generate more reliable theories; more reliable than those generated from responses to assumptions made by “others.”

It is not surprising that African immigrants have been lumped in one category. Such categorization may be useful for administrative and political reasons but they are not effective for research purposes. Statistics and estimates of circumcised women and those at risk of circumcision in the USA, are now available. What policy makers may find useful is research done with the participation of communities affected by circumcision. Such research is more likely to generate good information on issues such as which African groups are likely to continue circumcising daughters and which are likely to stop or have already stopped the practice. Continuing or discontinuing certain practices will depend greatly on how immigrant women succeed in negotiating and forging a new or a modified status, as well as on whether or not they resist the new culture.

As far as FC is concerned immigration seems to be a factor in bringing it to the attention of the world as well as causing changes in the convictions of the immigrants themselves. The main reasons for continuing FC bear certain similarities in the practicing communities as mentioned in the introduction above. Yet *habitus*³² tend to have a different effect on different communities (Kemuma, 2000).

Generally research on African women's issues is witnessing a surge as mentioned above. But research on specific groups of immigrants are still lacking within the feminist research. In a collection of about 5000 books and articles on and about immigrant women (Hofstetter, 2001) I found only one article about immigrant Sudanese women, written by a long time anthropologist of Sudan, Janice Body (James, 1995). Therefore a Sudanese immigrant women's perspective on how they gain knowledge, learn or unlearn in their new environment, and how they use their culture and traditional methods in their new home, remains mostly a vacant space.

Public/Private Dichotomy

Another important element that occupies a space in the feminist methodology is the division of societies into private and public spheres. Women's lives have by and large been confined to what came to be known as the private sphere or space. The word private is supposed to indicate the home. Governments have been content with patriarchal control in the families. Injustices in the home did not concern the state much. For example domestic violence remained, for a long time, an issue untouched by law for it

³² Joyce Kemuma defines the concept *habitus*, which she takes from Bourdieu, as being, "... a constituted product of a particular class or conditions of existence, a product moulded by the life one has lived in the social world. This means that each and every person has *habitus*. Making *habitus* a universal and trans-historical tool. ... each individual has different *habitus/es*, because one belongs to different fields as she or he interacts with the social world and that each field influences individual members."

belonged to the private sphere. Forced and early marriages, FC and other practices that mainly target women remained private. Even with the overwhelming changes of women's status in the past four decades the political or public sphere continues to consider women wards of the private sphere. Syela Benhabib rightly points out that:

.... with the emergence of autonomous women's movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with women's massive entry into the labour force in this century, and their gain of the right to vote, this picture has been transformed. Contemporary moral and political theory, however, continues to neglect these issues, and ignores the transformations of the private sphere resulting from massive changes in women and men's lives. (Benhabib, 1987).

Lives of Sudanese people have witnessed an overwhelming change during the past twelve years. The Islamist government that took over through a military coup in 1989 disrupted lives by violating human rights. Freedom of movement and association were the first victims of this government. To achieve control of people's lives the private lives of people and particularly of women became subject to regulations by the government rather than the family. Indeed for Sudanese women the line between the private and the public has been blurred through strict application of laws that are seeking to change the gender and social relations in the country.

Women's dress, movement, especially travel abroad, and work outside the home that used to be left to customs and "culture" became the concern of the state. Even when women are able to negotiate their presence in the public sphere they have to seek a private space underneath the long garment or *hijab*. The Sudan becomes a living example that when the state has a stake in regulating the private sphere, the popular feminist slogan "the private is political" may be detrimental to women. The state is subduing those who occupy the public sphere through usurping their power in the private one.

Recently the government even engaged itself in holding group weddings, because

marriage is a protection against “vice.” The organization of the institution of marriage and the rights and duties in it has always been a public issue that concerns all states. What is new in the Sudanese government’s intervention is the policy makers’ interest in organizing the shape of the wedding ceremony and the amount of dowry that should move from the man to the woman and what it should be used for.³³

The executive, legislature and the official religious office holders became active participants in the wedding process that has always been a family and community matter. On the flip side of government intervention there is the government’s dissolution of family planning associations, including those who are sponsored by the United Nations. The justification was that they interfere with people’s customs and beliefs. The BBC World news reported that the Sudanese president encouraged men to take up more than one wife and that they should “ignore international family planning policies.” (BBC Wednesday, 15 August, 2001, 20:28 GMT 21:28 UK). Last month, March 2002, the President of the republic’s taking of a second wife was described by him and the Sudanese media as a “jihad project.”³⁴ (UPI Mar 04, 2002. Although the privacy of the home and its security is breached on a daily basis there is an insistence that women should remain at home, or should be confined to certain types of jobs.

For immigrant women the blurring of the public/private divide is clearer in the United States. Sudanese are known for the custom of living a segregated life at home.

³³ A governmental department would contribute the dowry and the husband should spend it on furniture or other household items. Such a condition breaches the Shari’a rule that the wife receives the dowry. The brides became known as “government brides.” A popular joke was that they should be considered public property.

³⁴ The president got married to the wife of one of the members of the revolutionary council that lead the coup with him in 1989, Ibrahim Shamseddin, a notorious blood thirsty officer who died in a military plane crash last year, 2001.

Men occupy the external part of house called *diwan*, while women occupy the inner parts associated with the kitchen and other household functions facilities. Although children are allowed to move between the two spaces, they are usually encouraged to stay with their own age group in the private part allocated for women. In the United States immigrants' issues are subject to public debates in various circles. Their most private issue at home, FC, is a public issue that prompted legislation by congress and campaigns by the executive branch. In a sense, that private issue is not theirs to shape or portray anymore; it has entered the public domain. Some African countries have legislated laws against FC, yet women are still in control of the practice. The segregated home does not exist any more as the majority of the Sudanese immigrants live in apartments that make that segregation difficult if not impossible. At this juncture of their lives the dichotomy between public and private has little or no meaning.

African Feminisms

Feminist research is trying to bridge "the rights talk and the culture talk."

Generally speaking, African women tend to articulate their own brand of feminism from their own perspective. Their framework often collided with the Western rights framework in the past. The African feminist perspective showed no inclination to dismantle the collective rights perspective. It may not be easy to argue that a rights debate is possible from within these cultures and that individual rights are sustainable. But it is more difficult to argue that an individualistic point of view is going to see any success in communities that have a say in almost everything that concerns the individual; add to that the fact that the individuals do not have an alternative now and we are not sure that they are going to choose to replace their communities.

Within the Western reality, individual women have many alternatives when, for example, they decide to leave an abusive situation. A woman may resort to a shelter or go on with her life on welfare assistance (Uma Naryan, 1997). While on welfare, a woman has many opportunities to develop skills through training or more schooling and increase her chances of employment. There is no social stigma for leaving the family or the community. An African woman lacks this cushion of support to fall on. Therefore her rights to a better life are more likely to be articulated within a right to bodily integrity and safety within the family and community.

Feminists in developing countries are engaged in sorting out what is culture and what is not. They are concerned with alternatives for women who choose not to adhere to community rules that breach their rights. But African feminism is conscious to an important part, which is the political change in the continent and the power of those states to become parties to international conventions and pass local laws. Jeanne Maddox Toungara, writing about Ivorian women's rights noted that, it is not unusual for states to try a sweeping social change through the law. (Mikell, 1997). However people depend on their strong lineage and communal life to resist such laws. In addition, the increased participation of women in economic activities and the movement of people to the cities, people are becoming more and more aware of their rights.

One of the areas that feminists can work on is the elimination of pluralism in the law. Laws that depend on local customs that are actually harming the communal life should be abolished. Women did take advantage of laws against forcible marriages in the Sudan. African feminism has a role to play in the lives of African immigrants. Part of this role is paying attention to the lives of women and making their dilemmas visible to their

host countries. Complaining is not enough, as long as the system is open to understanding what it is that women are wrestling with there is no excuse for not providing the information that may help both the host and the guest.

Having said that one cannot but notice the big stride the research and activism around issues such as FC have taken towards a rights discourse on the continent. This rights discourse takes in mind that cultural practices have to be tackled from a group's rights view before reaching the individual rights of an individual woman. Involving the community in the fight for the individual right of a woman to her bodily integrity proved to be more effective in realizing that right.

Gwendolyn Mikell points out the differences between African feminisms and western feminism and refers those differences to historical and cultural. Events that affected the emergence and development of feminism in the West are different than those that governed African feminism, Mikell argues that,

The debates in many Western countries about essentialism, the female body, and radical feminism are not characteristic of the new African feminism. Rather, the slowly emerging African feminism is distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal and concerned with many "bread, butter, culture, and power" issues. The African variant of feminism grows out of a history of a female integration within largely corporate and agrarian-based societies with string cultural heritages that have experienced traumatic colonization by the West. Women have experienced marginalization in the capitalist –oriented transition of these societies to an "independence" fraught with economic dependence. (Mikell, 1997).

The economic "dependence" referred to by Mikell has had a great effect on the scholarship and activism in Africa in general, and within feminist circles in particular. It helped bring the language of rights to dominance. Feminist and other discussion the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), have argued for the human rights of women and

everyone else affected by the unjust programs imposed on developing states (UNDP, 2000; Danaher, 1994).

Mikell noticed the friction between African and Western feminist particularly over the issue of FC. I argue that the differences between Africa and the west are not differences in whether a woman has the right to bodily integrity. Rather they differ on the origin, reasons for persistence of FC, and its elimination. For the Western feminists it is an oppressive act perpetuated by men against women. For the African feminist it is an act that women themselves participate in to negotiate other rights and better status, as such it is strongly tied to other rights, such as rights in marriage and participation in their community's social life. Therefore the "phallocracy" argument is completely rejected by them. Apparently the main difference is not on whether to argue for women's rights or not but a clear resistance of Western hegemony in the feminist scholarship. In this respect the friction is similar to the criticism made by women of color to white feminists' scholarship in the United States.

While Western feminisms have developed mainly within democracies, African feminisms have, by and large, developed within dictatorships and resistance to policies of international financial institutions. The development of feminism has affected the articulation of the rights debate. For many African scholars culture is not a good excuse for breach of rights, yet the debate on securing those rights is faced with the dilemma caused by the sudden discard of a well adhered to culture. There may be a fear that a sudden change in favor of women may bring with it the demise of other rights of women. For example a forcible discard of FC may cause more restraints on women's movement, since the belief that their sexual desire is going to be damaging, or that they

are in need of guardians any way, as is the case in the Sudan and other Muslim cultures. Most importantly women would like to be assured that their right to marry is not affected. African feminists know that the explanation of all actions that subordinate women according to culture is unacceptable to African women. With the socio-economic changes that culture is going to change.

One of the changes in resisting laws in the Sudan is using the available legal mechanisms in the Sudan. Newly legislated laws that hide behind religion, especially *Shari'a* laws, are resisted as political issues designed to further subordinate women, rather than being accepted or tip-toed around as part of the culture of Muslim women. State interests sometimes take priority to any culture or rights, articulating resistance to state interests from a rights perspective make more sense, since governments often refer their actions to keeping the culture and behaving according to “our thoughts that emanate from our heritage.”³⁵

Activism around reproductive rights forced international pragmatic population control polices to change course and address issues of women's rights to fertility, family planning and safe motherhood. The rights discourse has paved the way for a much culturally shunned population control policy into what all cultures would not argue against. Dr. Mahmoud Fathalla, past Chairman of the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics and a former Chairman of IPPF's Medical Advisory Panel, addressed UN delegates during the Cairo+5³⁶ and stated what cultural paradigms curtailed from being the obvious about reproductive rights:

³⁵ The phrase *afkarna alnaba'a min turathna* became target of much sarcasm in the Sudan since it became the source and justification of all sorts of oppression.

³⁶ The Five-year review of the International Conference on Population and Development that was held by the UN in Cairo, Egypt in 1994.

This is not a disease that should have to fight for resources. Women are entitled to the right to be protected." Dr Fathalla told delegates. The continuing violation of women's sexual and reproductive rights was also identified as an area in which the implementation of ICPD has not been successful. The list of violations, stressed Dr Fathalla, is becoming too long and there is an urgent need to hold governments accountable and urge the correction of these injustices (IPPF, 1999).

The difference factor, in reproductive rights (including FC) activism and scholarship, is twofold, firstly it is a difference between women and men and difference between feminists of different cultures. Reproductive rights for women are sought through emphasizing the difference between women and men. Cultural beliefs may have turned men's inability to bear children to their advantage, but their benefit from women's ability to bear children made it difficult to deny women the right to safe motherhood and good health to avoid maternal mortality. Western feminism tends to have a greater inclination towards articulating sexual rights that include the rights of lesbians and those of all women.

During the ICPD religious extremists from all religions distorted the fight for reproductive rights by calling them rights to homosexuality and sterilization. Religious states emphasized their stands regarding strong families and observing religious and cultural diversities. Anti-population groups were active during ICPD and challenged some of the concepts that are being used without an actual explanation of what they are.³⁷

³⁷ Baobab, a journalists group that opposed the ICPD published on its website what it called "Free advice" to the ICPD. They stressed their position, that population control and democracy are contradictory terms. Further they questioned the widely used term empowerment, "Some population policies are based on notions that are far more vague -- the empowerment of women, for instance. Here, the rhetoric from donors is not always as precise as we would like it to be. Indeed, sometimes "empowerment" is offered a means to lower birthrates -- and sometimes it's the other way around. But in any case, no one is quite sure what "empowerment" really is. Does "empowerment" consist of jobs, money, responsibility, the opportunity to hold public office -- what? If lower birthrates

Anouka van Eerdewijk points to the success of employing the sex difference to reach equality in research and equality in paying attention to the life and death issues of reproduction. She stresses the concept of “entitlement” in human rights (van Eerdewijk, 1999). She defines the concept of entitlement as “the socially and culturally recognized rights of specific categories of persons to decision-making power on matters related to sexuality and reproduction.” In the end this definition amounts to the recognition of “rights.” If the entitlement argument is acceptable, it may be beneficial in stressing the *duties* of that group regarding reproductive rights. In this regard close attention has to be paid to what the group sees as its rights. We have to be careful that the community does not formulate FC as one of its rights to regulate vice.

Economic globalization is forcing changes in family settings and settlements. The political pressure exerted by local governments in Africa hide behind a heavy cloud of culture that ascertain privilege for men and for certain groups, a privilege that renders men themselves unequal. Political pressure caused demographic and economic changes in the Sudan. Natural and state made disasters collaborated to move whole communities out of their homes to seek survival at the edge of cities. Individuals from those groups were forced to seek jobs or asylum in other countries. Such dramatic movements may strengthen the rights debate as individuals and groups seek their basic rights from their own state or from other states that they became residents of, immigrants that is.

Feminist research has a good chance of finding out what has changed in the

really create jobs, for example, then the people need to be told how many of these jobs there will be, where they will be, who is going to fill them, the nature of the work, the wages, and the employee benefits. "Empowerment," if not fully explained, may seem to many people to be little more than a cynical euphemism for sterility."

<http://www.africa2000.com/BNDX/BAO417.htm>

attitudes of women affected by the dramatic movement out of their countries. A feminist perspective affords researchers a chance to investigate whether “culture” has a life of its own or that it can be changed by those who produce it in favor of a better life. Further a feminist researcher should be concerned about how do women start to change attitudes on a certain cultural practice, rather than suggesting those changes. In this study I note women’s use of a rights discourse which is in itself a change of part of the Sudanese culture. Statements such as “I am a tax-payer” and “I have a right to ...” are not uncommon when immigrant women start to explore their rights or protest a breach of those rights.³⁸ A feminist rights framework suits this study, in the sense that it will let the women articulate whatever changes they feel or making, by themselves.

***Wanasa*³⁹ as Methodology**

The language of all the meetings and interviews was Arabic, the first language of the participants and me, the researcher. I taped all the conversations and translated as I transcribed the contents. This exercise caused me to listen to the tapes over and over again. I listened and transcribed on a daily basis and then went back to listening to the day’s and the day before tapes. The confidentiality insisted on by the university, eliminated any possibility of having anyone transcribe or translate the contents of the tapes. In the end this exercise of repeated listening was extremely useful in giving me clarity and preparing me for the next interview or group session. It satisfied the theoretical importance of grounding the theories on the data.

³⁸ Last year Sudanese women among others sued a USA airline company that harassed them for wearing scarves. They invoked their right to choose their dress and pleaded discrimination rather than invoking a religious or cultural right to that scarf.

⁸ Sudanese colloquial Arabic for informal leisure time gatherings of people, especially women, during which information and small talk is exchanged.

Speaking the same language and engaging in the same social activities was a great help in pursuing answers and asking direct questions. *Wanasa* or chatting for long hours is a relaxing practice that Sudanese women often engage in and exchange news and knowledge. Women engage in *wanasa* in different social gatherings. It may be accompanied by special food as in the case of childbirth ceremonies or with coffee and tea when it is just for entertainment. *Wanasa* was a great medium to use since women engaged in lengthy debates and told about their lives with little or no inhibitions.

Sandra Harding defines methodology as “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed.” Method refers to “a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence.” (Harding, 1987). This study will use more than one method from different methodologies or “traditions of inquiry.” Feminism provides a theoretical framework that is flexible and allows the use of a variety of methods. Feminism’s main requirement is the involvement of the researcher with the participants because the research should add something (empower) the women participating in the research. Qualitative research strategies avail the researcher the use of multiple techniques and also innovation by changing techniques during the research.

Elliot W. Eisner (1995) uses the terms qualitative “inquiry” and qualitative “thought”, rather than qualitative research. *Qualitative* for Eisner is “sufficiently general to encompass not only teaching and other forms of human activity, but also objects such as buildings and books.” Qualitative thought is “ubiquitous in human affairs. It is not some exotic form of doing or making, but a pervasive aspect of daily life, for that reason and for others it is useful.” Such flexibility is possible within the feminist theory.

Data Collection

Qualitative methods use descriptions and categories; I used some of the known methods such as: open-ended interviews, observation of daily lives at home, participation of groups, comparing literature, and self-reflections. Open ended interviews were useful in answering specific questions while at the same time allowed the interviewees to elaborate and tell me more about themselves and their surroundings, their neighbors, children and husbands. Such interviews made it easy for me to see whether the interviewee is likely to answer a private question. Some answers came without my asking a question, some gave me information that I did not even think of, e.g. Islamic schools and their impact. Younger women readily informed me about broken relationships because of FC. Staying at their homes for days involved me in their daily lives and gave me a better perspective of how they cope. I discussed my own reflections with them and probed for answers of questions such as the psychological effect of FC.

A theory emerges from the analysis of the data collected and conclusions or recommendations are drawn. Although choosing a method is important in doing a qualitative inquiry,

The point of method is not to claim that, above others, there is one correct or superior mode of inquiry to discover and ascertain the truth or the true meaning of something. There is no single method, just as there is no uncontested truth. Rather, the reason for reflecting on method is to discover the historical approaches and suppositions that may hold promise in rendering human experience interpretable and understandable in our present time and place.” (Van-Manen, 1997).

It was not difficult to make an entry into a community that since I belonged to it and knew some of its members before. Once I put my idea of researching the experience of circumcised Sudanese women to two of the women I knew from before, they jumped

at the idea and said they were discussing among themselves how African and other communities experiences and needs have been documented and how that eased their access of state and federal services. I discussed with them my plan of bringing together a group of about 20 women for a few meetings and then choosing three of them for in depth interviews.

I was immediately provided with an excellent idea that helped me immensely in accessing information in an organized way. The idea was to form three groups for three different age groups. The Sudanese community that has for a long time consisted mainly of men includes now wives, sisters and mothers. Sudanese family settings are being imported to the USA.

The second step was to make a list of women whom we thought would be open to participating in the research. My two informants, helpers and friends immediately embarked on calling the women and deciding the meeting places and times. Of course I had no objection to any of the arrangements since I was ready to meet at the times that are more convenient to the women. The word got around and two women who were not on the list asked to join a group. The word did not get around without rumors around what I was up to. Some women received information that I was forming a women's association and called the group organizers to complain that they were not invited for this. I made it a point to call them and explain what I was there for, and to welcome them to join the group. They did not come! It was also rumored that women are enthusiastic to join the group because it was an empowerment group against men. Group organizers received phone calls and subtle questions from some men; it is worth mentioning that they were men whose wives were not members of the group. It became apparent that it

was necessary for the group members to spread our word of why I was there meeting with women.

I expected to see women, especially married ones, disappear from the group if it is viewed as “against men.” Contrary to that the women stuck with the groups to the end, not only that, but new women wanted to join our meetings. A woman activist, who is working to organize the Sudanese community, saw a good chance to form a women’s group to attend to women’s needs within the existing registered Sudanese Community Association. Adopting a feminist framework I saw this idea as something that women can come out with at the end of this resolution.

I decided to meet with the group of married women first. Seeing the enthusiasm of my two helpers to get this together and practice their abilities in getting the women together I left them to make the calls and started to look for a place to hold the meeting. The idea of looking for a place to rent for the meeting contradicted with my plan of operation for these meetings. When I talked to the women I said, I would very much prefer sessions of *wanasa*. It was not difficult for the organizers of the group to humorously notice that. The organizers planned the place and invited the group; we were to meet in one of the organizers’ apartments. Refusal of this Sudanese hospitality would have put an end to my research.

At the beginning of the meeting at the apartment, I read to the group the agreement with Ohio University on how to conduct the research. One of the points that I wanted to make sure of with the group and not depend on my own perception of was the idea that the mention of circumcision may upset them and cause them to go back to bad memories. Laughter was their first answer, then assurances that I will not need to take

anyone of them to the neighborhood psychiatrist. One of my biggest surprises was how one woman just started by saying “enough about regulations, let us talk about our FC and what is happening with that here and back home.” That was an enthusiasm not usually sensed in Sudanese women when the subject is FC. Everyone agreed to tape recording the session that continued for six hours. We started at 8:00 p.m. and ended at 2:00 a.m.!

Meetings with a group of older women who were staying with daughters or sons and then a group of young women who are living by themselves or with family members followed. Open-ended questions were the mode. I felt that recording everything at the meetings was very important. I participated in the meetings as a member of the group but was the curious member with many questions. I jotted down my observations of body language and how testy some of the participants were.

Out of each group I interviewed one woman. I stayed at their houses or apartments for the purpose of these interviews. I was welcomed into the houses and the families. The three women live in one form or another of family setting. The first one is married with two children. She and her family occupied a large new house in one of the suburbs that was recently developed. It was a pleasant surprise to find out that she leads an extended family. Her sister and her three children just moved in with them after arriving in the USA from one of the Gulf countries in the Middle East.

The second woman, who was over sixty-five, came to the USA with her daughter and her family. It is her only child and they lived together all their lives. She has been the main household organizer for her daughter’s family. I had to follow a certain line of questioning with her. She needed to be assured that the interview was not for the government.

The third woman was a thirty years old who did not mince words about her frustrations and the continuous trials by her family to limit her “decision making power” as she put it. She expressed her major frustration as being held back by a family that resides in the Sudan, and thinks that life in the USA should be run according to their wishes. She expresses her frustrations towards her inability to let a doctor examine her. She said it was because of her circumcision and upbringing. Getting straight answers from her was an easy task.

During the time that I spent in each house I recorded the interviews and wrote down my personal observations about their lives. I noticed things that during past visits and under other circumstances did not notice. I lived in amazement and excitement as I followed how the three women juggled the independence that they longed for with their family settings, and how they negotiated the multi-relationships in the household. The noticeable difference in how they view their circumcision since they came to the USA was another encouraging sign that made me extend my stay by a day or two with them.

It was not appropriate to remunerate people for their time and they refused any attempt by me to participate in meetings expenses. That prompted me to make myself available for any services that they may need my help in. Throughout the duration of the research I made myself available to help draft appeals to social services, fill out immigration forms, make calls to telephone companies to straighten out bills and accompany non-English speakers to governmental offices. I even accompanied an appellant as a friend and translator for an appeal hearing at social services. I managed to forge some close relationships with some of the members who consulted me about some family problems with husbands.

Afternoon and evening chats among Sudanese women usually go into the personal lives and experiences, and lead to offering advice in the never outdated “grandmother” style. This research experience proved that this is still a much-needed network for women, but it is not as easy to form or attend as it was in the Sudan. Between work and family there is no time left for long chats. Most of the time *wanasa* is done over the telephone and between two friends. Therefore group meetings were welcome and steered some nostalgia. Nondirective interviewing, participant-observation and, recording of long narratives of life histories was made possible by this setting. These techniques allowed a flow of personal stories and ideas and were suitable for long discussions and exchange of information between the women while they were engaging in *wanasa*.

This method of *wanasa* included convergent interviewing. The technique of Convergent interviewing achieves its result “by leaving much of the content unstructured. You don't ask only a series of pre-determined questions. The information is therefore determined by the person being interviewed.” (Dick, B. 1998). While the content of such interviewing is unstructured “The process, however, is tightly structured. You analyse the information systematically. You use only relevant information from earlier stages in subsequent stages.” As indicated by Dick, B. systematic reading of the data and finding where interviewees converged or diverged has eliminated a great deal of any biases I might have had. What the interviewees said and how they introduced new information to me their views became what I was interested in not what I believed before or thought should be happening now.

Data Analysis

Data analysis may start at any stage of collection, for this research it started

immediately after recording of a session. It continued throughout the process of data collection. I found Burawoy's challenge of "... conventional correspondence between technique and level of analysis" useful. Equally illuminating was his argument that "participant observation can examine the macro world through the way the latter shapes and in turn is shaped and conditioned by the micro world, the everyday world of face to face interaction." (Burawoy, 1991).

The data consisted mainly of audiotapes, over forty-five hours of tape, and personal notes that contained mainly observation while staying with the women at their homes or at the meetings. Grounded theory methods are used for constant comparison of data in interviews made on different days, and for pulling apart the data after each session.

One definition of grounded theory is that it is "an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data." (Turner 1986).

Employing a grounded theory strategy for analyzing the data in this study proved to be of maximum use. Repeated listening to the data from the tapes and comparing group sessions and individual accounts was valuable for making a thematic coding of the data, hence an organized analysis of it. The conceptual framework for the study encompasses a look at the patterns of coping and learning in the day-to-day life. The lived experience of immigration especially when linked to feelings of being uprooted is told in details. The codes were revised, subdivided, and refined throughout the period of data collection.

A reflexive method of reading the data is a check for subjective issues in the research. It lead to ascertaining that my personal feelings or any pre-knowledge served as part of the research not as the basic ideas in it, nor a reason to counter any of the stories given or the participants' own analysis of any specific situation. Direct interaction, especially during the group sessions, provided many "check points" for use when interviewing individual women and when comparing my own contribution as a participant in the group sessions. How women viewed themselves and their state of circumcision varied from one group to another. Yet they stated the same need for the same services and sought the same understanding by the American medical profession.

The daily reminder was that "it is people giving their own accounts and telling their own stories about their new situation as immigrants in the USA. Lynn Davidman, who writes about herself and women of her community, Jewish women, recognizes that she writes about herself too, she uses herself as data. She also tells of what she expects from a field study involving people who are not much different than the writer. She maintains that in qualitative stories she expects a tale of *the field*. (Kleinman, 1999).

I used Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method techniques, that position the researcher as a "facilitator" rather than an "instructor" in collecting data. Although it is a method of research for a wider sample of people and mostly in agricultural settings, it greatly minimized the risks of personal biases and interference in the flow of the stories. It also facilitated the flow of ideas between the participants during group meetings. This technique fits in the feminist perspective, which seeks to empower the participants by actively engaging them in discussions, not just telling of stories (Chambers, 1995).

In summary this study combines different methods and techniques to ensure the

flow of reliable and detailed stories. Each interview was rigorously reviewed for refinement of method and content. Attitudes and stories converged and diverged causing new techniques such as *wanasa* to emerge. Each interview and each meeting went through analysis and comparison with the previous one. The main objective of combining these methods was to move the experiences of women from being just stories of immigration into a process that brings about important additions from the people who are affected by the issues discussed in academia and other disciplines and convey their own suggestions to policy-makers.

CHAPTER FOUR

PART ONE

ISOLATION IN A FAR AWAY LAND: THE STORY OF HAJJA MAMA

Introduction

This part of chapter four reflects the attitudes and beliefs of an older generation of women. I decided to start with the older generation group and move into the middle generation of married women and end with the younger “militant” generation of women who are seen as breaking some difficult barriers. I chose to start with the older women because they still live by Sudanese standard. There is no pressing need in their lives to, for example, change the way they dress. Some of them do not speak English so their interaction with the host culture is kept at a minimum.

The main change inside the home has been the size of the apartments and the lack of privacy they feel inside them. Their families keep the respect they always showed them back home and make sure that the change that the rest of the family is undergoing does not alarm them, nor cause them to feel they are losing power in the home. However they all realize what their families are going through and mostly understand and try to help.

Their attitudes towards traditional practices including FC remain the same. However they were willing to accept having uncircumcised granddaughters so as to protect them from the health and social difficulties they face in this country. The participants in the group were all, but one who was over fifty, over sixty years of age. All, but the younger member, came to the USA to reside with sons or daughters who

immigrated to the USA. I expected the members of the group to have the same level of education or at least not vast variations in that level. To my surprise their educational levels ranged from a master degree from the best university in the Sudan to bare literacy. Their attitudes toward FC ranged from strong support (four of the participants), to total refusal of its continuation (two participants). Their backgrounds have different effect on their views. Rogaia Abusharaf (2001) maintains that,

The backgrounds of migrant women are very relevant to an understanding of their position in the host society. Undoubtedly, social and material conditions affect their roles and their daily lives. Many are restrictive to women: constraints on political participation, unemployment, discrimination, cultural conventions which enforce "keeping a low profile," economic victimization and circumscribed personal mobility.

All of the above constraints mentioned by Abusharaf, are relevant to this group of older Sudanese women. Even The participant with a master degree felt that she could not get a job in the USA. Her age and her life long employment in a different system are major obstacles for finding work in the USA. She said not she is “content with being a grandmother.”

I thought the participant with the highest level of education would be of great help in the debate against FC, but that was not the case. She admitted that none of her two daughters had a graduate degree, actually only the younger daughter attended college, the other one got married after high school. She did not circumcise her daughters who are now over 25 years of age. I was astonished that she was a staunch supporter of FC. So I asked why she didn't circumcise her daughters. She said, “I thought this is their decision to make not mine. They are old enough to decide whether FC will benefit them.” Such attitude is rare within Sudanese women and the Sudanese society. Waiting for daughters to grow up and give them the right to choose what to do with their body is a healthy

attitude that did not resonate well with the rest of the group as indicated later in this chapter.

I chose Hajja Mama because she came forward with her ideas about FC and, at the same time, was attentive to others during the meetings and was ready to make comparisons between Sudanese and American people and their behavior. She is also the most isolated because she does not speak English and depends on others to communicate with Americans. Therefore she has experienced the most dramatic change of life. She is also the only one who could not make a decision to return home for all the family she has, her daughter, decided to reside in the USA. Finally but most important she is entrusted with three granddaughters whom she assumed were circumcised while they are not. Two of the girls are teen-agers. Although a pious woman who follows her religious duties carefully and with awareness, she is a faithful follower of the Sudanese customs even when they are clearly against religion. She believed in keeping the fabric of society in tact.

Everyday Life Has Changed to the Unfamiliar

It was a sunny day that followed five cloudy rainy days. I decided to go and visit Hajja Mama. She is over sixty-five and lives in an apartment with her daughter Mimi and husband and their three daughters. I have seen Hajja Mama before but we never held a long conversation on any topic. When we met at the group meeting, that I invited her to, with six other women who are in the same age group, she thought I was collecting information for the government about FC. Her first comments were directed to the Americans. “Tell the Americans that once FC is done it cannot be undone.” Or “tell the

government not to worry circumcision is as outmoded as these *shiloukh* [face scarification]” She traced her face scars one by one as she said that.

Many Sudanese share Hajja Mama’s feeling that governments get into the private lives of people. I assured her that the government did not hire me for this, but I was hoping that they would read it when I finished writing it and perhaps find in it something that would help Sudanese women. She gladly invited me to come and visit her apologizing in advance that she lived in a small place. She asked me to come and stay with her during the day, when the rest of the family is at work or at school.

I entered a large living room that was divided into a dining and a living room. Hajja Mama was watching Arabic news on the international channel, that is the only thing she cared about on TV, a half hour news interval provided among intervals in other languages. The Arabic channel available in a nearby city was not available where she lived. “That is my entertainment during the day. Gone are the days of midday coffee with friends and evening visits to relatives.” She said that and apologized for neglecting me and watching the news. “No problem Hajja Mama I would like to see the Arabic news too.” We watched the news together.

A half hour of Arabic news made a difference in Hajja Mama’s daily routine. She talked all the time about isolation in a far away land. This feeling may have greatly affected her attitude towards Sudanese traditions. When asked whether she thought FC should continue to be practiced her first answer was “yes, it was our mothers’ *a’da* and girls would be better off circumcised.” When I pointed out “the isolation” that the girls might suffer in this country if they were circumcised, her countenance changed and she waived her arm in the air, “Not good, worst thing in the world is to be isolated, being a

ghareeb [stranger or foreigner] is a painful experience, may be they are better off without it.” But Hajja Mama continued to be half hearted about the practice till late in our conversations.

The news ended and Hajja Mama was ready to give me her full attention and started to ask me about my mother in the Sudan, brothers and sisters and how I was doing myself. A long greeting style that is typical of Sudanese meetings. When done with greetings she started towards the kitchen and I knew that she was going to prepare something for me. I followed her and said I was fine and that I would like to sit and talk to her for a little bit then we could cook together. On the way out of the kitchen she tripped on a chair that was pulled out of the dining table and that started our conversation!

Too close to Socialize

“Look at this! Look at me! This place is so tight I am almost suffocating.” The place she called tight was a large three bedrooms apartment. “My son-in-law, the man of the house, sleeps in the room next to me! Back home I could never have stayed so close to him like this. I want my own home or my separate quarters where I will not be a nuisance to others or they to me. Staying so close to my son-in-law makes me feel that I am crowding the place.” I watched her face get into an uncomfortable frown, and I reminded her that she had always lived with her daughter and son-in-law, or as a matter of fact they lived with her. “No, not like this. You know after I go in at night I do not come out at all till the morning. I cannot use any facility in the house. It is just not right to get out, for he may come out at the same time.”

It is interesting how people in Northern Sudan keep so close to each other,

coming and going into each others houses at all times of the day. They sit together, eat together, yet they never feel comfortable in small places. Huge courtyards surround the spacious mostly sand floored rooms and verandas. Sleeping arrangements are carefully organized in those courtyards. Once assigned a place in the house then there are certain times that those places are off limits. Social gatherings are usually assigned a certain place in the house. When a son-in-law is part of the family more restrictions are imposed on the family and its guests. The organization of life inside a house in the city carries many similarities to the arrangements of the village.⁴⁰ Janice Boddy gives an interesting description of the house and attaches meanings to its parts,

The in-between space, social space, is organized concentrically. At the hub is the hosh or bayt (house): an extended family and the place where life begins. Surrounding this in the village are kinsmen and neighbors, considered the same by local people: they are referred to as nas garib, "those who are close" or garibna, "our kin." In the nearby villages are more distant relations and affines and, farther still, nonkin Arab Sudanese, Soon thereafter one arrives at the periphery of the known, and readily negotiable, social world.

A *hosh* may house more than one residence, nuclear families reside in those separate residences to form one or part of the extended family. Such arrangements keep families close but provide enough room for privacy.

The wife-husband privacy is deeply rooted in Sudanese traditions and religious practice, even when the family is small it is a social shame for a woman to be sleeping anywhere near her son-in-law. The mother-in-law is also revered by her son-in-law. Men would challenge each other by invoking mothers in law. The word "*naseebtak!*", your

⁴⁰ In Northern Sudan most of the cities are populated by people who moved to them from the villages it is a popular saying that one who does not have roots in a village is without roots. Even when the design of the house is drastically changed from that in the village the behavior inside the house and its use remain the same.

mother-in-law, is uttered to challenge a man into doing or saying something. A man can never cross or mistreat his mother-in-law. Mukhtar Ajjubah relates this revered relationship to the time in history when women were more valued than men in the Sudan. To the time when they were the queens and the lineage was matrilineal.

... revering the mother in-law continued to this day. Eltayeb Mohamed Eltayeb tells us that the most solemn and the strongest traditional oath is when a man swears by his mother-in-law. The mother-in-law has a degree of respect that has not been attained by anyone else. She is obeyed whether she just recommended or demanded an act. The biggest insult for the man (*ibn albalad*) is to mention his mother-in-law in his presence or behind his back. An insult to the mother-in-law's honor can only be rectified with Blood.⁴¹ (Ajjubah, 2001).

Immigration to this “far away land” has affected the mother- son-in-law relationship. The first and most felt effect is the shrinking distance between the two in the household. They are closer to each other than ever, they even eat at the same table. This unwelcome closeness is affecting the financial decisions of the family. They are making plans to buy a house instead of this three bedroom apartment. Hajja Mama felt responsible for the additional burdens but she was not under any stress, as she saw this decision to be part of what the family should do so that the “man of the house” could rest in his home without being on alert to her presence all the time.

Maternal grandmothers wield a lot of power with fathers who are against FC. A man who can stand up to his own mother may not be able to stand up to his mother-in-law. But as Hajja Mama noted, times are changing and in-laws are interacting and socializing more in younger generations. Such daily interaction, noted Hajja mama, was diminishing older women's power within the family. The barriers were relaxed and in-

⁴¹ I translated this from Arabic. The words “ibn albalad” are used to indicate a free northern Sudanese man.

laws can actually debate and disagree expressly. The power of mothers-in-law has a great impact on FC in the Sudan.⁴² Many a times they defeated the decision of parents who decide not to circumcise daughters. They may take girls to be circumcised without consulting any of their parents. Even when there was a law against infibulation in the Sudan grandmothers enjoyed what may be termed as immunity from that law. Men are faced with social disgrace if they sue their mothers-in-law.

During childbirth and for two months after that, husbands are allowed in women's quarters only for brief visits with the mother and the baby. With FC and its complications many practices became traditional so as to give the mother privacy during healing time. Only women stay with and help her with the baby and her private needs. Many of the mothers come to the United States to help daughters during childbirth and to take care of babies afterwards. Four of the women in Hajja Mama's group came to the USA for that purpose and ended up staying for a year or more. Many of them spoke of the unsettling fact that it was hard to make sleeping arrangements work after their daughters gave birth.

Hajja Mama's face lighted up with a big smile when I asked her to tell me about her home and life in the Sudan. She lived in big houses all her life, be they government employees' housing or her family's home. "I had lots of freedom in my house. A big house that was big enough for me and my daughter and her family. "Mimi worked so her daughters stayed with me all the time, I am their Mama." She laughed and felt proud that she was the one entrusted with raising the daughters. "My daughter and her husband lived in a separate part of the house. Her daughters and I occupied the rest of the house. That is

⁴² The same social customs regarding grand mothers exist in Somalia. Somali grand mothers are seen by activists as the major cause of perpetuating FC in the country. *Awaken* a newsletter by equality Now of new york reported the same in its issue of December, 2002.

before my husband died. When my husband was alive we had a separate quarter too.”

The house she described in the Sudan was built in one of the newly developed suburbs of the capital city Khartoum. Upper middle class families built big concrete houses in that area. She had house help for cleaning and laundry, but she cooked for the family and the guests. For Hajja Mama the extended family living arrangement is how living should be. She dealt with the apartment she lives in now, as if it were meant to house an extended family not a nuclear family. The vast grass yards in the apartment complex did not make any sense to her. “How can people cut such small housing for themselves while there is no shortage of land?” she asked.

Hajja Mama’s discomfort is understandable, she is a woman who lived a life of luxury in a big house and had her own house-help who helped her raise her granddaughters. Now all she claims is a bed in a room shared with two of her granddaughters and is working as help for other people, she is babysitting the neighbors’ child. Hajja is hoping that by Allah’s grace she would return to the Sudan. Although she likes the Americans, she does not feel that she is here to stay. She represents a more unsettled status than that exhibited by younger women and confirmed by Noland (2000) in her study of Indian women.

Nina has acknowledged that the US has more comforts, a higher standard of living, an easier life, and greater economic success, but all these things cannot compete with truly belonging. As another woman poignantly explained, “the price is too high”. Nina like many others in this study feels the price is too high.

Hajja lost her social life she feels that she does not belong to “this place”, she only belongs to the apartment she lives in where she can communicate with her family. Not only is she not a part of this society, but she barely lives in it.

There are no alternatives to the life she is leading here. Even her daily routine is planned around other members of the family. She was elated that now she has a Sudanese neighbor albeit a younger woman “who sleeps half the day.” She felt more secure having someone to resort to if she needed anything. In the Sudan she was used to spending time with her neighbors everyday. “We talked about our lives and we heard each other’s news. We advised and confided in each other. You know what you were talking to us about a few nights ago, you know, female circumcision, we advised each other on what to do after childbirth.” When I was at school we used to describe such women talks as idle talks that were nothing but *gatee’aa*, that is talking about people behind their backs. I felt a sense of loss of how women’s *wanasa* never gained the attention or given the value that it deserved by women. *Wanasa* is a practice that continued even within the ranks of educated women, an indication of its value in the lives of Sudanese women.

I quickly turned to Hajja Mama saying I needed to hear more about FC talks. She laughed loudly and said, “Listen, now that I know you are interested, let me tell you. When we decided to move to America three years ago I told Mimi that if she did not circumcise her daughters I would not come with them.” Hajja was acting on a belief in circumcision but what motivated her to “blackmail” her daughter was a sense of *aib* or disgrace, a stigma that follows uncircumcised women.⁴³

Zineb el ouardighi conveys a valuable articulation by Guessous of the sense of

⁴³ Dr. Hamid Elbashir, a Sudanese sociologist who works with UNICEF, conveyed a funny poem by a Western Sudanese woman who was praising the American president Ragan for sending aid during the draught that hit the region in the eighties. She praised the president for the millet and the powdered milk that did not come from the usual places that she was used to. She apologized that she did not know his tribe but expressed her biggest fear and hoped that it was not true of him, namely that his mother was uncircumcised.

hchouma (shame) in the Moroccan society, which I found to be identical to the sense of *aib* in the Sudanese society,

Hchouma (shame) conditions and permeates the world of female sexuality to such an extent that women simply cannot make decisions without analyzing them in terms of shame. Shame is seen as one of the key values of Muslim society. The woman, therefore, has no right over her body and is prohibited from even thinking that it is her own. Furthermore, she must take good care of this precious "merchandise" only in view of attracting a good husband (El-Ouardighi, 1997).

Mimi told me that she staged the circumcision of her daughters.⁴⁴ The daughters were good collaborators because they did not want the circumcision, so they pulled a good act and pretended that they got circumcised. They stayed in bed for three days and received Hajja Mama's gifts and praise. Mimi said she did not want her mother to find out now, but she would tell her, one day. Perhaps when she becomes fully convinced that FC is harmful and feel sorry that she did it, then Mimi would make her happy and tell her that she never did circumcise her daughters.

What Would People Say About Us?

Hajja knew that Mimi could not have left her behind and she wanted to pressure Mimi into circumcising her daughters. Hajja described Mimi's resistance to circumcision as wanting to follow in the footsteps of those who became slaves to the *moda* (fashion or fad) and wanted to leave the girls *sakit* (with nothing or for nothing). With the word *sakit* she flung her arms in the air as if scattering something that could not be retrieved. "What

⁴⁴ In a recent meeting in Bellagio, Italy, more than one participant told about the new spreading trend of staging FC to appease grandmothers. The meeting found such behavior worthy of research so as to accurately ascertain the number of those who stopped the practice. Staging the circumcision has all the rituals done except of course the circumcision. It is done on individual basis and the community is usually convinced that circumcision had taken place.

would people say about us? They will say that we are a low caste and unrespectable. Our daughters will be called *ghalfa*.”

During group meetings Hajja expressed how she protested when they did her face scars, *shiloukh*, and how she still was not happy about it. The group embarked on praising *shiloukh* and how Sudanese women did not know acne and face spots when they practiced them. They also praised *shiloukh* for removing part of the skin that sags with age and that was why women with *shiloukh* do not age as do those who were without them. Even when a custom is abandoned there is a tendency to stress its value for those who had it done and make them feel better about it and themselves. Such comforting words are lacking in the feminist discourse that wants women to feel “mutilated” rather than circumcised.”

Hajja was pleased to hear the praise but she said she was still not convinced they were necessary. This was an entrance to ask her what if her granddaughters felt the same about FC. Hajja was not at a loss for a response. She said her *shiloukh* did not hurt her and neither would FC hurt her granddaughters. It was worth it for Hajja to risk the girls’ anger than to risk their virginity. “Girls are a great responsibility. They should be supervised and especially treated all the time. You always have to follow them around to make sure that they do not go places, I mean bad places.” Unlike FC *shiloukh* did not protect her from anything, but they were like make up and at the time, despite her anger, she felt she was treated like her peers. Circumcising girls she thought afforded them the same favor of belonging to a group of their peers.

“Both *shiloukh* and *tahoor* are traditions, if my mother did not do my *shiloukh* I might have not married; in my time they were the most important sign of beauty. Just like

this colored scum girls put on their faces these days! All men would have seen me as odd and not pretty enough. *Tahoor* is good for the same reasons; people will not talk about us.” Identity and belonging to the group whether it is an ethnic group or a peer group dictates certain practices that become part of the life of the group and may be perpetuated for generations even when those practices cease to make sense (Rushwan, 1982). Peer groups may exert pressure on their members to take up a certain look or dress or body modifications (Willis, 1977; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990).

Gender Relations: a Woman’s Home is Her Kingdom

Hajja Mama does not just express her own opinion about FC, she volunteers a men’s point of view. She stresses that Sudanese men want to keep the tradition. “Let me tell you, they wanted us to re-circumcise after each birth, or if we did not give birth every three or four months.” Hajja entertains a certain image of a man, one who wants to show his virility and does not accept an “unsealed and stamped product.”

I asked Hajja what women were getting in return for being “sealed and stamped” through FC. “They get respect. We ruled our homes and demanded that husbands be faithful to us.” The pains of circumcision and re-circumcision are endured largely to provide sexual pleasure for husbands. A recent study of two neighborhoods in Omdurman area in the Sudan confirmed that a majority of men still prefer circumcision and when the state of circumcision is infibulation they also preferred re-circumcision (Abdelmageed et al, 2000).⁴⁵ Women negotiated their position as decision makers and recipients of husband’s wealth through adhering to husband’s wishes. Women immigrants of different nationalities felt that “women had to be strong . . . women did it

⁴⁵ See Annex

all . . . you just had to let the man feel like he was the man . . . that's it." (Coser et al, 1999). Hajja Mama felt that men go along because traditionally no man should refuse such self denial, by a woman, that seeks his satisfaction.

Hajja lamented over the condition of Sudanese women in America. She thought that women doing grocery shopping was the ultimate disrespect. "Even when I shopped for clothes I did that from the comfort of my home or sitting in the car outside the shop. My husband had to either bring the merchandise to me himself, to choose from, or send the shopkeeper." Hajja Mama's account conveys how women negotiated power in their homes. Not expecting to be actors in any other space their homes captured their full attention. The right to rule their kingdoms emanates directly from their ability to conform to the traditions of their society.

Hajja Mama is furious over the fact that all the young women she knows in that USA city did everything. They worked a full or part time job, did the housework, and took care of the kids and the husbands. To Hajja Mama, young women had left nothing for the men to respect them for. They showed men that they would enslave themselves to be with them. "A woman is to stay at home, the man is to bring the money and she should take that money in return for what she does at home."

Hajja Mama refused to accept the current situation and considered it totally exhausting to the women; at the same time she refused to accept men sharing in housework when women work outside the home. She felt that no man ever "shared" housework. "They [men] don't see it as sharing, they think they are doing women a favor," she said. She thought women should refuse to work outside the home. Many younger women agreed that they shouldered more than their share in the family duties. In

their group meetings they admitted that sometimes men intentionally mess the kitchen so as to be ordered out of it.

I had to revisit my perception of Sudanese women before education is widespread. Hajja Mama and her group challenged the generalization that was made by the Sudanese Women's Union in particular, and held by educated women, that they were subordinated, powerless and suffered vast gender disparities. Hajja Mama insisted that the women she saw in USA were vulnerable and gave up way too much of their dignity so as to continue in their marriages. In Hajja Mama's time marriage was the single hope and wish of women, yet it became clear from her firm stand against husbands' exploitation of wives, that women of her age made demands that were unthinkable for women today. They negotiated their way to and through gender disparities in a more sophisticated way than do women of today. Hajja Mama insisted that in her days "infidelity was not tolerated. If we bear the pain of circumcision men better be faithful. If we reached the brink of death during childbirth, then husbands better provide the best housing, clothing and jewelry. No man was allowed to raise his voice even if his wife raised hers."

One of the participants in the group was against FC but she made it clear that FC for her generation was not just meant to make it difficult for men to penetrate women who were not their wives; it was also for the women to know that the pain they go through better not be wasted on men who did not deserve it. Men for Hajja and her group are not to leave after getting what they wanted. They are expected to stay in the family and shoulder their responsibilities. Hajja Mama and her group alerted me to the fact that divorce for women used to be easier than it is today. "We rarely went to court. Men's

duties were clear, if they failed then divorce is a family business as were the marriage.

These days the marriage is a family business but a woman is on her own to wrestle a divorce from her husband. Women would not ask for a divorce in the old days, they just made their complaint heard and then their fathers or uncles would know that the complaint warrants a divorce.”

Women were also available for each other, they advised and supported each other. Asha, one of the participants, relayed the following story, “A young lady sought my help for she got pregnant out of wedlock; my first question to her was why she would go through the agony of being opened up for nothing.” The value of parting with virginity is high and is expected to be considered by the man, and that consideration should be nothing less than a commitment in a marriage. Asha thought that if men were to be released of the commitment to honor virginity, then women would be vulnerable and pay the highest price they would ever pay, their honor and their future. Infibulation is one way to make virginity visible. If loss of virginity can easily be detected, just by looking at genitalia then women would think twice before they submit to a sexual relationship out of wedlock.

Fifty years ago Sudanese women did not participate in the public and political life that men monopolized, but they practiced a monopoly of domestic lives. This is how FC was appropriated by them and became a source of power (Samad, 1992). In order to adhere to the conventional traditional idea of marriage, within the Sudanese communities, women bear all sorts of burdens. For the first time I am alerted to the fact men had always known the high risk of circumcision, that is why they did not debate women command of the household. According to Hajja Mama that command was possible

because it was not public; she thought that decision making in her days was a quiet process “none of the shouting I hear these days took place in my days.”

Younger women talked about how they feel obliged to keep their marriages, but Hajja Mama did not shy away from telling them that if one of their men wanted to marry her she would certainly turn him down. She did not show any trace of the vulnerability of the younger women. She thought women’s bargaining chips are being lost because women were not ready to bear the pain of re-circumcision. When told that men are voicing protest against FC, Hajja explained to me how men harbored contradictory feelings and behavior. For example a man who himself would marry more than one wife would stand by his daughter or sister who refused to have a *durrah* (co-wife). She said even now men who would not circumcise their daughters would want to marry a circumcised woman.

Hajja noted that men were afraid of change unlike women who embrace it. The power she felt in her home, was earned through FC and her consent to other restrictions. She said that she recognized the fact that women of today deserved more freedom and more respect than they were getting, because they are making sacrifices in a different way. I asked her if that was not contradictory on her part, wanting women to be restricted for respect and advocating some freedom at the same time. “No!” she said. “I was talking about different women and different times. I do not want my daughter to give as much as she is giving now and still be subordinated by her husband. Modern life is different.” Then why does Hajja Mama still support FC if she thinks modern times are different? Because she thought it is something that women could fall back on to gain respect when their modern lives fall apart.

They Smell and They Are no Good in Bed

Some of the statements that Hajja Mama and her group made about uncircumcised women, were refreshing and surprising. They were surprising because they are the very same statements made by uncircumcised women about circumcised women. Hajja Mama and three women in her group insisted that uncircumcised women had a peculiar smell. “The smell of an uncircumcised woman is stifling, Nana, the woman in our group told you about her cousin’s daughter who said she could smell herself, didn’t she?” Although Hajja Mama thought that hygiene was not enough to eliminate odors, she acknowledged that lack of hygiene was a secondary source of smell. Use of toilet paper instead of water was cited as a reason for adding to the smell.

The other statement made was about sodomy. Lightfoot-Kline (1989) thought that men in the Sudan had to be sodomizing their wives for it was extremely difficult if not impossible to penetrate an infibulation. Nana conveyed what she saw on the Playboy television channel. “Men did nothing but sodomize women, that is because ‘at the front’ women are so wide open, for lack of circumcision. Men look for sexual pleasure in tight genitalia that is why they sodomize women. Sodomy is a sin and a crime in our society and no man dares to approach his wife that way, because women provide the desired tightness through circumcison.” In both cases, circumcised and uncircumcised women, what constitutes sexual desire and pleasure, and practices associated with that pleasure is imagined rather than researched.⁴⁶

For Hajja Mama and her group unguarded sexuality was a concern, a woman’s

⁴⁶ A recent research done in Nigeria found that circumcision did not reduce a woman’s desire for sex. *Awaken*, December 2002.

loss of her virginity was equated with loss of negotiating power. Researchers in the Sudan uncovered the fact that infibulation became a sure way to keep that power. Women who choose to engage in premarital sex found a good ally in infibulation (*Ahfad*, 1998). They engage in sexual activities and stitch themselves back to the desired infibulated condition at wedding time. Hajja Mama thought that premarital sex could not be hidden and that it was a sure way to lose a chance to marry. “Men talk to each other, they tell about whom they slept with, she becomes known, infibulation would not protect her.”

Actually this statement was one of the statements used to make Hajja reflect on her belief about circumcision. In her own words she said that education and upbringing were the main protectors of women rather than FC. Later on she was more inclined to think of the upbringing of girls rather than physical acts such as FC to curb their sexual behavior.

Wanasa as a Medium for Changing Attitudes

There was a gradual change in Hajja Mama’s beliefs about circumcision. As younger women told her about the problems they encountered at child birth and other times, she reflected more and more on whether it was needed in the USA, rather than whether it was needed at all. One of the most repeated expressions “the deeply entrenched or rooted tradition” is explained by the bewildered expressions of Hajja when she was told about the harmful consequences of FC by those who suffered them first hand. Her initial reaction was that childbirth had never been an easy task for women, yet when the harm sustained by infibulated women is compared to the lesser pains of uncircumcised women, such harm stood out; Hajja Mama could not deny it. In the Sudan many health professionals are experts on the practice, lack of this expertise in the USA

made FC a real health hazard. Such facts caused Hajja Mama to think about FC, the *aib* factor is diminished for her.

The concept of *aib* is formulated and prescribed by society; the social group decides from time to time what constitutes shame and dishonor. Hajja was afraid of the society around her. In the United States the society around her and her children and grand children is against FC. During our meetings the Sudanese community got concerned about Sudanese parents arrested in Canada for circumcising their daughter. Hajja Mama thought those parents should have known better, “they should have gone to Sudan to do it.” She used the word *fadeeha*, disgrace, to describe their arrest. The more examples given from real life the more Hajja Mama became convinced that FC was unnecessary. The *fadeeha* that may have been caused by lack of circumcision in the Sudan was being caused by practicing it in places such as Canada and the USA. Hajja Mama’s main concern was to avert the *fadeeha*.

One of the highlights in this learning through *wanasa* was the discovery by Hajja Mama that one of her favorite young women, who seemed to say the right things, was uncircumcised. Hajja Mama had to revise statements such as “an air-headed woman is usually *ghalfa*. Haven’t you heard people calling each other names such as wad or bit alghalfa?” The polite conservative young woman was an example of how circumcision had nothing to do with maturity.

Conversations about religion kept Hajja on her toes she went back and forth trying to make FC a good practice no matter how it was perceived. Statements by Shiekh al-Azhar, that FC was not part of religion were difficult for her to counter. The *Sunna* argument that she likes best, for she did not expect anyone to contradict it, fell apart

because a religious authority that people usually look up to had contradicted it. “To tell you the truth we just practiced FC, we never thought of it as a religious thing, but the *Sunna* is a good argument to convince girls like you. Religion has nothing to do with it so do not drag me into a debate I am certain I would lose. We did it to keep girls from running after men.”⁴⁷

Hajja Mama kept going back and forth with her thoughts. She conceded that girls were not benefiting from FC especially in America, yet she could not take it out of her head that being *ghalafa* is *aib*. She said she never had to sort out traditions to see what was in them for her. Things were done because they should be done. The idea of *aib* seemed to have a lighter presence among the immigrant community. The fading of such a powerful concept that deterred people from transgressing social norms was a confusing aspect for Hajja Mama. Yet she did not want to give it up, she started to look for new instances of *aib*. She wanted certain places to be out of reach for the girls. Night clubs that she saw on TV, if not made the source of *aib* would bring many grieves to the parents, she thought.

Hajja Mama was convinced that education was necessary, but she could not help thinking that “*banat Amreica assyat*” meaning that girls in America are stubborn and make up their own minds. “They are not like Sudanese girls. In the Sudan they are obedient. Here they do not even listen to you when you talk. We never pressured girls into anything in the Sudan but they listened.” Girls in the Sudan, stressed Hajja Mama, did not mix with grown ups that much, they stay with their own age groups. In the USA children sat with grown ups as long as they were in the house. They pick up the defiance

⁴⁷ Dara Carr reported that the majority of Sudanese did not relate FC to religion.

and strength exhibited by adults. Hajja Mama was vexed that, “Here, kids discuss everything, even the slightest order or direction such as not to go out is subject to discussion.”

Hajja noticed the disparity between the organized life she saw in public places such as government offices and the courtesy she was met with wherever she went, and the behavior of children. She was amused at the thought that the vulgar neighbor child may grow up to be a courteous doctor. “I feel grateful to the Americans they show a lot of courtesy. Wherever I go they respect me. I go to the doctor and find the best treatment, but we are always homesick.” Hajja Mama acknowledges her diminishing power inside the home, but she tries to reconcile herself with it as a sign of handing over that power to her daughter. Still she is concerned for her daughter because she is overburdened by family duties and her power may be compromised by the lack of an extended family.

Conclusion

Hajja Mama entertained some change of mind about having circumcision done in the USA or to girls who might come to live in other countries. She said she still believed in the value of FC as a way for women to value themselves and make demands of men. she conceded that if FC became harmful in the USA and would lead to jailing parents then no real value would be gained from it. Hajja also noted that the incident in Canada might have given girls an idea of how to blackmail parents into not taking them home for FC.

Hajja Mama lived a life that cherished female circumcision, yet the mere idea of the practice isolating the girls in the USA caused her to see it as a practice without value. The vulnerability she saw in younger women who were trying to keep their marriages did

not make any sense to her. She argues that there is more subordination of women now than in the past. She added that women ought to take advantage of the presence of the extended family in the home country.

Exchanges through *wanasa* revealed many situations that Hajja Mama in her isolation in that apartment did not think about. It also conveyed to younger women a side they did not think of in older women. Many of the younger women were attracted to Hajja Mama as she exhibited a strength they did not see before.

The experience of being uprooted kept Hajja Mama consumed by nostalgia until the conversations about FC caused her to look into the present conditions that her daughter and granddaughters live in. She found it necessary to convey her attitudes and think about her new life rather than wait to go back home and continue the old one. One of her statements was memorable. She said, “During the past weeks I talked to many who came back from Sudan, life there isn’t what it used to be either. Here or there I am going to have to think things over.”

PART TWO

A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN IMMIGRANT

Introduction

This is the story of Serene, a married woman with two children. I chose her for this interview because of the enthusiasm that she had to participate and tell her story, but most importantly for her open uninhibited way of speaking about her immigration and FC experiences. Serene she is an artist, hence a wonderful speaker who lead me through and connected the issues in her own way. She describes how she gender issues complicated her life during her first years as immigrant and he she finally overcame those complications. Her circumcision and how she lived the experience of childbirth were a source of jokes as well as sadness. Her life is still going through change especially as her sons grow up. After over ten years in USA, immigration is still not the rosy picture she hoped for.

The interaction between Sudanese immigrant women and the host country has some tensions caused by difference of language and culture; FC is an added dimension to that tension. On the one hand the Sudanese women found themselves living in different social and familial settings, and they are not fully aware that their condition, as circumcised women, is something that even the medical profession would have many problems dealing with. On the other hand the host culture including the medical profession encountered FC as a medical condition that is totally foreign to them. Erica Andrea Rubin (2000) studied the reaction of the American health professionals to FC and found that the profession dealt with FC by measuring it against their own cultural

background, and that the medical literature lacked “cultural competence”.

This study focuses on the reactions of Sudanese women and how they viewed themselves in a culture that received distorted information about them as circumcised human beings. Assumptions such as being psychologically traumatized or physically mutilated beyond help (Abdalla, 1982), are just part of the issues that causes uneasiness for Sudanese immigrants. When such information is spread about circumcised women they are faced with the task of disproving it. Paradoxically this task of defending themselves against the above assumptions eventually brought many of them to think about FC and conclude that they did not need it to enhance their womanhood.

While FC may have been a subject for other people, such as older members of the family or doctors and some activists to deal with and talk about, in the USA it became an issue for the nuclear family to directly confront. Men who never had to talk about it in the family or to health professionals are now accompanying wives to doctors and cannot avoid the issue.

Circumcised women have to prove themselves in the new “home” as human beings worthy of respect and not of pity. Later in this chapter Serene explains how her neighbors felt about her circumcision. Serene and her group will recount their experiences and how those experiences affected their attitudes and thoughts about FC. Their attitudes toward FC had undergone significant change and their resolutions not to circumcise their daughters would hold fast against all social and familial odds.

Serene, granted me several in depth interviews and hosted me to observe her life in her home with an extended family in the USA. Her story is put together with other talks and *wanasa* with the rest of the group. All the participants stressed that FC was not

just a childhood incident nor was it just a sexual matter for them. It was an action that spanned their life cycle and had different repercussions at different stages of their lives.

Destined to Break Taboos: Serene's Unique Experience as an Artist

Serene is a gifted artist celebrated for breaking the taboo about women singers in the Sudan. A Nubian from Northern Sudan, Serene is the daughter of a teacher who himself was famous for being one of the high schools headmaster when there were few schools and few Sudanese headmasters. As teachers were transferred around the country they became well known.

Serene is one of seven daughters, the family had two sons. Having seven daughters is not a preferred status for a family in the Sudan. The Sudanese society is patriarchal and sons are preferred, if only for their ability to support the parents at their old age. However inside Serene's family the father treated his daughters in a unique egalitarian way. He decided to support the artistic talents of his daughters. Despite the extended family and friends' discouragement, he helped and supported his daughters to belong to folklore groups. His support did not stop at involving them in dance groups and other theatrical studies but he stood fast against all odds and let his three youngest daughters form a singing trio.

The Sudanese artistic arena welcomed them and it was difficult for the society to discard them as *magatei* (without roots), or any other description used to belittle the pioneer women singers. Although singing was in demand in the Sudan, singers and artists were not held in the highest or esteemed social status (Sikainga, 1996). Knowing this and living the fame of being a singer, Serene appears to measure almost all her social decisions against a backdrop of what her singing made her in the eyes of the people.

Serene stood out in the group of participants invited for this research, because she was open and freely used words that others would shy of publicly using to talk about female circumcision and sexual relations. She has a great sense of humor and her way of telling the group intimate incidents in her family or surroundings quickly gained support and was matched by stories that women admitted would not have been readily told were it not for Serene paving the way.

With Serene came her sister Amna, who was a great addition to the group as she has newly arrived in the United States. Amna, a recent divorcee, used to live in one of the Gulf states. She is now in the USA because a stable life for a singer, a divorcee and a single mother today in Sudan is a difficult challenge.

I decided that Serene would be an ideal interviewee and she was. On one of the coldest days of January I headed towards her home in a newly developed suburb. I was given the grand tour of the house and told that, “there is a big story waiting for you concerning this house.”

Captivity in Washington DC

Serene’s unconventional career in the Sudan was monitored by the conventional life style of the northern Sudanese society. Yet as an artist the demands of her career gave her some freedom of movement and decision making. A career and an independent income were vital in shaping Serene’s character and behavior. “I participated in family expenses my father told me to put 60% of what I earned in the family income. I had the rest to spend as I wished. The family of course took care of me no matter what. My salary was for whatever I wanted to spend it on.” When she landed in Washington DC it was a whole new experience.

A popular Sudanese idiom describes a person who moves into a lesser status, be it social or financial as being reduced from a carrier of the throne to a straw seller, “*min hamalat al-arsh ila souq algesh*.” and the opposite if the person moves up the ladder. Serene’s first encounter with immigration sent her down from being the independent confident outgoing young lady she was, into a totally dependent insecure introvert. She described her first year with bitterness and a sense of loss.

Being in the spotlight since age fourteen and earning a salary at that age, marriage was almost a disempowering experience for Serene. “I found myself without an independent income; asking my husband for money was like begging.” Harboring that feeling Serene entered and stayed in an apartment in an unsafe area in the inner city. All the advice she got from her husband, was how dangerous getting out of that apartment was. “I lived in fear, I lost confidence in myself. I was used to walking the streets alone and I was known for being daring and aggressive.” Yet that neighborhood was tougher than she thought. Terror of that neighborhood paralyzed her. Her dreams of further studies and formation of a folklore group evaporated. “I wanted to participate in the society I live in. I mean the American society.” The Washington DC neighborhood she lived in raged with violence, even the music sounded violent, it was not anything she could participate in.

Serene’s days depended on the daily visits that friends made to her apartment. The majority of those were men, but Serene was used to being friends with men; her profession was dominated by men, with whom she had to interact and work daily. Her Sudanese idea of making friends who would visit any time of the day and volunteer unsolicited advice, did not sit well in the host culture and especially not with the inner

city she could not even walk through alone. As a result close relationships and small networks were her window to the American life. The downside of such close networks is their tendency to isolate and shield individuals especially women from the life around them.

Serene found no precedents of work among the Sudanese women who came to that city before her. They were content with being homemakers and resentful of the added burdens delegated to them. “One of them told me not to make the mistake of learning how to drive. She said unexpected chores would be thrown on my plate. She had to drive her son to school and to the doctor and other places he had to be at, and do grocery shopping.” These are not chores for middle class Sudanese homemakers.

Despite the woman friend’s advice, Serene decided to put an end to her fears and venture outside the home. She asked one of her friends to accompany her to look for a job. Serene attributed seeking a friend’s companionship when she ventured outside the house to her long captivity in DC. It was not easy for her to regain self confidence. “There is a social intimidation, if you will, on whatever women do. The more I talk about this the more I realize it. FC is just one act we discount the harm of so as to secure our sanity.”

Filling out a job application was a learning experience. Serene had to ask her friend about the meaning of some words, therefore her vocabulary grew by a few words. Understanding the questions and knowing how to answer was another addition. “I felt good throughout the process but became reluctant when I was offered the job, but I quickly overcame my reluctance and accepted the offer. I drove to work alone for the first time. I was scared to death but also happy. I wore the “work smile” while trembling

inside.” Talking to the rest of the participants in the group I learned that such experiences are not uncommon but the resilience of the women and their longing for independence helped them go through it.

Women in Serene’s group said they were happy with their lives as working mothers and wives. Despite the long hours and the manual jobs they held, they found the security of a job worth the trouble, especially when they compared themselves to women in larger cities. One of the participants exclaimed, “Do you believe that many Sudanese women in Brooklyn do not know how to take the Metro⁴⁸ to Manhattan?” Yes I could believe it I saw them. The participants in the group were not satisfied with what they have achieved, because their jobs or education were still not being taken seriously and whatever the woman was doing had to stop if the husband decided to move. Gender disparities and relations became the subject of a subsequent chat (*wanasa*). To get a clearer picture of such relations I had a long interview with Serene regarding her insistence on being a stay at home mother during the early childhood of her two sons.

Education and Social status

Mobility of the educated few Sudanese was a limited one in the past. International mobility was limited in both numbers and places. Government sponsored scholarships for higher degrees were the main reason for leaving the country, as such living abroad became linked to education. Women followed mainly to keep homes and rear children. The majority of government sponsored expatriates returned home (Boddy, 1995; Abusharaf, 2002). Serene and the rest of the participants in her group are planning on a

⁴⁸ Underground transportation in D.C. is known as the Metro while in New York it is the “Subway”.

permanent stay in the USA. Their limited familiarity with the new surroundings has to expand. Women have to ask many questions and not be content with what is allowed by husbands. Finding one's way around town is a refreshing learning experience for some of them.

All women in the youth group and the middle group, Serene's group, have gained a high school education. The majority had university degrees. Without exception they expressed their eagerness to engage in higher education programs in the United States. Some of them came to the USA with that intention, getting higher degrees. Yet that dream was met with some formidable obstacles. Everything in their lives seemed to work against that dream. A major obstacle is the high tuition fees at universities that can only be overcome by borrowing from the government. Many of them did not want to go into their new lives burdened by a school debt. But that was not the only obstacle.

Serene said in her case there should have not been any problems with fees she just did not know that until years later. With a sad tone in her voice she was still wondering about why her husband never helped her get into a program at the university where he taught. "I found out by sheer chance that I could enroll as a student for free; a friend pointed it out to me. I cannot even guess why my husband did not tell me about such a chance." She stressed that she and her husband loved each other and the incident did not make any rifts in their relationship.

Asked whether she would like to take the chance now and enroll in the university, she seemed to be in a difficult position. She already made a choice. By the time she found out about the university opportunity she already had a son. "I have to ask myself why do I want to get another degree? What would it help me do? I have to wait for my

children to grow older. I do not think I will be able to realize this educational dream now.”

Serene felt great responsibility towards her children. I got the feeling that there was more to that absolute dedication to her sons and total dismissal of her own dreams than just a mother’s obsession. “Since I came to the United States I do not see tomorrow. It is blank. I am not alone anymore. I have children and a husband. Because of financial burdens our plans come to a halt. To start from zero you have to be single, once you have a child your life takes a different turn.” I did not think that she answered my question and had to probe further.

I became intrigued by the fact that while almost all the women in the group were working either full or part time jobs and had children, Serene was the only one who wanted to devote all her time to her children, despite the discontent she expressed with her life as a mother and a housewife. “I want to enter a new world even if it is not my profession. Housework does not make me feel that I am giving anything. Giving is doing what you like. I want to feel that I am useful not just like any couch ready to be used in the house.”

Serene is totally immersed in her children’s life. She drives the younger one to school and drives a second time at midday to deliver to him a hot lunch. She diligently sits with them to do their homework, even though she sometimes does not know what the lesson is about. She forces the father to do some of it and is willing to spend time on the phone talking to other mothers whose sons are in the same grade. She is already wondering about the future when they go to junior high and her language ability will be an obstacle to helping them.

Serene finally touched on the reason for her “forgetting about herself”. She felt that her status as an artist is under scrutiny in the Sudan. If anything goes wrong with her children then her career as an artist will undoubtedly be blamed for that. Everyone will talk about her, not just her family and friends.

Until early nineteen sixties singing, dancing and participating in folklore groups was a branch of art that is shunned by the Sudanese society and was limited to certain women, mainly ex-slaves and some women immigrants to the Sudan (Ajjuba, 2001). Very few women were helped by their families to be actresses or singers. Ahmed Sikainga attributes the low status of musicians and singers in the Sudan to the fact that Arabized Northern Sudanese held similar perceptions to the Arabs whose music was performed mainly by the *mawali* (slaves).

The Arabized northern Sudanese held similar perceptions [to those of the Arabs] despite the fact that their traditional dances have distinctive African elements which were deeply rooted in their traditions

The first generation of Sudanese musicians faced many challenges, but were able to overcome tremendous social pressures. This was particularly the case with female singers, who had to contend with the additional burden of gender discrimination (Sikainga, 1996).

For a long time female singers no matter which ethnicity they belonged to were dubbed *khadam* (slave women). Serene and her sisters broke the taboo and started a stream of female singers from within the ranks of middle class northern Sudanese families.

Despite the fact that no allegations of being loose families or promiscuous women were levied against Serene and her sisters, people were puzzled at what prompted a father to allow his daughters into this difficult path. “He was unique,” said Serene “no other father was like him. I have seen all my relatives and neighbors, no man would openly

flirt with his wife the way he did with my mother. He used to do for us what other fathers pretended not even to know about their daughters. He would go to the market and buy our sanitary napkins to spare us the embarrassment of buying them from a male shopkeeper.” With her father by her side, Serene always felt her responsibility not to let him down. Her mother kept the balance and was as strict as any Sudanese mother could be.

The social status of a Sudanese is determined first and foremost by traditions and customs. Serene’s extended family abided by their local customs. Her father’s objection to FC made no difference to the family. The mother was in charge of adorning her daughters with the most revered status, of being circumcised women, to secure their future as wives. When it came to a complicated deeply entrenched custom such as FC, that educated man’s weakest link in his social status was his education. That education enabled him to earn a comfortable living and lead a relaxed family life. Yet that education was not earned in isolation of the culture. In her study of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania Amy Stambach noted the type of educated person who is the product of the interaction of culture and schooling,

However, the point to retain is that the kind of gendered and generational transformations associated with schools emerge through a dialectal interrelation of school practices with local culture. Thus the kind of “gendered knowing” schools produce is not culturally universal; school-educated women who are thought by elders to be becoming more and more like Chagga men are neither women anticipated in the official policies nor those that hold in most versions of Western feminist ideals. Instead, they are a product of the interaction and mutual effects of the structures and principles of formal schooling and of social life on Mount Kilimanjaro.” (Stambach, 2000).

People who broke some cultural barriers were careful not to break all ties with that culture. A compromise is made by transgressing one social barrier and abiding by

another. To be uncircumcised and a singer would have been unthinkable. With their virginity secured their father at least gained some peace of mind that allowed for some room for the girls to step into areas that women of their status have rarely ventured. Serene even joked about the thought of being a singer and *ghalfa* (uncircumcised). She thought the fame of being uncircumcised would have superseded her fame as a singer and her songs would have been characterized as nonsense of an uncircumcised woman.

Education has changed the economic status of many Sudanese and has caused the fast urbanization of the country. However traditional practices stayed unchanged in many aspects of the Sudanese life. The dialectical relationship between education and respect for traditional life resulted in some weak or stifled voices against traditions. Knowledge that FC has harmful consequences did not always end in opposition or ending the practice in one's family. Social status is boosted by education and a better economic status, however that education succumbed to traditions.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Sudanese traditions during weddings, funerals and other social celebrations continued without interruption despite the high cost of living and some community attempts to change the traditions. In my recent visit to Sudan, women's rights groups attributed this resistance to change to the fact that it is a change aimed only at alleviating the economic difficulties that men face in keeping these traditions. To prove their point they quoted the fact that almost every tradition that is collectively changed by the community, such as the high costs of wedding traditions, resurface as soon as the economic status of men gets better. Expatriate men not only reactivated the rituals of weddings, they added some new ones that helped expose their new riches.

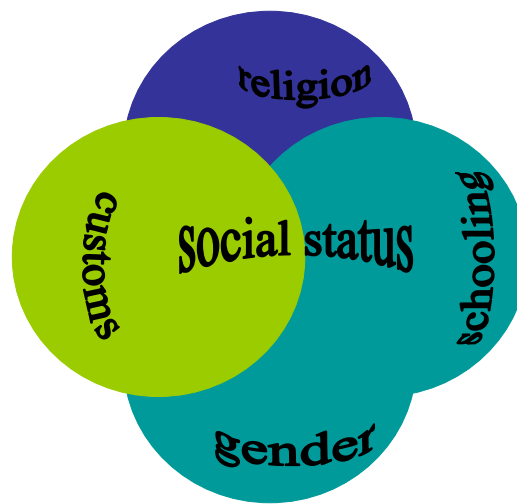


Figure 0. Determinants of Social Status

The overlapping of religion, customs, gender relations and formal schooling create complicated dynamics of change. Cultural norms and practices persist despite change of attitudes towards them, because the fabric of society has to be carefully treated to avoid sudden ruptures that neither produce change in the community nor preserve its unity. Maneuvering change within the seamless web of the above elements is indeed a consuming effort. While gender discrimination is quite obvious in formulating women's status, culture and religion are often cited to dismiss their success or innovations. Despite her wide popularity among the Sudanese in USA, Serene is still concerned about her career being invoked to explain any failure that may happen in her children's future. She is also concerned about her sons' future in a strange land.

Unpacking the Baggage of Traditions

Serene knows that her life and her family will always be judged by her reputation as a singer. She wants to make sure that when that life is used as a pretext to her social and family life, she would pass the test of being a respectable Sudanese woman. Serene is still a Sudanese woman, who cherishes the culture and hopes that the social change that is happening in the immigrant community in the USA liberates women here and in the Sudan.

Serene is sure that she is a changed person as an immigrant. Many of the participants in her group attributed what in their words is a “new improved” status, e.g. being able to make decisions inside and outside the home, to the fact that they were working and are sure that they can lead a good life independent of men. For Serene it is not just work that makes the difference between the Sudan and USA; it is the exposure to different values and attitudes towards the individual and her/his capabilities coupled with the absence of close social scrutiny.

Serene acknowledges that the Sudanese community in the USA is also gossips about its members, yet the fact that we are all living the changes of immigration makes it easy for everyone to invoke the changing life conditions as an excuse for any contravention they commit. Some researchers noted that women are quicker to change and do participate in the linking of both the home and the host culture. Anja Peleikis (2000) noted, in her research among Lebanese Immigrants to West Africa, the plurality of female identity and how migration caused change in both the country of emigration and the host country.

Indeed, in the context of the Lebanese movements the distinctions between traveling, migration and visiting become blurred. Not only people are moving,

but also along with them, and independently from them, goods, messages, social and religious events as well as organizations and institutions are in motion.

Changes are happening in the Sudan too but immigrants tend to be attached to the Sudan in their memories. Several researchers noted that immigrants remember home as “lost paradise.” (Thomas, 1999; Noland, 2000). Sudanese women are no exception; they tend to remember the good social relations in the Sudan, despite their annoyance with the political situation and their knowledge that the social scene has also changed.

One participant alerted the others saying, “We are like the Sufis who kept the religion by being isolated from the rest of the world. They kept this pure version of religion while everyday life was changing it for the rest of the people.” Women are usually charged with keeping the culture, therefore they do their best to keep some salient features despite the rapid change in behavior they exhibit. Jill Bystydzienski and Estelle Resnik (1994) recognize that women face difficulties because they are expected to keep the culture, they also do not have opportunities to be involved in the new culture as the men do. Despite that they found out that,

... a combination of low status and specific role expectations – that is, that women be caring and empathetic – makes it more likely that women will see and accept another’s point of view and will be less territorial and nationalistic than men. Moreover, women are less likely to feel denigrated than men if, upon entering the new culture, they find themselves in low-status positions, such as working menial jobs. Thus it may be surmised that women should be able to take on a new culture more easily than men (Bystydzienski & Resnik, 1994).

Sudanese women quickly remove their *tobes* (northern Sudanese dress for women) and don pants or long skirts and tops. Men express little or no objection as it is not in the economic interest of the immigrant family to spend money buying the expensive material for *tobes*. At the same time *tobes* are hardly suitable for the type of

work women do. In USA *tobes* are reserved for social gatherings and international events. This change that is hardly acceptable at home is comfortably implemented by women in the USA.

Southern Sudanese women who took refuge in Egypt conveyed their experience with change of status through work. Men who are mostly university graduates found it impossible to stoop to do manual work. They preferred to stay home and baby-sit than mop the floors at hotels and restaurants. Women took up those jobs and became breadwinners. If they can switch roles with men that easily they thought that they can effect change in social attitudes towards women and their roles. In the words of Jane Malou a southern Sudanese woman living in Cairo, “It is about time that gender disparities disappeared and women are respected for what they do, not just when they are needed to do it but whenever they choose to do it.”⁵⁰

Social Change: Traditions and Identity

Sudanese, men and women are still gathering in huge numbers for mourning days, weddings, child naming and visiting the sick. Having family from Sudan is another occasion for Sudanese to pay *salam* (greetings) and ask about conditions in the country. Rituals such as *jirttig* at weddings (Abusharaf, 2002), and even bride dances and clothing are being adopted here, especially with the increased rate of marriage between men and women already residing in USA.

All participants expressed how exhausting it was for them to have a job, take care of a family and attend to the *munasabat* (social events). Some of them decided to cut down on their *mujamala* (courtesy participation in social event). The participants

⁵⁰ Personal communication with Jane Malu in Cairo, 1997.

unanimously complaint of the burden of these social events, yet they diligently observed them. This behavior carries some resemblance to the case of FC. Most of them thought of it as a harmful practice while back home, but they never actively resisted it. Attending social events is another practice that is apparently taking a toll on their time, health and family life but is vigorously kept and insisted upon. It is an example of how social ties and practices may be tolerated for the sake of keeping the group together.

Dr. Safiyya declared that she stopped attending *albikiat* (mourning gatherings) in the USA, except when the lost one is a parent or a sibling. “These days everyone of us is having a cousin or an uncle die everyday. I cannot attend each and every one of those.” Assia declared that she stopped telling people about relatives dying so as not to create a *munasaba*. “By the way the *munasaba* is as exhausting for those receiving guests as it is for those who come as *mujamala*.”

I asked whether the group would accept congratulations or sympathy cards by mail, since this is a known practice in the USA. Although this suggestion sounded like a way to cut going to *munasabat* it was received as foreign and unusual. A card will be received as a substitute for the person’s presence. “You know a card is acceptable from someone whom you know cannot come, but for someone who can, it feels as if the person did not care enough.” Said Nabila. All conceded that their exhaustion and lack of the babysitting services they enjoyed within the extended family, have already changed their behavior towards attending *munasabat*. For example extended all day stays during mourning or weddings have been cut for most people they just attend for a few hours.

The idea that people are enslaved by culture and their behavior can only be explained according to that culture, is an over simplification of their real problems. These

women proved that they can no longer be intimidated into certain behavior because of the culture. Haya made it clear that “There is a difference between the culture and how we practice it. The culture is to be there for each other, not the how to do it. I do not think that wasting time in this country through passing cups of tea and coffee and making food for three days is supposed to be the culture. This is a process inside the culture. We can keep the culture and change the process.” That was an impressive logic that sends a clear message that things have to change.

A question then arose: shall we keep female circumcision but change some processes? The ingenuity of the Sudanese women never ceases. “*Asma 'ai yakhti* (listen here my sister), apply the logic as we presented it. FC is in itself a process within the culture. The culture is mainly to abstain till marriage, *ya 'ani* (meaning) no sexual freedom; the process to achieve that was thought by older generations to be FC. So far we are not proponents of sexual freedom we are fighting to prove that the culture can stand without FC.”

The above ingenuity is not exactly a model for western feminism. As Mikell (1997), Badran (2000) and Elizabeth Fernea (1998) argued feminism is developed and used by women within their specific cultures to serve their specific situations. While much of the Western feminism may address sexual satisfaction and the right to it, Sudanese women are thinking of perilous childbirth and other dire physical consequences. That is not the only difference when Sudanese women relate FC to human rights it is their right to bodily integrity and right to a safe life rather than a right to enjoy sex and have an orgasm. Although they do not deny that the latter is important they do not think that FC had taken away their enjoyment of sex. It just brought about painful

beginnings and in this far away land brought psychological difficulties not known back home. Moreover they resist the fact that FC became a way to represent them as women and to analyze their whole world against a background of entrapment in culture.

Serene who is the most vocal against FC said, “We do not have the psychological damage imagined by others. My neighbor is surprised that I could live with this condition [FC]. She behaved as if my head was cut off or something. She could not imagine it. Her skin curled. For her it was different than losing any part of her body. What is awful about this is the tourist mood, they want to hear a sad story, I resented them but I laughed at their reaction.” van Eerdewijk articulated what Serene referred to as the tourist eye, meaning an eye that sees everything as exotic.

My point here is not to decide whether or not such practices are harmful, but to analyse the way they are employed in representations of so-called ‘third world women’. In this representation there is a danger of overgeneralization and oversimplification of issues of culture and religion in women’s sexual and reproductive lives. Oversimplification takes place when cultural and religious aspects are overemphasized. Women’s lives are explained from religious and cultural practices only, disregarding the numerous other processes that impact on their lives and well-being. Moreover, oversimplification takes place when culture and religion are being studied in an abstract and general way (van Eerdewijk, 2001).

Women’s lives, as described by them, became a balancing act. They do their best to change traditions that hindered their free movement and at the same time try to keep some of those traditions because in them they find the comfort of belonging.

Weighed Down, But Forging Ahead

Nothing could be discussed without looking back to see what is going on in the Sudan. Even deciding who to target in educational programs had to be decided by comparison to what is going on there. Why? I asked the group; “because there is a stream of new comers to the USA. They are not the intellectual types that used to come

to the USA; they are the lottery mix, various types and *mustawyat* (standards or levels; *plural*) are expected.”

There were several references to the *mustawa* (*noun*; singular of *mustawyat*) of immigrants. The almost same level of education among Sudanese and the status of being expatriates for a short period of time is not the case anymore. Men who are high school graduates of different ages and spouses of the same level of education are expected to slow down the change, till they themselves are swept by the change in the host country. “Every patch of newcomers repeats the same cycle of behavior, you know, the dream of building a little Sudan over here.” Nostalgia may drag many to go into the *mujamalat* cycle with the new comers rather than the latters being chocked by the busy schedule of the old immigrants.

The participants likened the situation of immigrants to that of migrants from rural areas to the cities. Migrants to the cities received relatives from the villages on daily basis. Services are still concentrated in major cities, hospitals and government offices are centralized in the cities. Migrants did their best to have the appearance that they have not changed and all the values are kept. They avoided any behavior that may make them the “talk” of the village. All migrants to the cities would travel back to the village for vacations. Although change in clothes and appearance in general are tolerated change of behavior and getting out of the tribal or ethnic traditions is not taken kindly.

The same seems to be happening with immigrants to other countries. People are striving not to appear “westernized”. The propaganda against America and American women and their promiscuity is very strong in the Sudan. Women are silenced by accusations of being westernized if they demand any of their rights. It is quite amusing

to note the contradiction in behavior. While almost everyone is falling for clothing fashions, movies and even music of American origin, people shun change of certain behaviors because it is an imitation of the west. This is confirmed by an online discussion on the British Broadcasting Service, Arabic section. The majority of Arabs and Muslims reflected that their number one favored place was the USA despite their express dislike of its policies (BBC, June, 2002).

The fundamentalist policy that reins in the Sudan right now is directly responsible for distilling fears of “westernization” in a selective manner. Uma Narayan (1997) rightly argued that,

This “selective labeling” of certain changes and not others as symptoms of “Westernization” enables the portrayal of unwelcome changes as unforgivable betrayals of deep-rooted and constitutive traditions, while welcome changes are seen as merely pragmatic adaptations that are utterly consonant with the “preservation of our culture and values.” It has often struck me that many in Third-World contexts who condemn feminist criticisms and contestations as “Westernization” would like to believe that there was a pristine and unchanging continuity in their “traditions and way of life,” until we feminist daughters provided the first rude interruption.

Going back and forth and skirting around the changes that are taking place is an exercise of testing the waters by immigrant women. Assia said, “We tend to test the waters and as the Americans say ‘push the envelope as far as we can.’”

Gender Disparities: Two headed Creatures and traditional husbands

Sudanese women see themselves trapped between their home culture and the American one. Adults are striving to reproduce their culture and live it. Yet that culture could not stay in tact and underwent changes according to the demands of living in the host culture and especially its economic demands. Serene referred to herself and other participants as the “two headed creatures”. They see themselves growing a second head

as a matter of survival. Hugo A Kanya (1997), supporting her arguments by several references, noted that,

Immigration involves a process of acculturation. At a cultural level, acculturation involves adjusting to a new culture and environment. At an interpersonal level, immigrants must reorganize interpersonal relationships. At an intrapsychic level, immigrants must learn to cope cognitively, attitudinally, and behaviorally in a new cultural system

The participants saw themselves changing and learning new things. They wanted to change a few things within the family but many of them complained that men do not change. They saw men as wanting to retain their position as guardians and would like to continue the old way of life.

Serene thought that men have already undergone many changes, what they do not want to change was their attitude towards women. Suad added that “They [men] behave as if life revolves around the check they bring home. Even when I bring a check home those checks are not equal.” Some participants said that they could spend months being the sole breadwinners in the family, but once the husband found a job they quickly got relegated to a secondary position. Haya thought that women are treated as “reserve” to be called upon and have to serve at the time of need. Dr. Safiyya added that this is the exact attitude that made women unable to change traditional practices or have an effective voice regarding issues such as FC. “We are trying to change this in the USA. It takes strong will on our part.”

Women have to develop the skill of moving from one culture into the other. Serene said, “Men can get sophisticated about political and literature discussions. They express the most admirable ideas but there is no counting on them to behave according to those ideas at home. They also like women who can hold an intelligent conversation with

them, but they want them to never lose their domestic side, actually that is the side they care for.” This double identity bothered the women as they found it hard to deal with. There are many family problems and divorces are not a rare happening. “Men can easily get Americanized when it suits them. In the end they take what is best for them. They sleep on the side they feel comfortable at. Just like when they use religion and those *Hadiths*, that are sometimes made up by men and the prophet could not have said them, to repress women.” These statements made by Serene found support from many participants. However they also noted that men do interact and consult them better than they used to in the Sudan. They are better listeners and make less fuss about women’s shopping. This is similar to what Donna Gabaccia (1994) reported on changes in gender roles among different categories of immigrants.

One Mexicana, for example, describes her husband as macho in Mexico, but a considerate “delicate butterfly” in the United States, where she, like her husband, works for wages. Dominican women report more consultation and shared decision-making about purchases when they pool incomes with their husbands.

Serene reported that when she wanted to buy the house she did not have any money but she was able to say enough is enough. Captivity in DC had to end. She was also able to trace reluctance in her husband and an inability to make big decisions. She decided to start the process of buying the house and coax him into joining her. While I was interviewing her she was also able to get him to buy a new car. She decided that her domestic responsibilities are worth something. “The low or nil value attached to our domestic role ought to end. Older women knew how to handle this, I like what Hajja Mama said the other day.”

Some of the participants thought that it was not work that changed their role and

gave them a stronger voice in the family. Haya attributed her increased role in decision making to the different environment and the demands of life. “Here we do not have the help of the extended family that lets the man off the hook most of the time. There were way too many things that we were told not to bother husbands about. In the USA they live the domestic life and have to participate in it. They cannot skip it. In the Sudan he may tell me to ask my cousin or my mother or even his mother to help, here there is no way to do that, therefore we have to speak out and demand their participation. In so doing we have to make a decision about what they should do. And we have to make decisions that make life easier for the whole family.”

The most salient feature of women being able to make decisions about their lives is that all divorced women decided to stay in the USA rather than return to Sudan. Within the participants there were two divorced women who decided to stay and had the blessings of their families. In the Sudan a woman cannot live outside the family home if she is no longer married. There are very few cases and are known to everyone since a woman living by herself, except for students in hostels or women who move out of the city of their families’ residence, is an odd behavior that people talk about.

The participants admitted that their ability to earn an income and ability to disburse it as they wish, albeit it goes mostly to the family, gave them power to challenge men’s power and their threat with divorce if women do not comply with their orders. Suad attributed men’s discounting of women’s earnings to the fact that men are threatened by the power of earning an income and would like women to believe that the family is more stable with a man’s income. Mehrdad Darvishpour (2001) found that Iranian immigrant women’s ability to earn an income increased the rate of divorce.

However, she argues that divorce is not a problem but an opportunity for women to seek better lives. The participants to this study acknowledged that the close scrutiny by the Sudanese community of individuals' behavior makes divorce a problem in the sense that a divorced woman gains an opportunity to advance in her career or study but her freedom of movement and starting a new relationship is highly diminished.

Immigration of men affect the lives of women at home. In a study of Sudanese women who stay home while their husbands migrate, Samira Amin found that women's access of service networks whether governmental or in the community, total control over the finances sent from abroad and supervision of house planning and building they acquire a great deal of power that some husbands resent upon their return home (Amin, 1995). Gender roles assign women an original status of being subordinate, they are deputized to take men's roles at the convenience of men, no matter how well they execute their "male" assignment they are expected to return to the "original" status. One thing is certain though they rarely return to that status unchanged.

Women started to pay attention to the rules that apply to them. Many of the participants said that they knew about the *Shari'a* rule that women were not obliged to do housework; others were excited to hear this for the first time. They all admitted that "if push came to shove" they would not hesitate to demand that if men want their *Shari'a* rights then women should insist on theirs too. Serene confirmed that by saying, "And believe me they are not going to like it one little bit." All the women wanted was for the men to know and understand that women do housework because they loved their families. Serene acknowledged the difference in gender roles in the Sudan. "We do not resent housework because it takes from us. We just resent the fact that we are not thanked

for it. In the Sudan in our Nubian communities, women go to the field with men and work; women are a bit more respected. We call each other by our mother's names⁵¹ (Ajjuba, 2001). My father used to cook for us. All my family members treat their women well. I married outside my ethnic group, therefore it was wrong for me to expect the Nubian treatment. However, Nubians also got acculturated by living in Khartoum and other areas, and changed through immigration.”

The participants thought that it was easy for them to make decisions about not circumcising their daughters because men had delegated that particular duty to control sexuality to women. Men may protest but they had lost actual control of taking girls to circumcisors. In effect the participants saw no possibility of men trying to take control over this issue. Actually all participants thought that men would like to stop circumcision for their own sake.⁵²

Double jeopardy

The participants did not just decry how they were overburdened by doing double shifts (housework and outside jobs), but also the great injustice done to them when they are single mothers and immigrants. Coming from and living in societies that see gender equality as irrelevant, participants were not sure that their success would be valued. Joyce Antler, writing about women in the educational system made comments that are applicable to the above situation.

⁵¹ The history of Nubia is full of stories about Nubian queens and their courage. To this date the Nubians of Halfa in Northern Sudan call both men and women by their mothers' names.

⁵² The third group, the younger women's group resented that men thought of stopping FC only when they became aware that it was hurting them physically and mentally. The fact that it was hurting women did little to entice opposition by men.

Working both outside and inside the home on what amounts to a double shift, today's women will not consider themselves idle. They may think their lives irrelevant, however, and perceive their education as having somehow betrayed them.

Now the conceptual categories of education not only make educated women anomalies; they make the phenomenon of gender appear to be of no possible interest to educators. This is scarcely surprising: in a framework of thought derived from the experience of one sex only, questions of gender simply do not arise (Antler, 1990).

Attending to gender issues seem to be a luxury, women who are seeking better education or a professional life are forced to reconsider just because they are made to feel that other family matters are important than their own endeavors. They can succeed in achieving their dreams if their husbands would just acknowledge their other than domestic roles and ambitions.

However, the participants considered themselves luckier than their counterparts in Egypt. Ihsan Algaddal describes the predicament of those women.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees helps a small fraction of Sudanese who are granted refugee protection status in Egypt. Most women are driven to brewing local wine for sale or working as house maids. A few earn money by plaiting hair or making baskets for sale. The difficult economic situation and lack of job opportunities has forced some women to resort to prostitution (Algaddal, 1999).

Participants thought that they are also subject to different standards when compared with American women. "Sudanese men take American girlfriends and they may marry them but if a Sudanese girl befriended one of them before marriage that is the end of her. They would not give her the time of the day. Their American wives can drink but if a Sudanese woman does that then Hell break loose." All participants in this group were worried about the young women who came to the USA and were living by themselves, but this is a story for the third part of this chapter. Some of them were

optimistic that the Sudanese men would change their scale of judging women.

Not many are optimistic though. A few days before this meeting the Sudanese community enjoyed a celebration of the *intifadah*, uprising, that ended the previous military dictatorship. A woman artist participated by introducing four girls as a dancing group. The Sudanese community enjoyed the dancing of the young girls, yet they were talking about their wearing short dresses and some people were even critical of this *gooat ain* (defiant shameless behavior) of being dancers.

Serene spoke from experience when she said that Sudanese people do not appreciate dancing as a profession or even as a free show, despite the fact that it is the same dancing they may practice at weddings and other occasions. “What is normal suddenly becomes erotic and unappreciated as such. When we danced in the folklore group the applause was cat calling. The foreign visitors appreciated our folklore dance more than the Sudanese.”

Inability to cope with the rapid socio-economic change, Serene was afraid that FC may sound as a solution for some Sudanese. “Of course it is not a solution for anything but it puts them at ease. Even in the Sudan people do it to replace them in guarding the honor of the family.”(Abdelhalim, 1995).

Serene wanted to form a folklore group in the USA. She tried to get women into it but they also had problems of babysitting and demanding husbands. This group would have come to life if it were not for the husbands who would not help and cooperate. “We did not want to create problems with men. Then we decided to include men but women did not want it for they were sure that men would leave them at home and join the group without them.”

Serene gave another example of how changes in gender roles make men feel inferior. She performed in many of the Sudanese events. During her performance her husband babysat the children. “You would not believe how he resented that. He used to get upset for no reason on the day of the performance. Doing things for me made him feel that he looked less manly. When I needed to bring musicians in for a performance I had to pay for their tickets. He would not help me do that although I was not working and could not afford it. My friends helped me. Through these friends I was able to do some performances.”

I wanted to get to the bottom of this confusing stand of Serene’s husband. He did not object to her continuing her artistic performance yet he refused to extend a helping hand. We talked about gender and culture and how people behave in a way that may hurt their personal relations just to please the outside world. Once more we talked about FC and how it was more an adherence to a social norm rather than a personal benefit. Serene picked up this point as if it was a revelation and said that was exactly the situation with her husband. “It was not that he did not want me to help, but he did not want people to say that he was making money out of his wife’s performance. It is the Sudanese culture that still lives in him after 30 years of being in this country, and it will still continue to be with him. There was also the stigma of being the husband of a famous woman. Instead of the woman being called *fulan’s* (*fulan* is a reference to an unidentified person, it is the equivalent of John Doe, *fulana* is the feminine of *fulan*.) wife he would be called *fulana’s* husband. All Sudanese men abhor being identified by reference to their wives.”

It was not just the artistic performance that he did not help with. Even when Serene applied for a job at a grocery store she went with a friend. Women seem to also

stick to the culture. We all noted with amusement how each one of us would like to take a friend along if she was going somewhere; women walk together. It may be attributed to the supervision that society imposes on women at all times. If women were in groups then they were not hiding their behavior. Any person, man or woman, who excludes others from his/her life is destined to be the “talk” of the community; “what does she/he has to hide?”

The Only Way Out is “Change”

The group kept coming back to the “change” argument. There was a consensus that men think that they should be taken “as is.” Women’s dependence on them put them on top of the game. For example, women’s physical inability to do hard manual work disadvantages them but men’s inability to give birth is considered a virtue. Their inability is turned to give them more power, Whatever work men are unable to do is classified as demeaning work.

Specified gender roles make women feel that there are certain duties that would not be executed unless they are the ones who execute them, hence their acceptance to do “double shifts”. Men take advantage of that and force women into leaving jobs, for example. Serene suffered when her husband did not want her to work at a grocery store. “When I worked at a store till eleven p.m. my husband did not like it, but instead of having a confrontation with me he would just have my sons sleeping in the car when he picked me up. They would tell me that they had not eaten nor done their homework. Sometimes he would forget to pick me up from work because he was pursuing one of his hobbies. His lack of collaboration with me increased my hostility towards him.” His insistence that it was her duty to attend to the children and that she was neglecting that

duty forced her out of her job. She had just started a new job hoping that the arrival of her sister would cut some of her responsibilities.

Serene also had the luck of starting out her life in the USA amongst a Sudanese community in which none of the women worked. “When I had a chance to work at a hotel he told me it is a dangerous job. All jobs were not suitable and dangerous. I did not understand whether he was protective or just repressive. In addition to that none of the Sudanese women in DC at the time was working. Serene thought that because Sudanese men imitate each other, the non-working women status in the immigrants’ network in that city contributed to her repression.

The participants agreed that Sudanese are comfortable with “follow the leader” pattern of behavior. “If you noticed, even in a party someone has to start dancing for others to follow.” However there was an acknowledgment that within the immigrant community breaking the pattern was easier than in the Sudan. The women in the group did not see culture and religion as static institutions. There is a tendency among the group not to pretend that they can make their lives easier by staying within the limits of traditions and what they see as erroneous religious interpretations. There was no “we can do at home jobs” or securing interests through trying to fit the new in the old mold. Saba Mahmood argued that,

A central question explored within this scholarship has been: how do women contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it? Scholars working in this vein have thus tended to explore religious traditions in terms of the conceptual and practical resources they offer that women may usefully redirect and recode to secure their "own interests and agendas," a recoding that stands as the site of women's agency.

The participants pointed that they were having a critical look at their lives as mothers and wives as well as women, something that they did not do at home.

Physical and Psychological Consequences of FC

It was remarkable how the participants were talking about their circumcision in the USA. Back home it was an act that included them and made them one with the society they live in; in the USA it excluded them, they are in a category of their own. Back home it was the reverse, it was the uncircumcised women who were in a different category and dealt a special treatment. In a way the immigration situation has forced them to take a serious look at circumcision. Their experiences with the host culture were horrifying to them, but useful in the sense that they were not thinking of giving up the tradition in order to avoid the unfamiliar looks and treatment. Those experiences brought about an awareness of the tradition itself and whether it was useful anywhere in the world.

When Serene got pregnant with her first child she went to see a doctor of Egyptian origin who knew something about FC. As she approached the final stages of her pregnancy she started to get worried about giving birth. “I thought of traveling to Egypt to give birth. The expense of giving birth in a hospital was another problem for me.” Serene was directed by her doctor to Columbia hospital for women. The first thing she told her doctor at the hospital, was her *hajis*, her circumcision.

The woman doctor at Columbia Hospital saw Serene late in the pregnancy but she comforted her and told her that she had an idea about FC. “She was there for my delivery but I will never forget how she let me suffer labor pain every minute for 21 hours. I think she wanted to experiment with me. What I was suffering had nothing to do with circumcision yet she continued to ask the chief doctor to give her time so she could deliver the baby naturally. After 21 hours it was decided that I was to have a caesarean.”

When the nurse on the day shift cried and stayed with her till the end of the next shift, Serene was thankful but came to a realization that nothing around her was normal or natural.

Serene's second delivery was attended to by a doctor who saw a Sudanese before her, but that woman delivered through a caesarean. "At least he remembered that he saw a similar case. I had a "natural" delivery despite complications with the baby. Serene drew the quote unquote signs in the air to qualify the word "natural". "I suffered a great deal, the psychological state I was in was helped only by my mother's arrival."

"They call it natural, let me tell you, there is nothing natural about the delivery of an infibulated woman. The natural has been taken away, how could doctors call our birthing natural?" I think circumcised women should stay in hospitals for at least 3 days just like a caesarean. But I had to go home the next day, despite the complications that could result from being deinfibulated."

Serene's most painful psychological experience that she remembered as a funny one and was making jokes of it was how she looked at and perceived her body after birth. She cried most of the time about her "gaping thing". She could not tell anyone and she had to get over it only with the help of her doctor and husband. Many of the participants were reluctant to express what they went through, only when Serene told her story did others come out to make suggestions and express their discomfort with FC itself rather than what doctors knew or did not know.

The participants articulated a logical question, "is it wise to do harm to women and demand that others deal with it? Or is there a responsibility not to cause the harmful unfamiliar condition?" This question did not have a simple answer. The only answer was

a vow that there would never be FC for the daughters of these women. Such questions are not asked back home, at home FC was normal and women have been successfully dealing with it, besides at home it serves many purposes that are no longer part of life in the USA.

Food for the Circumcised

Circumcised women developed foods and drinks that would help their condition during childbirth. The same may be fed to little girls after circumcision to ease certain digestive problems that occur with being bed ridden and the discomfort of swelling or infection that may accompany the cutting or the re-stitching after birth. Serene became a believer in such special food. “I always wondered about the special food made for a woman who just gave birth. Not anymore, once my mother arrived and prepared it for me my bowel movement became normal, I had a better appetite and nutrition.”

Food made with herbs prevented constipation which can be very painful for women who suffer big cuts during childbirth. Certain herbal drinks are soothing and relaxing and help with lactation. By experience foods such as *madidat hilba*, a kind of porridge made with *hilba*, a widely used herb, butter, milk and flour are great help. Serene even suggested that hospitals should be talked into letting mothers or relatives bring such food into the hospital for new mothers. Food culture is not always food taboos. Women are well educated on how certain foods may cause burning urine and constipation. They are well aware of how certain foods are connected to lactation and that the more a baby suckles the more the uterus recovered.

“Before my mother’s arrival I was like a closed up balloon for three days; on the fourth day I went back to the doctor and his diagnosis was that I suffered swelling due to

stitching. I was happy with my mother's presence because I had someone to talk to. I could confide in my mother. She had the same experience and could tell me that I was not dying."

Discovering scars

Serene was also the first to describe a deformity that was the direct result of circumcision "I have a bulging area in the middle, I have sensation in it but I do not know whether it is a disease, or they just forgot to cut my clitoris." It was hard not to laugh at Serene's portrayal of her condition, but one of the benefits of this research has been exchanging some information with the participants. I gave the participants information about a clinic in Boston, at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. They were pleased to learn that it is directed by Dr. Nawal Nour, who is a Sudanese educated at Harvard University. They said they would certainly consider going to the clinic as it may have answers for such worries. Some participants were at ease just to know that there is a place to go to if need arose.

The American doctor did not know what the bulging area was in Serene's genitalia, but did not think it was anything critical. She trusted his opinion, but did not feel comfortable with it. "He actually did not see it till I pointed it out to him, he said he did not look during the exam. He touched it and he said it is a possible fat tissue and it is up to me to remove or leave it. I let a Sudanese doctor touch it and he said it is possible that it resulted from stitching. It gets bulgy during menstruation. If it got bigger I have to remove it."

All participants agreed that we lack knowledge of our own bodies, and we are not comfortable looking at ourselves. Amna conveyed a story about her curiosity to see the

genitalia of an uncircumcised woman. “I asked one of my friends to show me, she did. I could not believe what they cut out of me. They practically carved the whole thing out. I looked at the scar and stitches on me, they looked like a worm with many legs.” Amna felt that she was better off not thinking about FC, the more she thought about it the more inhuman it looked. The scars turned into reminders of something lost rather than reminders of honor preserved.

We Are Not Nuts!

Psychological effects have been the subject of discussion amongst feminists in Africa and elsewhere. Cloudsley’s attitude that Sudanese women will suffer nervous breakdowns found no support among this group. Nor is there any evidence in the studies done already that circumcised women are mentally unstable. Despite this there is a wide belief that women suffer mentally. The extremes that some writers such as Alice Walker (1999) went to about psychological consequences were not acceptable to this group. They all agreed that there was no need to exaggerate the effects so as to eradicate FC.

“Inventing or exaggerating consequences will only make us lose our credibility” insisted Serene. She was the only one who suspected a psychological effect of FC. Serene said she tried to find the reason she hated to open her legs for anything. “Now I think I know why, I attribute it to the circumcision. I was forced to open my legs, I felt it was demeaning, but I do not know whether that is the real reason.” However, when she told about her neighbors and how they felt sorry for her being circumcised, she expressed her astonishment at such feelings by other people. She insisted that FC had not hindered her movement publicly nor privately. “I do not walk in the street feeling that I have lost something. I am not in pain at home and aside from the childbirth experience that was

really educational to me I think I am going ahead with my life without even thinking about my circumcision.”

The contention that circumcised women are damaged goods is instigated in part by what Ahmadu (2000) attributed to the behavior of some women who cry in public hearings and using that for activism. The participants in this group argued that the fear they felt as children was greatly minimized by anesthesia, and their conviction that FC included them in their peer group and in the society at large. They ruled out any lasting psychological effect because of being afraid of or suffering pain during FC.

The psychological effects that the participants reported were regarding immigrant women who left the hospital to go to empty homes, to find themselves alone. It was interesting to note that husbands were not considered as present and the women were said to be alone. An explanation for that statement came from Ihsan who said, “Husbands do not know what to do with women who just gave birth, despite their presence in the delivery room. I think they are usually in a state of shock themselves. Besides, most of them are useless if there is one or more other kids to be taken care of.” This group reported that some women would spend the first week crying because they could hardly move and husbands had to go to work or as Ihsan said were useless and may be having their own psychological fears about their first encounter with such a situation. Women are also not used to conveying such discomforts to men.

As indicated by Toubia (1999); Abdulla (1982), Psychological effects have not been researched enough. They are not visible or they are short term in the case of women who do not leave their communities. For women FC was the “normal state” and lack of is as Serene pointed out would be the source of psychological pain for women. Many

women conveyed stories of how they actually insisted on FC because of peer pressure and the prestige conferred on circumcised girls.⁵³ Yet in this far away land FC became a mark of shame, something no little girl wanted and no mother to perform. Peers are horrified and little girls who may have never been to the Sudan would not understand why their bodies should be changed. In short the host society is not demanding FC. On the contrary it is punishing those who perform it.

Fumbai Ahmdu (2000) presents a daring powerful case against making FC the devil that women need to be coerced out of. She conceded that more research needed to be done before any generalization can be made. However, she maintained that,

A small but growing number of African female activists against various forms of “circumcision” have detailed the pain and trauma they underwent and the lasting impact such negative experiences have had on their lives, and they campaign against what they rightfully believe to be an affront to their human rights and womanhood. I have spoken to a few young Kono women who are adamantly opposed to initiation because of their experiences of pain, abuse and maltreatment by female elders in the “bush.” However, most women I have interviewed fervently support the practice, and my observations in the field confirm that most girls not only continue to look forward to their initiation but, further, demonstrate their ongoing support for the practice by actively participating in later ceremonies involving younger female friends and relations.

Immigrant Sudanese women reported that losing proximity to their familiar surroundings, by moving thousands of miles away and living in a different culture, may help gain a better perspective even of personal matters. What Ahmadu told about the Kono above applies in all fours to the case of the Sudan. Yet this group of participants clearly stated that in the host country they gained a different perspective. One may disagree with Ahmadu on the point that acceptance of the practice and continuing to look

⁵³ Somali women at a workshop on reproductive health in Arlington, Virginia, in April, 2002.

forward to it is not proof that it is a good practice. This is exactly what activists and scholars are trying to change. Ahmadu is advocating that as long as human beings accept what they do they should be left alone. She did make references to coercing people out of traditions, yet what activists are seeking is a way to bring facts to women rather than coerce them into abandoning the tradition. It has been proved that coercion has little or no effect (Breakthrough, 1999).

A catalogue for FC!

Serene is a never ending source of jokes about FC. She stood up to indicate that she was making an important point. “When Americans fool around with their bodies they make catalogues for that. They tell you exactly what you are getting. Have you seen what they publish to convince women to shape their labia?” When Serene’s sons were to be circumcised she said the doctor showed them a catalogue to choose what type of circumcision they want for their baby. Serene was completely cross with Sudanese doctors for not developing catalogues for FC or to show procedures of possible reconstruction.

Serene’s light hearted point goes deeper. In the recent research done amongst Sudanese health professionals referred to above, the researchers found that the curricula of medical schools were devoid of any mention of FC. Doctors gain their expertise through experience of childbirth in hospitals. Only midwifery school provides practical training on how to open an infibulation.

Immigration of women with circumcision has so far brought the issue of education about FC to the forefront. Not only that but, the experiences of these women are adding to the body of knowledge about FC and how to save women’s lives and

health. Amna Badri, in her research for a Master thesis lists some policies established by the Well Women's Clinic at Central Middlesex Hospital, London, United Kingdom. I think they deserve to be quoted *in toto*:

The following policy was established and modified in the light of experience:

Reversal (syn, Deinfibulation) was best carried out before the first pregnancy (often after betrothal). This was in line with the culture of many Somali women. This policy had several major advantages. Urinary function was restored to normal, and sexual intercourse was pain-free. The anatomy could be restored to normality in most cases, with special emphasis on the clitoral area. Pre-pregnancy reversal was always carried out on a day-care basis, but under general anaesthesia to avoid distressing 'flash back' memories of the original circumcision procedure.

When women present pregnant for the first time with infibulation, which would clearly be a barrier delivery, they felt it best to reverse the condition in the mid trimester- a time of obstetric tranquility. Having a fixed ensured that surgeons familiar with the technique would deal with them, and that the anatomy could be fully restored without the pressures of impending delivery. Subsequent labour and delivery would then be easy to manage with the whole area soundly healed. In pregnancy, most women accepted a spinal anaesthetic, though they would agree to general anaesthesia if the woman were distressed by the idea of being awake.

If the patient presented in labour, and was still infibulated it was important to ensure that senior staff familiar with the technique were informed of the patient's admission.

Failure to observe this part of the protocol could (and did) result in the wrong operation (resuture) or an inadequate procedure resulting in restenosis. Some Somali women insisted on awaiting labour before reversal. In these cases, they warned the mother to be present early in labour, so that reversal could be carried out in the first stage of labour under epidural anaesthesia. In their experience the anterior reversal was not disrupted or torn significantly during subsequent delivery. Reversal in the second stage of labour was stage least likely option to produce a satisfactory result (Badri, 2000).

Such experiences are vital for women's health. Many women complained that complications of childbirth result from cutting "the wrong way." Wrong way here is an indication that it is different from the way midwives and doctors do the cut in the Sudan.

The participants preferred giving birth through a caesarean, probably because the above experiences are not well propagated and exchanged. Dr. Safiyya added that “Every time there is a cut by someone who is guessing which is the best way to cut, there is damage.”

Sexual Effects

Serene lamented that she had no sex education whatsoever. All she learned about sex was from her peers. Men are beginning to ask about FC for they do not want to go through stuff they do not know. “I had no sex education whatsoever. The first full picture of how intercourse took place was drawn by peers when she was in high school. “When I learned that, I was appalled. I had a small opening and I happened to know the size of a man because I had a horrible experience as a child of a man showing me his private part. I never wanted to get married because I could not imagine how that would happen. I told my mother that I wanted a gay man. I was totally terrified of sex. I could not imagine how I could be opened for such an exercise.” This is one of the occasions where Serene showed some psychological barriers caused by circumcision, yet not by the circumcision *per se*. She remembered it as a horrifying experience here in the USA as she started to reminisce about FC.

Serene was almost 29 when she got married. That was marrying late by her generation’s standards and Sudanese traditions. Her knowledge of sex was mainly out of books and magazines which were mainly romance rather than sex education texts. “I got married late because I decided that I wanted a relationship that depended on love. I needed to feel secure; so I decided that unless I felt safe and really in love I would never get married. I had to get married to fit in the society.” Serene did not want to take any chances with someone who may not be happy with FC. She fell in love with her now

husband, who had lived in the USA for two decades. The first thing she did when he proposed to her was tell him that she was circumcised. “This is a man who he lived most of his life outside the Sudan and knew women who were not circumcised, I had to be sure. He expected that and said it would not hurt our relationship.”

The participants were getting more and more daring and revealing about their sexual needs. They all agreed that Sudanese men were shy and conservative in bed. They do not have a romantic mode for sex. Despite the fact that they do not like women who openly respond to sexual acts, they rarely show their own pleasure in a way that may encourage women to do the same. Serene said, “I do not think my sexual desire depends on having a clitoris or not it depends on my mental state. I do believe Hind’s statement that if you are not in the mood then you will not respond. It is not a mechanical feeling.”

Reviewing Soumaya Naamane Guessous’s *Au-delà de toute pudeur* (Beyond All Shame), Zineb El Ouardighi pointed out what made that book valuable; it disturbed “the long silence surrounding the sexuality of Moroccan women.” Ajjuba (2001) recounted the history of sexual freedom that Sudanese women had in the 19th and beginning of 20th century. There are hardly any new publications that address Sudanese women’s sexuality. The ideas expressed by Guessous are similar to what Serene and the participants in her group expressed in our long *wanasa* sessions. El Ouardighi sums up the situation as follows,

Guessous has now unveiled a contemporary society that is torn apart and where widespread, ill-defined shame overwhelms the underlying essential issue, that is to say, the psychosomatic balance, not only of women, but also, to a certain extent, of men. In this regard, Guessous speculates about the need for men to be "dominant" during sex and to throw their female partners into a sea of frustration. Where do the origins of this basic imbalance lie? In shame? A lack of sex education? Or a combination of both?

Shame or *aib* is certainly an integral part of sex for all the participants. They were certain that men were suspicious of women who react positively to sex. The question would arise in men's heads, "where did she learn all this about sex?" Nothing can hurt a Sudanese woman more than a rumor that she "fooled around" before marriage. The body is to be preserved not for the woman enjoyment but for the man's. FC is comfortably situated in such a culture. For men it serves as the assurance of sexual inexperience in women, a trait so desirable that songs are composed to praise such inexperience.

When it comes to sexuality traditions replace and suppress religion. Despite Islam's stress on the importance of sexual satisfaction for both sexes, women are subjected to the traditional rules. The *Qur'an* states the security that husbands and wives get in a marriage on egalitarian terms, by mentioning both men and women. Part of verse 187 of the Chapter *Albaqara* (the Cow) is, "It is now lawful for you to lie with your wives on the night of the fast; they are a comfort to you as you are to them" (2:187).

The consensus in *Shari'a* is that a woman is entitled to a divorce if the husband is impotent; she is not expected to shy away from that. During the Prophet's life women openly challenged their husbands who wanted to spend their nights praying. That caused the rule that "there is no celibacy in Islam" to be implemented. Actually court cases by women seeking divorce from impotent men are not rare in the Sudan, more than one case has been reported in the *Sudan Law Journal and Reports*. Such cases stigmatize men more than they do women, because of the express recognition of a woman's right to sexual satisfaction in the religious laws.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Section of the Personal Law for Muslims Act, 1991, enumerates the instances that give women the right to sue for divorce. Men in *Shari'a* do not need to sue for divorce, they have the direct right to divorce whenever they feel like it.

Serene insisted that the vaginal orgasm that circumcised women feel could not happen without help from the other sensitive parts of the body. Only by having husbands who are interested in romance before sex would women be able to get full satisfaction. “But men are not interested in women’s feelings, we are not supposed to feel it, we are supposed to provide it to them. Men can practice animal sex, meaning just go straight to sex, but women cannot, I cannot.”

The two participants with medical training in the group were of opinion that reaching satisfaction is in the brain and circumcised women are not devoid of sexual feelings. The marital problems that originate in sexual dissatisfaction may very well be attributed, in their major part, to the traditional ways of our arranged marriages. Or in what Serene said about men being interested in their own satisfaction.

Conclusion

Serene and her group were insistent that I interview men on the subjects of gender and female circumcision. After a short discussion they decided that those “*mutakhalifeen* (backward men) would think the worst of me if I talked to them about such matters. They would think that I were a loose woman who had no shame. This discussion lead to the question of whether they would talk to their husbands about FC and not performing it on daughters. The answer was in the affirmative, but coupled with an unfamiliar tone that I rarely hear women use. The women were of opinion that they were strong enough to assert their own point of view. The experience of immigration brought them face to face with a kind of vulnerability in men that they were not able to detect before. That vulnerability is not a weakness in as much as it is a realization by men that women are not as dependent as they used to be and a realization by women that men, if pressured,

are capable of adapting and changing. The rigidity they show in the Sudan was due to the whole environment that protected men's interests and ignored women's.

Another observation about this group is that they continued to keep close ties with the Sudan, yet they were willing to change their personal behavior because of the attitudinal changes they experienced, not for the sake of appeasing the host culture. They still seek legitimization by having their behavior sanctioned by the Sudanese community in the USA. Women are always worried about what people would say. The Sudanese community in the USA is shedding just some of its traditional traits but is still very much living in its Sudanese tradition. Although there is a constant complaint that these traditions were time consuming, they are diligently kept and watched.

The INS diversity visa program, known as the green card lottery, is securing a continuous stream of new comers who seem to renew even the parts that the first immigrants had ended. Noland (2000) noted that Indian women did not refer to themselves as Americans no matter how long they had been in the USA. They even talk about those who change their way of life. The "we are different" is as strong amongst the immigrants as the "they are different" is amongst the main stream Americans. Yet immigrant Sudanese women felt richer and more secure belonging to two places and cultures.⁵⁵

Summary

Serene and the participants in the group of married women have made statements that clearly indicates that cross cultural perspectives interact and indeed affect each other.

⁵⁵ Suad thought that the African American experience of losing roots in Africa while very slowly gaining some in the USA is fueling the feeling that the Sudanese should always hold on to their roots.

The constant regular exchange of visits, goods and certain cultures between the home and the host country is changing the home culture, there is a tendency to accept certain American goods and behavior, such as dancing, as fashionable and desirable. The cultural effect of immigrants on the USA is seen in the laws against FC that may not have happened were it not for the strong presence of the African culture.

A cross cultural perspective changes some paradigms that worked like a curtain before the cultural interaction. For example immigrant Sudanese women find it easy to accept the law prohibiting FC in the USA and attest to its being necessary, while they never paid attention to similar laws in the Sudan nor affected by the repeal of those laws. As long as they are living in the USA, FC has to be understood as an illegal act.

The participants pointed out how formally schooled adults may educated on certain issues that are not part of their educational curriculum, such as FC. Their awareness of their condition as circumcised women and their subordinate status in the family may not be a newly acquired knowledge but how to overcome both needed some new strategies that women freely exchanged with each other.

Decision making and the gender disparities in that respect have changed not through direct dealing with the issue but by the sheer change in the daily routine of life inside the home. Women's insistence that their daughters will not suffer in the way they suffered and feeling their ability to make that decision has greatly contributed to the widespread acceptance that FC is going to be something of the past.

Women are seeking ways to communicate with each other on the subject of FC as well as other matters. In the Sudanese tradition they are trying to convey their experiences to the younger generation of women, a group of women immigrants that is

forging its way on its own terms. The group in the following Part Three, comprised mainly single women who are not viewed kindly back home and may be more vulnerable in the host country. Their fears and hopes were openly discussed and for the first time in their lives FC became prominent and something to talk about and fear the consequences of.

PART THREE

WAYS AND MEANS TO EDUCATE OUR CHILDREN AND OURSELVES

Introduction

This part was not planned as a separate segment of the chapter. But it became important to highlight educational issues in the family. Children's reaction to the host culture and their resistance of the home culture is an important factor in shaping them as citizens of the new country. Immigrants and their children see an opportunity in immigration and try to make it on their own. Jeffrey S. Passel, and Wendy Zimmermann (1996) found that poor immigrants are less likely to use welfare than natives. The participants reported that they did not even know about most of the services provided to them. Only one of them reported that she used part of the services offered to her in a letter by the INS after she was resettled by UNHCR. She said even though she got assistance she had to repay the price of the ticket for her trip from Cairo to the USA. Being from middle or upper middle class Northern Sudanese families they all looked at welfare as a degrading state that should be resorted to only if one's survival is threatened.

Participants thought that their priority is that their children excel in school. All the mothers in the group reported that "*Alhamd Lil Allah* (thank God) our children are doing very well at school." One of the mothers sent her teenage son and daughter back home for high school. She reported that they started to act American, meaning that they wanted to come and go as they please and have boy and girl friends. She brought them back after three years so as to prepare to go to college in the USA. She is convinced that the three years stay in Sudan had done them a lot of good. "It [this period] instilled in them some

of the traditional ideals of respecting the older and cured the individualistic streak in them.” Other mothers thought it was unfair to make the children live the ideals in parents’ heads. Despite this statement they all said children should be sent home to spend sometime with the extended family, “so as not lose their roots.” They said it is beneficial for the children who were not born in the USA and actually came to the USA old enough to remember home.

Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001) have identified three ways in which immigrant children react to the host culture. They may react to the reception of the host culture by “ethnic flight” meaning that they abandon their home culture and adopt the host one. Unlike assimilation that is an effort by the host culture to remove the immigrant’s identity, ethnic flight is a deliberate act by the immigrant to identify with the host culture. A second way is to develop “adversarial identities” which leads to opposition of the host culture and going against it. The third reaction the authors delineate is “transcultural identities” where children learn to live in both cultures. The participants in the married women group hope to create a transnational identity for their children hoping that they take the best of each culture.

The participants in all groups talked about how in their everyday life as immigrants they had been learning new things. One of them said that you learn a new thing if you just walked the streets. They clearly want to use the new environment as a learning opportunity. Serene insisted that it was a new type of learning, “it is fast paced and necessary, it is not like it can wait to be learned later or there is a time to learn it. If you are going to take the Metro, for example, there is no one there who would hand you a ticket when you pay, it is a machine that has text and pictures so whether you can read or

not you can learn how to get your ticket on the spot or you will miss the train.” All participants conveyed that having no one to depend on for such simple matters have taught them a great deal. For the first time they said they looked at the Sudanese women’s habit of going places in groups. Serene says she enjoys driving alone to nearby places but to go on the highway alone, “that is something I am yet to learn.”

They Talk Back to You

Despite the fact that everyone is saying that their children are why they chose to stay or come in the first place to the USA, they admitted that children do not feel that they are a priority. The community is by and large living by Sudanese standards. The group agreed that Adults have priority when it comes to socialization and activities. Adults usually change children’s programs so as to attend social gatherings. “We drag our children to our parties and social events. Children see those events as grown-up boring events.” Sometimes children have to give up school extra-curricula activities in order to attend such events.

Parents are intentionally reproducing the culture, but their children are resisting. Parents insist on taking children to mourning gatherings, weddings, religious events and other social gatherings that children find extremely boring, even when the event is a party. Sudanese children are dubbed by one parent as “*nas* boring” literary meaning people of boring or those who say boring. Parents are trying to make children understand the value of a close social life; children want to have fun. For parents religion and traditions are not to be questioned they are just to be learned. Their American children always ask “why?”

Mimi said that even when parents attend their children activities they feel that it is

kid's stuff and not seriously get involved in those activities. Children feel that the only activity their parents are interested in is homework. Participation by parents in the school "fun" programs may be limited to just watching. "I took my children to a dance night at school. All other parents danced all night, my husband and I did not. Yet we were dying to dance but could not bring ourselves to participate in a "kid's event."

Talk about children and whether they should learn about FC and other Sudanese traditions, is a subject that mothers say is confusing for them. The status of immigration is a good shield for the children from many traditional practices, yet it is exposing them to another culture that is threatening to take over. Amna made it clear what her priority is in her children's education, it is religion. "One day I put a tape of the *Qur'an* on, I asked my nephew what was on, he said it was somebody singing. The ABCs of life should be taught. A Sudanese irked me once by joking about his kid not knowing the Prophet."

She continued, "Listen, the thing [FC] is now being linked to religion. They are going to be asked about that and laughed at as Muslims; *Allah yejazeek ya Ben Ladin* (may Allah do unto you what you deserve oh Ben Ladin).⁵⁶ We already have terrorism to thank for turning lives upside-down; we better deal with religious issues before they get out of hand." There was a remarkable degree of tension about this subject between Amna who is in the USA fresh from a strict Islamic culture and others who spent years in the USA.

Amna's statement was almost fanatic. She was told to "cool down, you are still under the fanatics' spell." Amna thought that the religious issue is being swept under the

⁵⁶ The incidents of September 11, 2001 left the Muslim communities and specifically those with Arabic names such as the Sudanese with a lot to worry about and to explain to the Americans. The participants would not hide their contempt for what he did and the hardships his acts brought upon them.

carpet. She refused to accept the justifications given by other mothers about the harmful effects of constantly putting the children “between a rock and a hard place.” Her sister Serene thought that children are speaking English as a first language, Arabic became a second language and it is difficult to teach any more than how to pray.

Two of the participants prided themselves in being able to follow up their children’s recital of the shorter verses of the *Qur’an* by heart. Many of the participants sent their children to an Arab-Islamic school that they said they later regretted. All noticed that children are more attracted to Christmas decorations and events than they are to the *Eid* prayer which is conducted in a language they barely understand. Some of the participants shyly admitted that they had Christmas trees for the children. They justified that by saying there was nothing wrong with celebrating Christ’s birthday. After all Islam acknowledges that birth in the *Qur’an*. Besides Christmas is just a tradition not a religious practice just as the Birthday of the Prophet Mohamed is. Two factors emerged from this discussion, one is how women are taking charge of their children’s education, another is the strong tendency to keep children bicultural.

Experiences of other immigrants that have similar sentiments towards their culture (both traditions and religion) reported that immigrant communities tend to keep traditions of food, marriage and religion alive for generations (Siddique, 1977). Indian food became a source of income as Indian food restaurants flourished. Sudanese women would like their children to keep traditional values of staying at home after age 18. Participants described girls leaving to live by themselves as a nightmare. They think that their children are closer to the host culture and girls may opt for relationships outside

marriage. They wanted the same values that restrict the single immigrant women to rule their daughters.

What the participants seem to be content with is a minimum religious education that would get their children through prayer and knowing why they were praying. They acknowledge the fact that Christians, Jews and other religions are keen to raise their children with religious knowledge, and that Muslims should do the same. However Muslims are at a disadvantage. Religiously the Sudanese are Sunnis and do not have religious institutions other than the mosque that is mainly for prayers. The evolution of the mosque into a teaching institution is marred by the political inclinations of the Islamists. The only alternative they had was the Islamic school set up by an Arab country, which they disliked and took children out of.

One after the other the mothers complained of what goes on in that school. Safyyia said, “This school is not suitable for any kid. I had bad experiences with the teachers there. First day I took my son there, they commented that my son’s shorts were showing *aura* (body parts not fit to be seen in public). Then they commented on my not wearing a scarf. I had to tell the male teacher off. A few days in that school and my kid became a fanatic; everything had a *halal* or *haram* tag on it. The frightening part is the discriminatory messages they deliver. I want my kid to learn thinking not repeating stupid things such as discrimination against non-Muslims.”

Discouraged by the syllabus of the Islamic school the Sudanese community set up their own school. However not all children get to go to that school. Political affiliations divide the community. If the executives happened to be those with Islamic tendencies the

liberals would boycott the community school and vice-versa. At the meeting many of the participants were happy to receive information from one of them, that there is a private school that teaches Arabic and did not have fanatic teachers.

At this stage it became apparent that all the participants were doing their best, to make sure that their children do not become totally Americanized. Many expressed disappointment at their children not being able to speak good Arabic. Amna tormented them over religion and how they themselves gave up prayers and were not capable of teaching children. As far as FC is concerned all participants were sure that their children would be asked about it, but have no idea how and what to tell them. It was suggested that the best approach is education by omission i.e. let children grow up having no memory of it or the struggle to eradicate it.

If they happened to run across FC during a visit in the Sudan or in a book from the library there was a consensus among the mothers that it would be explained as a discontinued ancient practice. “They see *shiloukh* and know that it is a discontinued practice, it does not bother them.” Said Serene. “How they react to it will depend greatly on how I present it to them. It is incumbent on us to educate ourselves on how to deal with this issue. If we tell good things about the Sudan, the bad traditions can be pointed out as discontinued bad customs.” However, many thought that these days good things about Sudan are hard to find, unless they are about family. The group felt that they have to think of a ways to educate children, which means that as Serene said they have to educate themselves on how to convey information to inquisitive children.

There is resistance to having children be assimilated in a new culture but at the same time the very same culture is used to protect them from parts of their home culture.

Such maneuvers with culture may be the reason for Bouvier's stand against immigration. He does not see any good ways to assimilate the different cultures into the existing American culture (Bouvier, 1992). Carey M Noland (2000) noted how strongly Indian women identified with the home country no matter how long they lived in the USA. The way the host culture receives immigrants has a big effect in the formulation of the immigrant child identity. Even those born in the USA are subject to discrimination at school and within society at large. The Suárez-Orozco (2001) research presents what they call "social mirroring" that affects the development of the child's character and reaction to that reception, therefore it is not just parents efforts that are forming that character. Fuambai Ahmadu, whose article I referred to earlier was raised in the United States. Her reaction to western concerns about FC was to initiate herself through FC and describe those concerns as "deeply imbedded western cultural assumptions regarding women's bodies and their sexuality than with disputable health effects of genital operations on African women."

How Are You Going to Get the Baby Out?

This is the question that every child asks and is asked everyday in Sudanese homes. Three of the participants who delivered through cesarean said they were truthful when they told their children that their stomachs had to be opened for the baby to come out. Serene said she lied about her second birth and said it was through her stomach. "Whatever you tell them is not going to be the whole truth. You are not going to say I was closed and they opened me up. Older children really suffer when they find out what mothers go through to have them. My son apologized to me after he found out in a biology class how he came out. I laughed because if I told him about my circumcision I

was afraid he would never forgive himself. He thought the open vagina was too small for a baby's head.”

Mimi's daughters' first encounter with childbirth was when their cow in the Sudan gave birth. They immediately thought of her and asked whether she gave birth in the same way. “I just had to deny it, they were young and the cow's birth was not a pleasant scene, childhood ideas affect us as adults, I was afraid that would leave an indelible impression about childbirth. Add FC information to that and, oh GOD!”

Mimi was adamant that children have to stay innocent as long as possible. She refused to let her daughter, who is now fifteen, watch sex education videos at school. She refused to sign consent slips sent by the school. She started to have second thoughts though after the discussion that was triggered by her statement. Safiyya alerted Mimi to the one point that she may have not thought about; that is her daughter will mingle with her friends who got to see the tape. Instead of having a first hand encounter that is educational, her daughter may be getting a second hand account from a teen-ager like herself.

Mimi admitted that that was likely to happen but she was depending on the strict orders she gave her daughter not to discuss the subject. “Yeah right!” teased Serene. “If your daughter is a normal teen then you can rest assured that she would discuss sex with her peers.” After this discussion Mimi seemed to be comfortable with the idea of letting her daughter go to sex education next time. Serene's argument that teachers are trained and know about child psychology and that it is safer to let children get their information from teachers, was persuasive to Mimi. The mothers in the group agreed that the way

they learned as children was not the best to employ when transferring information to children growing up in another culture.

Children in the USA confront their parents about such issues. Serene was shocked when her son asked her about what his cousin told him about intercourse. “I had no choice but to correct some information and finish the lesson through his biology book. Besides I did it in English and believe me that was a lot easier than saying it in Arabic. He tried to make me feel better about the “fact” that women lost their penises before birth, how can I tell him that I even lost what was left of it?”

Dr. Safiyya conveyed a “traditional encounter” with her brothers. “My son was excited about what he learned about adolescence, my adult brothers thought he should not talk about that. It was odd to hear a child talk about his body parts so accurately. My brothers are perhaps still learning what my son already knows, that was why he sounded overly adult and saying words that were considered the monopoly of adults.” It is similar to how women are treated. Some vocabulary is just off limits for ‘good women’ and well brought up children.

The participants were almost apologetic about their children learning about their bodies. It was as if women had to have an excuse for letting their children learn about their bodies and about sex. They had to justify why children are not like their counterparts in the Sudan. Words such as, “You are raising daughters in a different culture in a different time.” Or “How do you weigh the good and the bad? Certainly not according to what your parents used to tell you.” Such words were followed by a look that surveys the room to see whether heads were nodding and there was approval. A

sense of relief came over the speakers when a consensus was reached on the importance of sex education.

Participants felt that they were the main source of information for their children. One of the main points that they reached consensus on was the unreasonable unfounded alarm they feel regarding the American culture. Those amongst the participants who lived in Europe noted how Americans look conservative compared to Europeans. Amna commented that closed societies, like the one she used to live in, were the worst, but would not go into details.

We are Different

When asked how they tell their children to stop a certain behavior or not to get involved in it in the first place, the answer was surprising. Many of the participants said they would tell the children that, “we are different; we do not do what ‘they’ do.” Or “we are Muslims and this or that is *haram*.” Our meeting was one of the rare occasions that women thought about how telling their children that they are different may affect them. Some participants thought that the “we are Muslims, therefore we are different” was not only harmful but hypocritical.

None of the participants was able to counter Safiyya’s reasoning that “it is wrong to say that. For example in case of drinking the first thing that the child would notice is that Muslims are drinking like fish.” Taking girlfriends is another instance that the “we are different” argument is not going to work. It was thought that it was difficult to explain to the children that having a premarital relationship is not desirable or forbidden while Muslim Sudanese men are breaking the rule. A gender issue emerged; the children are growing up in a society that is more egalitarian than the Sudanese society. It is difficult to

single out the girls for the “we are Muslims” argument.

Their real dilemma was that they did not want their children to be treated by the American society as different. However Amna, Haya and Muna felt that fear of God is important, while others thought that making children scared by evoking torture by Hell fire was not a good idea! Other participants thought that it was common for Americans to talk to their children about the hazards of liquor, drugs and irresponsible sexual acts. The best way, participants agreed, was to talk to the children as regards their behavior instead of their religion. When they understand the hazards of certain behavior they can look back at their religion and see that it made sound good judgment about all that.

Dr. Assia pointed out that commercials on television are a normal daily scene and they address youth behavior directly without linking that behavior to issues of morality or religion. She also pointed out the good manners they automatically pick up in this culture; simple things such as “please” and “thank you” should be counted as a positive of the American culture. The difference in what immigrants want their children to learn and what they are learning from the host culture is clearly stated by Alwia Omer, a Tanzanian mother interviewed by Bystydzienski (1994). She said, “In contrast the emphasis in bringing up children in my community is on greeting properly and not on saying “please” and “thank you.”

The fact that FC is practiced to preserve virginity and prevent premarital sex was attacked by the married women as well as the single women groups as just myth in the heads of the older generations. However, issues of virginity and protection of girls and making sure that they are not around boys were strongly advocated by the group. Mimi indicated that she always stressed the “virginity bit” with her daughter. She made it

abundantly clear to her daughter that she should resist any passes and any sexual contact. Amna is a strong advocate for keeping girls virgins. “I am not actually concerned just about virginity. I talk about morality all the time and I am resisting any behavior that may lead to sex. Sometimes I use traditional ideas such as planting my son into my daughter’s meetings with her friends.” The concentration on girls’ sexuality and not boys’ was noticeable.

Mimi said that she told her fifteen year old daughter that “we are not like the *khawajat*; we do not do what they do.” She said that her oldest daughter understands what was *haram* and what was *halal*. So far Mimi claims that her daughters are not feeling different. She is hoping that her older daughter passes on the information to the younger ones. Mimi’s feeling is confirmed by Shanaz Khan in her conversation with an immigrant Muslim woman.

The sense of Muslim female identity also includes Muslim mothering. She claims that “I have to watch my kids and their friends.” In particular she is trying to extend her vision of Muslim woman to her daughters:

Manal: I tell them that they are not allowed to have boyfriends.... They can have friends, boys and girls, as long as they are in a group... [not] alone together.

Shahnaz: What about boys?

Manal: I will tell my son when he grows up to keep the girls exactly the same way that other boys keep his sisters. ...

Manal’s story indicates that she believes in the prescriptions for Muslim woman as well as a need to enact them in Canada (Khan, 2000).

Although some of the participants were not persuaded by sending religious messages about sexuality, they did not resist it. Religion holds a special place in the thinking and behavior of these women that they do not contradict an enthusiastic religious stand unless it is of the discriminatory types that all agreed are not part of the religion. There is also the dilemma of wanting to follow the religion but lack the ability to

make changes without being condemned by conservative individuals and institutions.

Therefore there were no supporters of premarital sex.

Amna admitted that her father, who is of course also Serene's father did let them befriend men. Of course sexual relations were out of the question, but "he wanted us to get the men thing out of our heads. My mother was also a strict supervisor. We had men friends who were known to the family but we would not go out with them." Yet the different climate and the adolescents who seem to know everything these days are another story according to Amna. She stood fast for full control and supervision of children. A stand that her sister Serene see as fanatic and not fit for children growing up in a different culture. Amna assumed that Serene was for a relaxed grip on children because she was the mother of boys and did not have to worry as much as mothers of girls.

This group realizes that some of the of their children behavior is inescapable and that it should not be a *hajis* for the parents. "After all America is not the most developed country in the world because its children are irresponsible. The hippies of the sixties and the seventies are the executives of the nineties and the 21st century. American children are as oppressed as ours, don't you see how they yearn to go to college and end the authoritarian rule of the parents?" "The Americans who live with us" as serene refers to her Children, are yet to see such relaxation of attitudes translated into everyday practice.

The participants who are now calling themselves "two headed creatures" say that they need both heads even though it may make them unbalanced at times. As usual Serene does not mince words about it. She thought that she could not be a balanced person who could deliver balanced information to the children. "I am trying to get my

kids to do things that I were not able to do as a child. I try to talk to them and make things logical. It is difficult to be of one culture and raise a kid in a different culture. I lost my sense of belonging to both countries. My kids may suffer the same fate if they follow my confusion.”

The participant who sent her teenage children to the Sudan admitted that she could not bear the fact that her children were growing up in a way that she could not cope with. “I sent them back to the Sudan. The poor kids are suffering a culture shock now, but I just could not bring them up to be Sudanese.” Parents are not actually thinking of the children but their own feelings and concerns. Suad said that she did not want her daughter to be telling her at age eighteen that she was moving out of the house. “We do not know what would happen but we need them for our old age.” There is a continuation of the Sudanese tradition that children are obliged to take care of parents and provide for them. Older parents residing with their adult children in the USA is known among immigrants to the USA (Glick and Van Hook, 2002). The continuation of such co-residence will depend greatly on how much of the home culture the children of these immigrants retain.

Parents’ deliberate reproduction of their home culture is colliding with their own changing attitudes and status and with their children’s new unfamiliar attitudes. From what Serene and her group were saying they are trying to strike a balance between the fact that they have really changed and their husband’s acknowledgement of that change, but denial of gender parity. Serene was adamant that men do know and understand everything, “they are just selfish and would like to try everything to stay on top and get what they want.”

Women Educating Women

For Serene and the rest of the participants in this group learning about their condition as circumcised women started to unfold after marriage and specifically at childbirth. For those who had the experience of giving birth in both the Sudan and the United States FC moved from being “normal” in the Sudan to being a “problem” in the USA. The participants expressed their feelings in many ways but what they repeated was that FC became a *hajis* (source of constant anxiety) for them.⁵⁷

In the Sudan a woman is surrounded by other women whether at FC time or childbirth. She is dependant on others to explain her condition and what to expect from it. Women learn by experience. Lacking older women as a source of information, immigrant women are consulting each other on what they should do. Childbirth is one occasion for one woman to ask another to be with her. Husbands do go into delivery rooms “but they do not have a clue” said Serene, “as to how a doctor or a midwife should deal with FC.”

Serene and her group conveyed stories of how they had to scream and force doctors or midwives to cut open the infibulation. The women said that doctors actually listen to them and cut, but they said doctors cut them the wrong way. Serene has been in the delivery room with many of her friends and acquaintances. “One time the doctor was just standing there not knowing what to do. I had to scream ‘cut her cut her’ and he did.” Later on women will suggest ways to inform the medical profession.

⁵⁷ Dr. Nawal Nour, an OBGYN at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston reported that many Somali immigrants who lived with their infibulation since childhood accept de-infibulation procedure offered by the clinic she ran at hospital, but Sudanese, men and women are reluctant to accept such procedure.

Learning the Hard Way

Being in such critical and sometimes life threatening situations brought FC into a whole new light. The participants said they did hear mothers use the expression “*alwilada mote*” meaning childbirth is death. Yet the phrase did not ring or give the feeling of fatality until their fear doubled in delivery rooms staffed by puzzled American medical professionals. Learning the hard way may be the best way to learn. It is not easy to forget a lesson such as approaching death and knowing that one should be able to survive but also knowing that one may not. Surroundings at childbirth have become unfamiliar women find themselves in the hands of a medical profession that is as scared as they are.

Serene thought that such experiences taught women that FC is “a crime, an unforgivable crime. Before our experience in the USA, we saw FC as something of value. As children we wanted the happy occasion. The psychological effect in childhood is a positive one not a negative one. FC was a great psychological balance, we become included and feel like adults. Even when we grow up and suffer other complications with menstruation and other problems, FC does not become the *hajis* that it is now.” Experiences with childbirth are passed orally from one woman to another.

What Women Do to Feel “Normal”: The Education of Suad

Despite her firm stand against FC and her use of words such as “I think it is a crime.” Or “it is the most inhuman act,” Serene drew the funniest pictures of herself and her circumcision and made herself the joke of the group during group meetings. Her circumcision was the normal state for her. After giving birth to her second child the doctor would not stitch her back. “I almost had a heart condition. The thing looked awful. I kept going back to the doctor asking that my vagina be put back the way it was. I was

totally depressed I was not used at this thing gaping at me.” The doctor refused to stitch her back and she kept away from her husband for about four months and then the doctor had to make a deal with her. He told her that if her husband did not like it he would do whatever she wanted him to do. “Guess what? Not only did my husband like it but I did too. Whatever they leave underneath the stitching is useful. Next time you give birth make sure that the doctor leaves it gaping”

I could not help but notice that tightness of the vagina continues to be a topic that is still discussed among women and tips are readily suggested. In the group some of the younger women learned for the first time that the desired tightness can be achieved by using alum or the Sudanese herb *garadh*. The smoke bath, known as *dukhan*, in which certain types of scent woods are used, namely *talih* and *shaf*, is also suggested for causing tightness and for relaxation after a busy day. “Mothers and aunts never tell you this at the beginning, it is just the beautification effects that are pushed on you, but then you discover that men prefer to have women do *dukhan*.”

Stories about *dukhan* in the USA are a source of funny and disastrous stories. I was a witness to one incident in a building where many Sudanese families lived. Sirens were sounding and the fire brigades and the police were responding to a call that there was a fire in the building. It turned out that three Sudanese women were holding a *dukhan* session using a clay pot they bought specifically for that purpose. One of them was a new arrival and they were treating her to a session of beautification and *wanasa*. The smoke went through the exhaust fan into other apartments the residents of which called the fire station of the city. Not being able to communicate well in English, in addition to the sudden “attack” by the police and firemen, sent the women into frenzy.

They had to call other Sudanese in the building to do the explanation. In retrospect they remembered how the police thought the dark henna on the hands and feet of the newcomer was burning and pressed hard to know why she was being burned.

Although *dukhan* is loved by both women and men it had to be given up. Few women who live in separate houses may be able to continue it. Actually carrying the logs of *talih* and *shaf* from the Sudan make for another set of stories of how husbands protest carrying it in their luggage and how women conspire to smuggle it in that luggage. “Well after September 11 you better be careful what you are carrying, the end of *dukhan* is nearing.” Said one of the participants. Seeking to make themselves tight is an indication that while FC may be given up women will seek other processes to keep men interested in them. Women’s sexuality is still governed by traditional expectations. And women in this group

Women wanted to educate each other in the joint meeting. Younger participants described as “naïve” by older ones, became extremely interested in this session of how to please and get the attention of that beat up tired man who just got back from twelve hours of hard work. These are some of the lessons that I also learned for the first time, despite being married before. Traditionally women do not flirt with men therefore they developed their own ways of conveying their desire to be with them. Shaking the *khumra* bottle indicates a woman’s desire in sex. “Men do not like this, because they want to practice only when they want to. They are so selfish and hide behind the tradition that it is not acceptable for women to initiate the relationship.” Nadia Wasif and Abdulla Mansur reported in their findings about men’s perceptions of women’s sexuality. Men thought that women value men only for their sexual power. The study concluded that

men have a fear of women's sexuality and think that they are never satisfied. (Wasif and Mansur, 1999).

This talk lead to two questions: one was about sexual satisfaction, another was about changes in sexual relations caused by immigration. For answers to the first question we all turned to Hind, a woman whom we invited not knowing that she was not circumcised. There is a presumption that all women over 30 are circumcised. This participant turned out to belong to a family that made no secret of stopping FC. The stereotypes about uncircumcised women quickly surfaced and Serene showed some of the gestures used to indicate an uncircumcised woman. I asked whether the jokes or gestures were bothering her. "Not in this group where I know that everyone is trying to stop FC. But I have two neighbors living in the same building with me. They confronted me and called me *ghalfa* in the most contemptuous way." The jokes of this group were serious matters back home; an uncircumcised woman is of diminished capacity in many societies (Dorkinoo, 1994; Mackie, 2000; Shell-Duncan, 2001; Abdel Halim, 1995).

Hind explained that "the clitoris sensation is concentrated; it is a very high sensation. This part responds faster than the vagina, but the belief that one would respond every time one is touched on that part is not true." One of the younger participants, Suad, interjected with a story that caused the group to embark on what was called "the education of Suad." She said women feel guilty about rape because they enjoy the sexual sensation of the clitoris, meaning that it does not matter how and when or under what circumstances, uncircumcised women would enjoy the sexual sensation. Hind strongly disagreed. "I think the feeling is in the brain. Even uncircumcised women resist and do not feel good when they are not in the mood. You know, we do get headaches."

Two members of the group were medical doctors and it was their turn to step in and participate in educating Suad. “Hind is right!” said Safiyya, “not responding sexually has a lot to do with the relationship between two people, besides there are places of a woman’s body that can be engaged and result in orgasm. I think it is in the brain. It doesn’t mean that whenever you are touched on the clitoris you feel good.” The only thing is that it gives a more intensive feeling. If you are not in the mood no part of your body will respond.”

In a workshop held in Arlington, Virginia, in April, 2002, Dr. Nawal Nour and Dr. Raquia Abdalla explained to the participants that if testosterone drive the male then women have what is called desire and this desire cannot be taken out. Circumcised women wanted more information about their own bodies. Many of them said that they do enjoy their sex life and that FC did not prevent that.

When the medical doctors in the group talked about how they themselves were not introduced to the woman’s sexual organs and how they had to study that from books on their own, all of us felt better, and not as ignorant as we thought we were. Dr. Ahmed Abdelmageed and Amna Badri studied the attitudes of male medical professionals in the Sudan and were surprised at the fact that those professionals did not know enough about FC.

Only about 50% of the respondents were aware of the fact that Female Circumcision has clinical and other complications as well. The rest (38% and 12%) were either unaware or at the best were silent. This result may again reflect short-comings and failure in university medical education as well as in-job training in connection with the negative impact of FC on women (Abdelmageed & Badri, June, 1999).

What women learn about circumcision does not go beyond how to stay virgins before marriage and how to please husbands after that. Women do talk about their bodies

but only in relation to the circumcised body. Traditionally the uncircumcised body is an unclean entity that should be avoided. Abdelmageed and Badri were alarmed that due to lack of specific knowledge about FC among health professionals about 15% of them preferred to have circumcised daughters (Abdelmageed & Badri, June, 1999).

Many of the participants said they actually insisted, when they were children, on having FC performed on them because they were told good things about it. The shame of not being circumcised goes beyond one's own body. Dr. safiyya conveyed that, "When I got married everyone was talking about my sisters-in-law who were not circumcised. The sheer fact that I was marrying into that family was a source of talk in my family. I think they were sending me a message that should I have a daughter I should think of circumcising her."

Effective Means of Dissemination of Information

Group discussions were a great learning experience for me and for the participants. Despite the harsh winter days the meetings with Serene and her group were vivid and long without being tiring. Each one of us seemed to know one thing but not the other. Assumptions and myths were not in short supply. Exchanging medical and cultural information was an effective way of passing knowledge about FC.

When asked about the most effective way of getting information on reproductive health and FC, participants agreed that word of mouth is the best. Sudanese women are still meeting separate from the men during weddings, mourning gatherings, child naming and other social events; even at picnics women tend to group together away from the men. These events are time for long *wanasa*. News and information are exchanged and usually not forgotten. The participants suggested that wedding gatherings should be an

occasion to engage young brides in a conversation about FC. They see this as most valuable, especially for new brides who come from Sudan. Molly Melching reported that oral discussions among Senegalese women lead to their awareness about FC and its subsequently being abandoned (Population council, 1999).

In the Sudan a newlywed woman stays with family members who educate her on being a wife and on the best ways of achieving a successful marital relationship. The trend these days is that brides travel on honeymoons or to join husbands abroad on the same wedding day. They are usually dependent on what their friends tell them about marital relations. With all the culture shocks around newlyweds who come to the USA, the group agreed that a newlywed does not need a difficult shocking marital beginning.

Many participants conveyed that this group has been a good medium of awareness for them. Despite being married and having children, there were still facts that they did not link to FC. Most important for them was the discovery that they should not feel embarrassed anymore. “Now I know that I am not the only one who is scared to death to go to a doctor.” One participant said amid the laughter and agreement of other participants. Such feeling, they thought, should immediately be conveyed to a newlywed. It is comforting to her to know that she is not the only one. Our gatherings can be a great social service. Information such as Serene’s statement that women hospitals are the best seemed to be needed by many women. Jill Bystdyzienski and Rosnik (1994) found that women moving to different cultures find a lot of support in each other; Sudanese women are no exception.

Women doctors in the group pointed out that many young ladies go to Arab or Middle Eastern doctors. These doctors may be asked to disseminate information on one

to one basis. Another medium is pamphlets that can be left in the doctor's office. If written in Arabic they will definitely catch the attention of the women. All participants expressed how excited they get when they see a sign written in Arabic or any piece of paper in Arabic among English publications. The single women group thought this is the best medium as it protects privacy. They can just take the brochure or pamphlet without having to talk to anyone.

Whether women will accept their doctors' opinion on FC cannot be ascertained, yet one of the participants declared, "What do opinions have to do with it, the doctor should convey the medical fact and make it clear that he does not have an opinion either way. Once he detaches himself from the culture and religion his medical advice will be taken seriously. An example of that is family planning; even in the Sudan doctors tell voice only their medical opinion."

Many participants said that they do reach for pamphlets in doctors' offices if the title concerns them. For example they reached for and read pamphlets on migraines, breast cancer and cervical and ovarian cancers. They learned about mammograms and places to get them from such pamphlets. The benefits of those mammograms were explained either by the nurse or the doctor. Pamphlets enabled them to ask questions and they wished that they were in Arabic. This suggestion is supported by the Senegalese NGO, Tostan's use of,

Cultural roots combined with the use of national languages, a deep valuing of African culture is the foundation of Tostan's educational program, exemplifying the practical and profound relationship between culture and education (Population Council, 1999).

They hoped for other possibilities that did not seem to be an option, such as hiring women doctors at American doctors' offices by way of being consultants. They

exchanged the story of their fellow participant who was able to diagnose a skin soar on a Sudanese man's hand just by looking at it.⁵⁸ They are convinced that communication in the same language and with a person who is experienced in the subject is one of the best mediums for getting treatment and information.

Other suggestions made were that the pamphlets should be left out in the reception, at all doctors' offices not just gynecologists offices. Women visit doctors for other physical conditions and will bring back these pamphlets especially if they are in Arabic. Having the doctor handing it may be more effective but it also gives the feeling that he/she is meddling where he/she is not invited to. Also doctors may hand it to some women and not others, or may not know who to hand it to. In these suggestions women combined issues of language, gender and culture and chose the best means.

A translation of the law was suggested and my services were immediately volunteered on my behalf. I was told to volunteer a translation to be distributed by "the authorities." Some of the participants' suggestions were made by the Sustainable Development Department of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, as far back as 1996.

Socialisation mechanisms and the influence of family and peers in the decision-making process and ultimate behaviour the emotional make-up of the individual such as one's sense of autonomy, well-being and self-esteem cognitive factors such as beliefs and perceptions about the benefits of a particular practice or its disregard availability, access and affordability of health care and other self-help

⁵⁸ A Sudanese man spent his vacation in the Sudan. After a short period of time a soar developed on his hand. Tests applied by the American doctor did not reveal anything. They started to think of some type of skin cancer, that sent the man into a state of depression. One day he met this woman doctor and showed her his hand. She immediately recognized it as *Leishmaniasis*, lesions caused by the Sandfly. Her observation was confirmed by the attending physicians who did not think of it because it is rare in the USA.

and support group type services that can help to motivate or sustain behaviour change (Leila Dabbagh, 1996).

When I suggested the mailing of pamphlets a collective “NO!” echoed in the room. “There is too much junk mail and women may not be interested in sorting it out. Further, we cannot ask DHHS for example to mail to everyone. Besides we do not want the information in children’s hands.”

Why should women be interested in this information? Dr. Assia provided an answer out of her personal experience, on how she continued to educate herself on a certain medical problem she had. “I have migraine, as a doctor I know almost everything about it but I pick up every piece of literature I see about it, anywhere I see it, even in the supermarket. Why? Because I am concerned about it to the extent that many people now send me information about it without my asking for it. Any additional information we gain about FC increases our concern and interest and will eventually lead to serious thinking about FC and its consequences.”

Life in the USA provides other mediums for women Dr. Safiyya thought that women do go into the internet often. Even in the Sudan women now receive e-mail and surf the internet. If a web site is designed in Arabic by members of the community women would use it not just here but also in the Sudan.⁵⁹ Dr. Safiyya said many young ladies ask about things that they do not understand, e.g. what is orgasm? Young ladies would like to find out about many things but are embarrassed to ask. If the information is on the internet they will access it. There are hundreds of web sites on FC but little interest in them. Women said they are either highly technical or opinionated and condescending.

Another suggestion that got a resounding “NO!” was passing flyers at community

⁵⁹ See discussion of Paltalk rooms in the next section.

gatherings especially public and wedding parties. All participants agreed that no one would pay attention “even the hot political stuff gets thrown away at the end of the party.” Laughed Nabila.

The participants were most enthusiastic about the suggestion of programs about FC in the Arabic radio and TV. They may be really effective since most of the Sudanese listen to this media. Yet this may be hindered mainly by the fact that Arabic media is not concerned much with African issues. The only hope may be if Egyptians would like to have such programs. All participants agreed that the sporadic dealing with FC in the American media was not serious enough to be educative. A radio program that may have people call in to voice their opinions or concerns may be more welcomed than one that voices arranged and edited opinions. Besides it is a suitable forum to face supporters of FC who have become loud and shameless lately.

Nabila made a suggestion to form a women’s society. Sudanese women have been trying to do that for sometime now. The major obstacle to its formation has been the political affiliations of the Sudanese women and men. The Sudanese community in the city and neighboring areas is made up mainly of refugees and asylees, and they are the groups that are more involved in the American system and claim to be the ones more inclined to settle permanently in the United States. There is resentment for Sudanese government supporters and a suspicion of the “lottery” immigrants, who may not voice any political affiliation. Sudanese government opponents are adamantly against extending any services to the supporters of that government and are certainly against them taking the reign of organizing the Sudanese community. A women’s association is under formation now.

Another suggestion that may work for the women is a listserv in which they can correspond in Arabic.⁶⁰ The list can host a doctor to answer some of the questions. It is better than a radio program because of the privacy and anonymity it provides. Besides women said that they do not have to talk they just write their questions down. Many of the participants were not comfortable with naming body parts and using words that have to do with sexual behavior even in this limited group, they resorted to English to do that. Saying a word in English does not have the same effect of saying it in the familiar language that may prohibit the use of that word in public. Doctors may also be able to record an audio tape that can be played over the internet. Women can access these sites when they are in groups.

The group ended up again by strongly suggesting that *wanasa* was the strongest medium. *Wanasa* will not just convey the information it is a medium to test the social waters, so to speak. “We like to talk and listen to someone who experienced something rather than read books and brochures. Besides in a *wanasa* people would sense each other’s attitudes.” A book or a brochure may convince the reader but if one is not sure that others will stop the practice one may not take steps towards implementing her changed attitude, (Mackie, 2000).

All participants realized that in the Sudan they were convinced of the futility of FC, but it was so normal that taking steps to stop it was not a priority for them. There was a social pressure to continue the practice and very little, if any, support for its discontinuation. Although the physical suffering is the same, the helplessness and

⁶⁰ Such correspondence is possible through the newly produced e-mail programs the work in arabic on Latin languages oriented computers, such as al-Nafitha and Maktoub.

isolation the women feel in the USA is a strong incentive to take FC and its consequences seriously. If there was mental suffering for not undergoing it back home the same mental suffering occurs here for having undergone it.

Who should be the main target of educational campaigns?

Suad a graduate of Ahfad University for Women noted that, in the Sudan the many projects against FC targeted young women who are already convinced, she thought programs ought to target older people. But the number of older people in the USA is very small and they lost much of their power in the family. Just knowing that there is a law against it here is enough to dissuade the older generation who are visiting the usa. Dr. Safiyya added that older people do not have the courage to stop it despite the fact that they were convinced. "My own mother admitted that her convictions that FC was harmful were nothing compared to the pressure of the rest of the family and the society." There was a consensus that a campaign ought to target those who are making family decisions in the host country.

Topics to be addressed

The main issue to be addressed is the terror of families that their daughters will get into the sexual freedom scene in the USA, a scene that this first generation of immigrants admits is not comfortable with. Although almost all girls are uncircumcised there is need to talk about sexuality to daughters and no one is comfortable doing that.

Topics of any campaign should be wide enough to address sexuality rather than just FC.

The idea of staged FC to convince grandmothers can be propagated. Those who practiced it felt that a big hurdle is removed by avoiding the social sense of aib that is invoked by the older generation.

Participation of men is strongly advocated within this group of participants as well as other groups. There was a consensus that men do not want women to respond to sex. They want passive partners they should be educated on what makes a silent partner. There is a belief among men that FC protects virginity. The fact that an infibulated woman can get away with premarital sex cannot be stressed enough.

The men also have a responsibility to declare that they do not want circumcised women. Since it is marriagability that parents are concerned about, men's declarations would be instrumental in any campaign of eradication.

Doctors and other health professionals are an important group to be targeted with educational programs. They do not respond to invitations to educational workshops. The last workshop held in Washington DC in April, 2002, attracted none of the American licensed professionals. Usually this group prefers printed materials sent to their offices. However the style of telling them some facts ought to change. Perhaps the brochures should pose questions to the doctors rather than list information. The recent tendency to teach FC at schools of medicine may solve this problem. Frances Keys, mph, reported in the Journal of American Medical Women's Association that,

While the laws are currently devoid of reporting requirements for health providers, there is a government mandate to produce medical curricula on the treatment of complications from FC/FGM (Keys, 1997).

Summary

Sudanese women value education and show a high level of awareness of the need for special programs that target the different members of the family. Certain themes emerged during this discussion. Cultural attitudes still have great effect on women's behavior. They want information but they want it in a culturally sensitive

manner. They also want children restricted from receiving any information unsupervised. They still value certain information passed to them without any discussion, e.g. tightness of the vagina is a must if the husband is to be kept interested. Despite their open discussion with each other they still feel that FC and sexuality in general is taboo and should be kept at minimum publicity.

Their busy schedules that consist of full time jobs and full time household duties do not allow much time for other activities. They innovate on how to prepare and disseminate information about issues that concern them. They provided suggestions that can be carried out with minimum funding form within the Sudanese Community Association. However they have little access to sources of funding for professionals to carry out their suggestions.

They are hoping that the Community Association may have a full time employee to implant some of the ideas they provided.

PART FOUR

BREAKING BARRIERS: SINGLE AND IMMIGRANT

An elderly woman whom I met in Khartoum expressed nostalgia for the good old days, when women were not allowed such mobility. She remarked: "Sudanese women are becoming increasingly free, they crossed these distances to go to distant countries all by themselves, I swear to Allah all of them are *mataliq*." The term *mataliq*, meaning free or unrestrained, has pejorative connotations as Sudanese people employ it to refer to uncontrolled or reckless behavior (Abusharaf, 2002).

Introduction

This part brings in the views and experience of a single immigrant woman, Nafisa. The first group of older women hardly interacted with the host culture and found comfort in keeping the home culture. They also think of their stay as temporary. The second group of middle age married women lives between the home and the host culture and call themselves two-headed creatures. They live the host culture and long to keep the home culture in the Sudanese community in the city. Their children are Americans and their husbands freely interact with the host culture because men are not as bound and burdened by the culture as women are.

As with the previous two women I held meetings and had *wanasa* sessions with a group of her peers and in depth interviews with her. They are a group of single educated women who broke the barriers and venture to this far away land by themselves. The one thing shared by this group with the other two groups is the fact that they are circumcised. I called them "the militants" but they declined the label for they did not see themselves as militant enough. They have many barriers left to break. The older Sudanese woman's

attitude above, conveyed by Abusharaf, is one of the hurdles they have to overcome.

Such attitude is a cause of much of the frustration of the group of women presented in this chapter.

When I presented the idea of my research to Nafisa, the young lady I later chose for an in-depth interview, her enthusiasm was great. The exceptionally cold winter did not deter her from doing everything possible to form this group of her peers. She invited me to stay at her apartment, and I did when I was interviewing her and held all the group meetings at her apartment.

This group comprised women who are all single and between ages 24-32. All, but one, are college graduates. As in the case of African men who immigrated (Dodoo, 1999), this group of participants had a high level of education. For some participants in this group being alone may be taken to mean ability to live alone, but not necessarily living alone. Unlike the other two groups where the women mainly came with husbands or sons or daughters, the participants in this group came for different reasons and under different circumstances and most importantly left the country unaccompanied. I wanted to know how they came and how they entered the host culture.

Nafisa came on a student visa and decided that it was dangerous for her to return to Sudan. Niemat her sister was resettled in the USA by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) program. Nafisa shares her apartment with her sister and an aunt who was awaiting the arrival of the rest of her family. She and her sister are single and their aunt is widowed. Nafisa's arrival in the USA was helped by another aunt who has been in the USA for the past twelve years. Nafisa exhibited the qualities of a tough leader and was helping both her sister and her aunt.

Two of the participants came in different circumstances but had their parents' blessings. One of them, Rana won the lottery and her parents actually allowed her some freedom even back home, she is here with her parents' blessing. Her father helped her settle by sending money during the first months of her stay. She was successful in finding a job with a construction company as a supervisor in construction sites. She graduated from the University of Khartoum as a civil engineer. When we invited her we assumed that she was circumcised, she surprised all by declaring that she was not. Thuraya came with her parents who decided to leave the country and join her brother in the USA. The whole family has been living in one apartment since last year.

Samia lives with her brother, whom she described as a stifling conservative, and his family. Her brother is married to a German woman who accepted *hijab* and all other restrictions imposed by her husband. After her mother's death the brother brought Samia to live with him. She applied for a visa at the American embassy nine years ago and easily got one. Both Saleema and Bidour came as visitors and decided that the political situation made it difficult for them to return and decided to stay. There are others who did not want to talk about the circumstances of their being in the USA, except for the fact that they fled the country.

One common factor between these participants is that their getting permission to leave the country and their first months of survival in the USA, depended to some extent on social and familial connections. Some of them joined family members already in the USA, but they ended up living separately from those family members. Others were later joined by mothers, sisters and/or brothers. Another common factor is that all of them were sure that the host country was the place they could achieve some of their dreams.

I did not have to go into long greetings or long explanations of what this research entails. It was easy for all just to read the written statement prepared according to the university's requirements. They were eager to talk about their status in the USA; it was a chance to vindicate themselves and to see if they shared the same frustrations, as they shared the willingness and the strong desire to leave the Sudan. Unlike the previous group that ended up being "two headed creatures", this group admitted that they were not nostalgic to the home culture, but they could not break loose from it. They long for change, more freedom and a future without control. They still see themselves without the freedom needed to achieve their dreams of higher education and travel and making decisions about whether they wanted to get married or not.

Nafisa as well as the rest of the group were frustrated with the contradictions in the "little Sudan" being created in the USA. According to them this little Sudan was tense and heavily populated with the "two-headed creatures" who do not want to reconcile themselves with the realities of the host culture. The participants in this group do not consider themselves two-headed creatures despite their keeping most of the Sudanese traditions. Nafisa said, "We have no qualms about the freedom the American society gives us, but we are not going to stage a revolt against the Sudanese culture; we are already under scrutiny and our longing to change is seen as an abuse of the freedom we find here. The older generations are not only fettering themselves but they are making sure that no one else escapes the old traditions." Why would this group of "militants" want to keep the traditions despite this unabashed longing for freedom? Bidour answered "We have to keep our families' honor! I would rather hurt myself than my parents."

Honor is the most important part of life in the Sudanese society. A tarnished

reputation is the last thing a family wants. According to two of the participants their families are already suffering from extensive questioning by the extended family for letting unmarried daughters live not just outside the family but outside the country. Men are the guardians of the family honor. Recent studies (Abdelmageed, 2001) revealed that men think that FC is a way to protect that honor. Women are put in charge of performing FC and young women are expected to act in an honorable way and part of that is accepting FC.

The “honorable daughters” are shackled by the scrutinizing society. FC is proof of that honor. At least the parents have allowed out women who went through the physical and ritual honor keeping tradition. The sense of *aib* mentioned earlier is stronger where unmarried women are concerned. Families closely watch unmarried women and demand that they be controlled by traditional and religious rules especially visible signs such as dress and refraining from attending certain social gatherings and places. Sexuality is an important part of that honor.

Sexuality and Change

Samia, the most frustrated one with Sudanese contradictions, volunteered an example to explain her eyebrow raising statement that, “Public sensual scenes are not unknown in the Sudan.” She gave the example of the sensual suggestive bride’s dance that is accepted by the Sudanese Muslim society. “At the beginning of the last century brides were paraded half naked, wearing only a *Rahat* [a skirt-like garment made of leather straps]. It was for the purpose of showing people the body of a virgin, to prove her virginity to others. In our modern day the same dance still exists except that the bride wears an expensive dress. The dance is done nowadays in a short and a sleeveless dress.

The songs that accompany it are often erotic, yet talk about sex remains taboo.”

The first and foremost quality that the Sudanese society carefully guards is women’s sexual behavior, especially that of unmarried ones. There is no sexual freedom in the society, religiously and traditionally virginity and a reputation for not being interested in men is a woman’s only way of being respected. Friendship with men or being with them in a situation that causes the least suspicion of having a sexual affair is a reason for “talk” about the woman and her family.

According to Nasr Hamid Abuzied (1999) the religious discourse adopted by Muslim interpreters is responsible for limiting the potential of women and restricting their value to some biological roles. It is a discourse that emphasizes femininity and the sensuality of the woman’s body and actions. Sexuality is closely tied to honor and reputation in the Sudan. FC is one way to secure that honor and to relegate sexual needs to a minor place in women’s lives.

When unmarried women venture outside homes, their dress and the places they frequent are under the magnifying glass of the community. Therefore when they venture outside the country alone, they are presumed to be loose or promiscuous women. Although this societal presumption has been subject to rebuttal, and there is now a general acceptance of single woman leaving the country, some conditions are attached to their leaving unaccompanied. Some of the conditions cited by this group were regular contact with home, relations with married Sudanese women and residing, whenever possible, near members of the Sudanese community.

Certified Honor

Saleema said she was unfortunate with her FC. She used to have a cyst that would

appear every month and she had to visit several doctors in the Sudan, all of whom suggested deinfibulation, but she refused. One doctor offered to issue her a certificate of honor, *shihadat sharaf*. The certificate of honor would testify that she was deinfibulated for health reasons. That was an attempt to absolve her of accusations of engagement in pre-marital sex. In effect it is a certificate of virginity. “I refused,” said Saleema, “I would rather nurse that cyst or die during childbirth as that doctor promised me, than be subjected to a situation where I have to produce proof of my virginity.” Since coming to the USA, Saleema did not suffer that cyst but it is still a *hajis*. “People would think that I did what I wanted to do and obtained a certificate of innocence. I live a dilemma; I already broke up with a man who did not want me because I am circumcised and am afraid that another would not take me if the circumcision was undone.” Saleema and the rest of the group did not want to think of their health, rather, what took priority was a fear of tampering with honor.

The uncircumcised participants attributed fear of going to doctors and listening to them to the cultural environment. Thuraya said circumcision did not matter, as an unmarried woman she did not want to go to a gynecologist. “I had an infection it was a very bad experience. I am not circumcised; I went to a woman Muslim doctor. The first step was making a decision to see a doctor, and then came the next step of the check up. I had to convince myself that this is what I came for; I had to have the check up. I got on voice messaging on the internet and talked to all the relative doctors in the Sudan asking for a solution other than to be subjected to a check up. There was none. I surrendered and convinced myself that I was helping myself.” while the group agreed with her they insisted that this fear of dealing with sexual organs is coupled in their case with an

immense anxiety over virginity and not knowing what doctors might do that would render their honor suspect.

The priority of families and the society at large is how to guard women's sexuality, if FC is the first step then dress is the second one in implementing the close guardianship over women's sexuality. This group of women kept a modest dress in the USA, for they believe in modest dress. Yet FC was a meaningless practice that protected nothing in their view.

The Dress Code

All the young women who gathered that day were well dressed. While all older women donned the Sudanese *tobe*, and the married or divorced ones mainly dressed in elegant pant or skirt suits, this group varied in how they mixed and matched the fashions and the cultures. Two of them were dressed in jeans, long sleeved blouses and tight scarves around their heads and necks. The tight scarves are known as *hijab*. This type of dress is known as “*hijab* London” in the Sudan, especially if the blouse and the scarf are of the latest fashion.⁶¹ Another one wore *hijab* but never pants. Others were all American girls with T-shirts or short sleeved blouses and jeans. Even those wearing *hijab* felt that they had some freedom in choosing their clothing and wearing what they wanted to wear without consulting parents.

Niemat who had the most recent contact with the Sudan told us that, “In the Sudan people look at you and what you wear, but under this government it is unbelievable. People look at you to decide whether you are dressed according to the

⁶¹ New fashions and behaviors get to be tagged as “London” things. Even circumcision that moved towards a mild type is being called “*khut* London” or London line.

code, especially if you are going into a public building. Would you believe that the man at the door can actually deny you access to the building if he did not like the way you are dressed?” When I pointed out the fact that Americans like to dress up too and they comment on the dress of others and whether it was “trendy” or not, there was a quick reaction from almost all of them, but articulated by Nafisa, “here it is benign, it does not hurt your reputation and it does not get you flogged. In the Sudan you may be convinced that you are well dressed but the decision is not yours it is for someone else to say whether the dress is proper or not.”

It is not just Muslims who demand or expect Muslim women to dress and behave in a certain way. Other cultures around Muslims also expect them to exhibit certain behavior or they get discredited. Shahnaz Khan (2000) gives an example of how miserable a Muslim Somali woman became when she decided to ignore certain religious edicts after she immigrated. Zahra a Somali woman who could not stick to her faith prescriptions was told that she was not a Muslim. She lost credibility and was at the verge of committing suicide.

Orientalist and Islamist determinations of the Muslim woman come with prescribed forms of behavior. Because Zahra, unlike many of the other residents, did not wear the *hejab*, did not adhere to prescriptions such as fasting, prayers, and dietary requirements, and was sexually active outside of marriage, she was placed in the position of not being “Muslim enough.” (Khan, 2000).

Zahara acknowledges her diminished *iman* (belief) and the contradiction leaves her “at times feeling immobilized.” She was expected to fit the description that host culture had learned about Muslim women. In the Sudan that description is enforced by law.

Niemat continued to explain that a reputation may be blemished if a woman was

punished for any behavior labeled un-Islamic. A recent news report alarmed the Sudanese community. The students of Ahfad University for Women were arrested by the street guardians appointed by the government, known as *jama'at al-amr bilma'arouf wa alnahi an almunkar*, meaning those who call for doing good and interdict abominable acts. The students were taken to Public Order court and flogged for improper dress.

A street guardian would board any bus leaving the university and order the driver to drive to the Public Order court.⁶² Students who were dressed in pants or short sleeved blouses were flogged and fined. Samia noted that a woman's body moved from one guardian to another. A woman's body moved from the hands of parents to the guardianship of husbands; and now the government's guardianship prevails over the family's. "Such guardianship makes it impossible for us to make decisions about our own bodies and their integrity."

Nafisa and her group were convinced that the dress code served the same function that FC served in guarding women's sexuality. Women's sexuality is dealt with in relation to men who are the center of social life. Within the Islamist interpretations women are seen as lustful creatures whose sexuality is obstructive to the performance of their (men's) duties. While men's pursuit of women is widely accepted as a natural instinct, women's sexual responses are seen as temptations to be avoided. Women are to bear the responsibility for protecting men from women's erotic bodies.

Women are also responsible for keeping those bodies according to men's instructions. The veil that covers a woman's body from head to toe is but a curtain of protection between the woman and the man. Women may try to find a

⁶² Public Order Courts have been operating since 1989 in the Sudan they are given jurisdiction over petty crimes and transgression of public order such as improper dress or parties that go beyond 11:00 p.m. the punishment is usually flogging and a fine

benefit in *hijab*, such as arguing that it is giving them their own domain, and thus guaranteeing them a freedom of movement. The very argument shows how women became convinced that they can only be free if they are isolated. *Hijab* then becomes a factor in further eroticising women's bodies. The veiled erotic body becomes central to men's lives and the benefits of that body are negotiated according to men's terms. Men's dilemma lies in wanting to avoid something that is central to their lives. As a result the responsibility for solving that dilemma is delegated to the women; they have to cover the tempting bodies; they have to undergo FC so as to protect virginity (Abdelhalim, 1999).

During the past two decades dress was used to make political statements. Tight scarves and long dresses identified the Islamist women and were almost exclusively worn only by them. The current government decided that all women are to dress according to the Islamist standards.

The sheer fact that women in this group could wear what they wanted and walked in jeans and tennis shoes was thought by them to be a great advantage. They said as long as they dressed modestly they could ignore those voices in the immigrant community that did not approve of changes made to their dress. The decision to wear jeans for example is helped by the fact that the traditional dress in the Sudan ceased to be mandatory for young women. The *tobe*, a five yards long piece of sheer cotton material or chiffon is rarely worn by young women in the Sudan. Among immigrants it is rarely worn even by middle age women.⁶³ It has been replaced by long skirts and long sleeved blouses or dresses or the type of dress that the young women donned. The *tobe* is expensive to buy, and very inconvenient for work. With men not wanting the financial burden of covering up women, and women deciding that the *tobe* restricted their movement, it was easy to divest sexuality from dress. A question then arises: If the young women feel that

⁶³ At a political gathering in Washington DC, that took place while I was collecting data, only a handful of women wore the traditional *tobe*. They said they wore it only for that occasion and usually would not wear it.

immigration has so far given them some freedom, why can't they break all the barriers to achieve their dreams?

Remote Control

Achieving dreams is not without frustration for this group. They are under pressure from the Sudanese community to conform to Sudanese traditions. The participants felt this pressure when they realized that Sudanese men, who wanted to marry Sudanese women in the USA, usually approach them in the old fashioned way at first; exactly as they would in the Sudan, they start by asking about the girl's reputation and about her family.

However the main pressure came from parents back home who would like to ensure that their daughters did not breach any of the valuable social mores, namely virginity and good reputation which go hand in hand for Sudanese women. To ensure that, Nafisa said parents practice what she called "remote control." They demand that the daughters remain in contact with them all the time. "My parents wanted to arrange my goings and comings as if I were in the Sudan. They have no idea about life here. Getting them to believe that the workday actually ends at 5:00 p.m. and not at 2:30 was quite a task."

Nafisa's sister, a soft spoken young woman, said when the UNHCR finally got her a ticket to the USA, all her parents wanted from her was to talk sense into her sister's head and not let her leave the place where two of their aunts live. She promised them to do that for she had no idea that life was totally different than Sudan or Egypt for that matter. Now she had to work with her sister to convince their parents to allow them to move to another state.

Samia gave us a living example of how tight a control is imposed on single women by relatives. On the night of the first meeting she had to leave at 10:00 p.m. because that was the curfew imposed by her brother. For the subsequent meetings she just asked for his permission to spend the nights at her sister's house. "Sometimes he would call my sister at 10:00 p.m. to see if I were there."

Direct control

Saleema thought remote control was paradise compared to having your parents in the same apartment. After more than one year of hard work, she managed to bring her mother and her father, who lost his job in one of the Gulf states, to join her in the USA. They were not the company she longed for. "In all honesty I regretted it. Yes, my parents made me feel secure, but I lost all the freedom I had before they came here. They interfere in every detail of my life. I have to go to social gatherings wearing a head dress, a *tarha*, and I have to report to them where I am going, the time I am going, and the time I will return. Believe me life is unbearable with them in the USA. They were not that restrictive before, or may be I did not notice until I lived here." Members of the group agreed that parents have preconceived ideas about life in the USA and that they try to put more restrictions on their daughters, lest the daughters should think it is permissible to behave like American women.

Hearing what others had to say about parental control, Saleema felt a sense of relief that her parents were not mistreating her. Yet she complained of the contradictions that her parents show in controlling her. "It is all right with my father if I wore pants and no *tarha*, head cover, to go to work. It is all right with him if I worked all night at a place he does not know where, yet he insists that in every Sudanese gathering I wear a *tarha*."

He would not allow me to stay late at a Sudanese party. I cannot begin to tell you how frustrating this is for me.”

Saleema is now engaged, her fiancé is looking for a job in Saudi Arabia. She could not wait to go and live an idle life in Saudi Arabia and away from her parents. She has been working seven days a week for more than a year, now her wish is to just sit at home and be a traditional wife. “Some *henna* and *dukhan* would do me a lot of good. My dreams have been trotted on. May be if I just disappear my father would think of going to settle in the Sudan.” Not being allowed to make decisions about her life was a painful step back for Saleema, who experienced freedom from parental scrutiny for a whole year. Believing that girls in the USA might slip into promiscuity, parents who live here feel greater responsibility. They will be directly blamed for their daughters’ misbehavior or what may be seen as misbehavior.

The effect of this control was drastic on her attitude towards her place in the family and towards her obligations. Earning the money without having control over spending it, nor on making decisions in the family relegated Saleema to the traditional secondary position of a woman. Therefore she thought if she opted out of being the primary breadwinner of the family, she would not sustain any social blame. If she got married, she would move to be the responsibility of her husband and no one can blame her for not providing for the family. This tendency to implement traditions to prove to parents that they could also be harmed by the same traditions, is similar to the tendency of married women, in the previous group, to apply *Shari’a* to their status as wives and decline to do housework to spite husbands.

Saleema thought that the freedom lost to parents is not even worth the fight for.

The price is too high, she would cause problems between her parents and risk the effect of that on her siblings who were living far away. She spoke bitterly about how her father was comfortable giving orders while she and her mother were doing odd and menial jobs to secure a living for the whole family. “If I make the mistake of showing my annoyance with his behavior my father would turn that against me by saying ‘*mun la yamlik gootu la yamlik gararu*’, [meaning he who does not control his subsistence does not make his decisions]. “It is hard to hear my father say that just because I became the breadwinner I do not respect his word. It is a constant psychological war.”

The tight economic conditions of almost all the Sudanese immigrant families compelled them and especially women to accept difficult hours and manual jobs. Saleema worked as a security officer during the week and as a housekeeper, for an American family, on weekends. Working as a housekeeper is inconceivable for a middle class Sudanese woman. But, Saleema has five siblings going to school in Egypt, her father lost his job and she became the only provider for the whole family, helped sometimes by her mother who sold Sudanese food items.

Saleema tried to convince her parents to go back to the Sudan and open the family house; two hundred dollars would keep them as an upper middle class household and she could save some money, they refused. I asked her how she talked to them about this. “I usually talk to my mother, it is impossible to talk to my father. He just gives orders and negotiates nothing. But I stopped asking them to go back home, because every time I do they get into a fight and my mother demands a divorce. All I can hear is ‘Divorce me! divorce me!’ Saleema was handling too many issues that she did not even expect to be

handling, her parents divorce was not something she wanted to add to her pile of responsibilities.

The Single women say that they have managed to become breadwinners but they cannot be household heads. Any attempt by them to make decisions is cited by the parents especially fathers as a sign of getting out of hand and taking too much freedom that can harm the family. It is made clear by the families that watching over them is a family duty. When they ask for more freedom they are told that marriage is the way to get more freedom. Gender disparity works within a hierarchy of age and social status. Nafisa commented that, “One gets more freedom when one needs it the least, when one is too old to use it. Marriage just changes the type of dependence, we move from father to husband. The only difference is that with husbands women can claim partnership and that is not possible with parents.” For this group of women marriage also brings new dependants, that is, children and women move to a status where they actually make decisions for their children not for themselves. They all agreed that, “marriage is to be postponed as long as socially possible.”

The participants agreed that the amount of pressure and control over their behavior is minimized by the fact that in the USA they did not have to deal with all the extended family. In the Sudan any male relative can interfere and regulate behavior within the family. Therefore even if the father is lenient another member may restrict a woman’s movement. Immigration is a release from that additional burden of relatives who should be obeyed. The circle of those with whom women have direct contact is limited to parents practicing “remote control”.

We Were Never Educated!

Sexuality is not a subject that is discussed in the homes or taught in school. This group of women thought that they were kept in the dark about sex and sexuality. FC and sexual issues in general were taboos, *aib*. Samia was not reluctant to state that she was still in the dark about sexual issues. “My sisters and I used to secretly read romantic stories in Lebanese magazines; we thought we were reading about sex. Even chewing gum was considered a behavior of loose women. We were not allowed to hear anything that concerned married women. We were confined to our own age groups all the time. I used to think that talking about sex was a big sin. I insisted on that even in high school. My friends would never talk about sex in front of me.”

The group agreed with Nafisa’s contention that even questions about sexual matters were discouraged at home and at school. Meanings of words such as semen that came up in religious studies were not given for fear that girls would get ideas. The participants attributed their fear to seek medical attention to the early restrictions imposed on their gaining any knowledge about sex. Nafisa who said that FC was not something that she would think about everyday, admitted that she refused to let a doctor examine her when he suspected a swelling in her ovary. “He wanted to do a private check up. I refused, partly because I am circumcised and partly because I was not going to let anyone touch me there. My aunt tried to convince me that I had to get the check up, but I refused. Mentally I was not comfortable at all with exposing myself to anyone even a doctor.”

Sex and sexuality remain taboos for this group. They try to find information by listening to married women’s discussions. They are all on agreement that the literature on FC is about its consequences but rarely anything on how to deal with the consequences.

As far as what they should expect after marriage and during childbirth, this group as well as Nafisa admitted that they had no dependable knowledge to act on. As to the level of their knowledge whether some of the troubles they suffer now are a result of FC or not, “not a clue!” said Nafisa.

They just heard things at different times from different people. Samia’s sister who got married here, told her that there were anesthetics to be applied to ease intercourse the first time. Nafisa knew that circumcised women needed special care when she saw Sudanese women asking her aunt for names of doctors, who could care for circumcised women. Nafisa insisted that to this day she does not have clear information about the consequences of FC. “Up until I encountered pregnant women or those with other reproductive health problems looking for specific doctors I did not know that FC could be a problem for me. Even when I told you that I refused check up, it did not cross my mind that my physical problem could be linked to FC.”

Rana said she did not know that she was uncircumcised until she was told by her friends in elementary school. All the participants admitted that their knowledge of FC is meager and that they did not feel comfortable discussing the subject on a one to one basis with doctors. They felt comfortable discussing it with a group of their peers. However, a group of their peers had very little hearsay knowledge. All of the participants felt that this group was ideal for learning about their bodies in general. They wanted to form the group regularly to share their information. I have directed them to books on the subject and web sites that may ease their minds about their future as circumcised women. But as they indicated earlier the material published is of little help to them. The Sudanese culture coincides with other African cultures in providing information for girls at the time

of marriage. This group of educated women wanted “scientific information and not grandmother information.

The participants wondered about the contradiction between their knowledge that they have sexual desire and the contentions that circumcised women lose their sexual feelings. The information they received during the meetings provided facts about possibilities of reduced sexual desire and orgasm in some cases. They thought that they had desire and would not shun marriage. Myths were in no short supply, they heard from others, such as Somali friends that FC was protection from rape. Nafisa said jokingly “Taking this from a gender perspective, how come they never thought of cutting the boys to stop them from raping girls?”

Nafisa and her group wondered about men and their ability and inability to penetrate infibulation. Samia conveyed the story of her cousin who used to be beaten up by her husband for he was unable to deal with her infibulation. It was rumored that he was impotent and could not consummate the marriage. Wassif and Abdalla(1999) has documented similar situations with Egyptian men. Sometimes drug use among men is attributed to the fact that men cannot deal with infibulation. This group attributed their inability to discuss sexuality and FC to gender relations in the family and the society at large.

Gender Relations

The participants in this group made interesting comments on gender relations in the Sudanese society. The most interesting comment Nafisa made was about how men preten that some of their decision-making power, regarding major events in their lives, was surrendered to women. Nafisa maintained that in order to minimize their expenses

and get wives, who would be under their complete control, some men call sisters or mothers and ask them to “shop” for a wife. Pictures are sent to him from the Sudan but female family members usually choose a wife for the man. Instead of just admitting that immigrant women would not be submissive wives, men blame the whole affair on the women in their families back home. They claim that they are obeying their “beloved mothers or sisters.” Many of the participants also noted how difficult it was for women to change the social norms while men could do so just by pretending to leave the matter to women. Nafisa insisted that, “It was not difficult for men to do away with the tradition that mandated the groom’s presence at his wedding. Expatriates resorted to proxy marriage, and women complied. This change was made by men but women complied because of the power they appear to have. In case of marriage it is actually the man, who choose his wife from among many presented to him. And when women agree to weddings to absent husbands they are actually accommodating the need of the expatriate husband who does not want to spend time preparing a wedding.”

The pattern continues with immigrant men, yet it is noticeable how women turned around and used this proxy marriage mode to their benefit. Samia felt that immigrant women have succeeded in convincing families they also can be absent from their weddings. Marriages between immigrant men and women celebrated in the USA, minimized the bias against the immigrant women and to some extent lifted the label of *mataliq* given to them back home.⁶⁴

The group accused men of remaining silent after marriage when mothers interfered in the couple’s sexual life. Another indication of how they use women to

⁶⁴ Although celebrations of weddings take place in the USA the official contract and accompanying celebration are still taking place in the Sudan.

ensure guardianship over sexuality. Niemat gave an example of how men delegate power to women so as to ensure *adal*, re-circumcision, without having the appearance of being part of the act. “Men are so concerned about their virility that they remain silent and leave women to suffer. When I was in Cairo my friend came back sick, because she underwent *adal* after childbirth. She said her mother-in-law told her that her husband sent money so she can be taken to a midwife and do it. They also claim that women enjoy the pain caused by *adal*.” Nadia wasif and Abdulla (1999) tell us that, issues of masculinity and myths about women’s enjoyment of sex drive men into accepting all the erroneous information and behavior dictated by society.

Furthermore this group agreed with the earlier group of married women on that men hardly ever change their minds on traditions that control women. “Why should they develop their thinking? They are best served by the status quo,” declared Bidour. Nafisa felt that any development in women’s status would hurt the men. They lose grounds in the family and their absolute power would be diminished. She added that, “Even when they pretend that they accept the empowered woman who would cherish her job and see herself as a provider for her family as much a man would, men are ready to repudiate that immediately after marriage.”

The participants said that they were still playing the game by men’s rules. They adhere to the virginity rule and even the dress code, because women who attempt to change social norms were treated with contempt. For that reason going out with men or meeting with them in private is not something that appealed to this group. They insisted that their good intentions might be misinterpreted. Besides, “Why put yourself in a position that may send all kinds of messages about your behavior?” They were content

with meeting men in public places and in family settings or with groups of friends.

All members of this group were confident that they could have responsible relationships with men, but they did not see themselves initiating those relationships. It had to do with their “worth”. Rana thought that a balance had to be kept. “We go through a lot of trouble for the men without being credited for it. Even FC, which is mainly to appease them and shape our bodies to conform to men’s idea of a respectable woman, is done to us under the guise that it is benefiting us. We end up serving all their needs, the least they could do is be the ones to come to us. Why should we do it all? If we initiate and serve then what is left for them to do?” this comment was in line with what Hajja Mama said earlier, she wanted men to initiate relations and provide for women in consideration of women’s tolerance of bodily harm, that is FC.

We Are the Real Losers in This Fight

The majority of the women in all groups thought that the whole society has to undergo a change of attitude regarding FC. However, this is the only group that was adamantly against FC and did not accept any justification for its continuation. Ironically they all felt that immediate abandonment of FC was going to work against them. The issue of reduced opportunity of marriage for circumcised unmarried women because of a change of attitude towards FC, is an issue that is hardly addressed in activism against FC. The already married women did not have to face this problem; they were only concerned about daughters who would grow up here, and how to spare them the agony of being circumcised in USA.

Saleema conveyed her personal experience with the first man, a Sudanese physician, she met when she came to the USA. They had a good relationship and were

going to get married until one day he asked whether she was circumcised. “That was not something I could lie about, so I said I was. After all the lectures he used to give me about independence and strong character being what he sought in a woman, I thought it would not harm our relationship to give him an answer to that question. I was shocked when he simply said he could not marry me. He was not even sympathetic. It was as if I had a contagious disease.”

The group felt that they would be hurt by a change of attitude towards FC. If the men they could get married to decided to marry uncircumcised women, then these young circumcised women lose their chance for marriage. It is ironic that a chance to marry was one of the main reasons for their circumcision. However, they were not going to stop advocating against FC just to secure husbands. They attributed their dilemma to the society that did not value women and only catered for men’s needs. They tended to agree with the married women’s group in maintaining that men were the ones who had control over FC and its continuation or eradication.

The participants did not want to be “a charity case” as Bidour said. They wanted to be treated as full human beings and not be judged on myths about their sexuality. “FC eradication campaigns can educate people about sexuality rather than genitalia. They should educate the men that circumcision does not make passive partners.” Said Rana. Samia interrupted in an angry tone, “Besides this idea of what is in it for them [the men] ought to change. When they are convinced that FC is bad that should be because it is harmful to me not because it deprives them of sexual satisfaction. When are we going to count for something?” The group thought that the discussion added a useful tool of

interpretation, that is gender, and some of them expressed their pleasure that they could articulate their frustration by analyzing men's behavior.

“The Sexual Auction Block”

Women continue to answer questions about their bodies and to prepare those bodies in ways acceptable and attractive to men. Forty years ago questions about a woman's beauty used to include whether a woman had *shiloukh*, or a tattooed lip, and whether she had her hair done in those painful tiny braids called *mushat*. Now that all those practices had disappeared, these young women have to answer questions about FC. In an answer to the question whether they saw FC as a barrier to love and good relations with men, the participants cited the successful marriages of circumcised women in the USA and Sudan as an indication that the answer is no. However, with Sudanese men having a chance to experience sex with American and other uncircumcised women, FC might very well reduce circumcised women's chance in the “sexual auction block.” Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart coined the expression “sexual auction block” when they studied the interpersonal politics of gender relations among college women.

In the process of establishing romantic relationships women exposed themselves to the sexual auction block. On it they faced the possibility of, and in fact often experienced, having their social worth- their attractiveness- impugned. They encountered men who wanted physical intimacy to soon, who made them feel that they were only sex objects, who paid too little attention to them, who let it be known that they were taken for granted and who spread their attention around to many women and thus cheapened the value of their attention as a sign of worth. In the code of romance, bad treatment was a sign that a woman was unattractive. Since women's prestige was tied to the world of romance, bad treatment was a sign that a woman was of low social worth (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990).

As in the case of the more experienced women in the study of Holland and Eisenhart, this group intends to make it known that they were to be desired for their sexual attractiveness as well as other qualities that Sudanese men may not find in women of other nationalities. They also intend to increase their worth by, "... not seeming to be desperately available and by giving the impression that they expected to be well treated." (Holland and Eisenhart, 1990).

Why tell them?

The majority of the group thought that if one of them was to commit to a relationship, she should never raise the issue of whether she was circumcised or not. They felt that every Sudanese knew that nearly all women of their age were circumcised. Besides their circumcision would be the subject of men's *ga'adat*⁶⁵, chat groups, especially if the man decided not to marry the woman.

In his recent study among male health professionals Ahmed Abdelmageed (2001) found out that,

A comparatively very small proportion (16%) of the respondents, were keen to enquire about the state of circumcision of their wives prior to marriage. However, the great majority (84%) were not keen to enquire. Such response for health providers is indeed alarming in the sense that those health providers are implicitly not concerned with FC, at least as a practice.

When asked which state did they prefer, circumcised or uncircumcised, the majority of the respondents in the above study 88%, preferred uncircumcised wives. This high percentage shows that awareness of FC and its consequences may cause men to prefer uncircumcised women.

⁶⁵ A *ga'ada* is the equivalent of *wanasa* for women, except that men usually sit at night and add liquor and singing and sometimes women.

The issue of FC became a dilemma for unmarried women. If they bring it up men may think the worst of them. They may think that these women are interested in sex and that is why they brought it up. If women do not mention it they risk the chance of having a disappointed husband who does not want to deal with FC. Saleema declared that she would not risk breaking up her second engagement by telling her fiancé that she was circumcised. “He may leave me and again make me feel like I am handicapped or something. Why did our parents ever mess with what God made? They cut it and gave us trouble. If I ever have daughters, I will never perform FC on them.” Three of the participants felt that it was better to ‘come clean’ about FC before the marriage to avoid disappointments after committing oneself to a marriage.

Making Decisions and Taking Responsibility

The relationship between this group and their relatives in the USA and in the Sudan is a tense one. They are voicing their frustrations and are not afraid to appear rebellious. They all conveyed that the immigration experience and exposure to new ideas and behavior had helped them eliminate the confusion over the power to make decisions. They no longer labor under the belief that restrictions are actually imposed to benefit them nor are they confused about who should really hold the power to make decisions about their bodies and their future, they hold that power, but can they exercise it?

Nafisa articulated the group’s stand by saying “I think our lives are still hostage to traditions. Even if the family lets us decide little things, such as what to wear, major events in our lives are still in other people’s hands. It is brothers, parents or even grandparents who arrange my life. The decision to travel abroad was our wish, but to make it come true the decision had to be made by other people. They gave us permission

to leave the country and that is why they think they can revoke that permission any time they deem necessary.” The participants of this group were in full agreement with Nafisa, but they intend to exert their own pressure and turn this permission into a right or at the worst an irrevocable permit. They thought that the result was going to be a decrease in consultations with parents and would certainly result in informing parents of decisions after those decisions were made, it was easier they said to ask forgiveness than to ask permission.

Even when people are liberal they are afraid for girls in the USA, and do not trust them with making decisions. Nafisa’s parents do their best to make sure that she and her sister are not only complying with instructions conveyed from Sudan, but also abiding by instructions issued as needed by their aunts. Saleema felt that Nafisa was lucky because at least she escaped the direct interference in every little detail of her life. “My parents even decide whether I was tired after work. They tell me to go to bed because I was tired. The real reason is that they do not want to hear me say I want to go somewhere.”

Despite this control they felt that since their families either needed their partial or total financial help, they had the freedom to choose which jobs to take. The middle class Sudanese parents came to the understanding that their daughters may end up working two jobs that may not be socially acceptable for women of their status in the Sudan. Ability to work and choose the type of work was cited by the group as a sign of empowerment and decision-making power. Samia was a dissenting voice on this point, she thought that conferring a decision-making power on women did not follow automatically from having a job. “I was working in the Sudan, but was not able to make decisions. What we should look for is the freedom to make decisions whether or not we are financially independent.”

The rest of the group responded that that was the ideal situation but unfortunately it could not be attained. Having a job strengthens women in case they were ostracized by the community.

A Sense of Belonging

Rogaia Abusharaf's conversations with Sudanese single immigrant women were, "illustrative of women breaking barriers and crossing borders that once enclosed them in order to protect their well being and prosperity" (Abusharaf, 2002).

However many members of this group, especially Nafisa and Samia were of opinion that once they got out of the "borders that enclosed them" in the Sudan they fell into similar borders drawn by the "little Sudan" created in the host country. As mentioned above the women wanted to belong to that little Sudan. They also saw that some of those borders were drawn inside them. Despite the frustration with all the restrictions imposed on them their upbringing is partly responsible for keeping them from breaking barriers. "There is something that is permeated in us. We resist the Sudanese traditions yet we do not seek ways out of the Sudanese life, despite the fact that we became Americans. My militancy makes me sound as if I am from a different planet. I end up backing off the decisions I made. I sometimes think of suicide it is that unbearable."

Nafisa said she had no problem living an independent life. She was not nostalgic for any of the Sudanese restrictions "In the Sudan I was not completely independent. Here I am totally responsible for myself. I am working and taking care of myself and others. I should not have anyone as a guardian, but my relatives insist on interfering in every part of my life. Sometimes I do go against the current, but sometimes I am afraid."

Fear of breaking barriers comes from the fact that all of the participants want to

get married to Sudanese men. Their desire to continue life in the Sudanese community leaves them at the mercy of this community. They are in limbo; living in the American society and befriending American women at school and work but staying Sudanese.

Furthermore the behavior they keep in order to belong to the Sudanese community makes them aliens amongst their American friends. Their progress as immigrants will depend greatly on a recognition that sometimes immigrants have to work for progress in their own pace. Marilyn Hoskin (1991) maintains that, “it probably took the massive movement of what Canadian policy refers to as “visible minorities” after 1960 to demonstrate that many migrants had not and would not progress through the stages of assimilation.”

Alien Females

As they try to pull out of the old Sudanese traditions and forge a new life, the participants found themselves gradually becoming strangers to their community and totally aliens to the host culture. Nafisa was amused by her American friend’s reaction to her sexual behavior. “When I told my friends that I do not have a boyfriend they asked if I were a lesbian. When I said no, they said there had to be something wrong with me. Not seeking to satisfy an instinct is seen by them as unnatural.” Actually Nafisa felt that her sexuality became a determining factor in judging her character by her American friends.

When asked whether they felt that it was the circumcision that was keeping them from having sexual relations, the participants laughed and thought I was joking. I insisted that I wanted an answer and one came from Samia and agreed to by others. “No it is not FC, because we have the desire, it is what we are brought up believing, traditionally and religiously. Having a sexual relation without being married is *aib* and

haram.” They certainly did not consider prohibition of premarital sexual relations a barrier that they wanted to break; they said they would keep the decision already made by their families regarding pre-marital relations. They did not feel that they would make a different decision, although the news from Sudan indicates that women are breaking some taboos regarding sexual relations in the Sudan, albeit in a small scale.

The economic and social situation in the Sudan has never been worse than it is now. Despite the intimidating punishments levied by *Shari'a*, premarital relations and sexual abuse are on the rise. Amal Abbas reported in a series of short articles to Sudan Nile, an internet newspaper, that *Alwan* a daily newspaper, had reported that 29 corpses were buried on May 28, 2002. Nine were corpses of people who died for various reasons but 20 were newly born children who were either illegally aborted or born and left in the sun or attacked by dogs (Sudan Nile 6/3/2002). Amal Abbas attributed the births to street girls, but she had no evidence of that.

Another report by the United Arab Emirates *al-Bayan* reported that there were about three million unmarried women in the capital city alone. The paper quoted Dr. Balqis Badri of Ahfad University for Women saying that the lack of marriage was due to the policies of the government that discriminate against women and that sent the youth into financial troubles. Further the paper quoted a religious scholar who called upon those who cohabit without a marriage contract to come out and urged the government to recognize them as married couples (al-Bayan, June 16, 2002).⁶⁶

Such daring behavior is showing in the tapestry of Sudanese life, yet the

⁶⁶ In The Sudanese Personal Law for Muslims Act, 1991 a gaurdian is the only one who can conclude a marriage contract for his ward, therefore women living in marriages without the consent or knowledge of guardian may be held liable for zina

immigrant single women were quick to notice that the consequences of the sexual freedom that women took for themselves, that is having children, is still not acceptable to the Sudanese society and that was why new born children were thrown in the streets. Furthermore, in “little Sudan” they would be banished if they lived with men who were not married to them. The men, who might cohabit with them, would by no means be ready to marry them. They would be deemed *mataliq*.

Nafisa and her group noticed that the Sudanese community is extremely resistant to change in general. They attribute the sometimes stagnant life of the Sudanese to the fact that men, who are the leaders, take very little risks. They reiterated Serene’s statement that men imitate each other and rarely break the cycle of the established behavior. Nafisa holds a comparison between Sudanese and other nationalities in the USA. “We are programmed. We have all the traditions instilled in us. Look at other nations, the Arab men and women; they are very successful financially, because they take risks. We are still afraid. We are still imitating each other; we feel secure if we are all doing the same thing, just as we would do at home.”

Samia agreed and conveyed a social picture to prove the above point. “When I went back to my hometown after years of absence, I found that everyone opened a shop in his house, who was buying from them? I do not know. They sit all day calling each other from the corners of the street. We do the same thing here. Rarely would you find a Sudanese who started a business, we work for a pay check at the end of the month, that is the ultimate security for us. We want to be *mowazafeen*, bureaucrats, other people get to do other things in America, and save traditions for home.”

Nafisa attributed such behavior to the fact that Sudanese pay attention to what

others say. This talk about lack of desire of the Sudanese community to change social behavior brought about a discussion of what innovative alternatives could women think of, to achieve their goals of getting married and settling in the USA.

Is Match-making a Solution?

Thuraya told the group about a Muslim African American woman who was a match-maker arranging meetings between men and women, under the supervision of the Imam. Thuraya thought it was a good idea that afforded women a chance to meet men. This idea did not appeal to the group since they, except for one of them, wanted to get married to Sudanese men, who may not like an organized effort of match-making. The group also warned Thuraya not to get into a relationship or a friendship with a man that might get misinterpreted. If that relationship failed then it would be the end of her within the Sudanese community.

Thuraya was of opinion that a match-making service was a good idea for Muslims. She thought that many people were ready to marry but their chances of meeting each other were not good. Nafisa, Samia, and Rana totally rejected the match-making idea, to them it was just another way of hiding behind religion to create a social setting that would control women. The idea of going to the Imam's house to meet a man would open the door for abuse of women and may be even sexual attacks. Nafisa who belonged to the Republican Sisters⁶⁷ thought that any possibility of a religious authority control over how marriage should be initiated was a dangerous one. Such innovations would leave the door open for more control over women in the name of religion.

Although the group conceded that match-making is known among the Sudanese,

they were against any organized religious match-making service. “We may create the suitable atmosphere for some of our friends to meet. Sometimes when a friend man or women gives a description of their dream mate another friend may suggest that *fulana* or *fulan* would suit him or her, but not more than that. Of course parents would want to arrange the marriage, but this is no problem. These days men and women agree to marry each other and the parents just take control of the social part of going to ask for the woman’s hand in marriage and they take over the burdens of the wedding arrangement.

Samia thought that the Islamic match making would not suit the Sudanese taste. “In this city they [Muslims] turned the Mosque into a meeting place. I went there once and watched them it was like a park. Young ladies parade themselves in the mosque. I wondered how they could bring themselves to do that. I do not think Sudanese need match-making. We meet at different occasions and many marriages have been concluded in the US.”

Another meeting place these days is the internet, Sudanese list-serves, chat rooms and voice mail are the most recent meeting places. Thuraya said she did meet someone in one of the Paltalk rooms.⁶⁸ Yet she thought that those were just new mediums to practice an old tradition. The man she met wanted her to send a picture, and then he wanted her to describe how she looked. It seemed to her that getting a man interested in a woman’s personality was impossible. “Serious topics usually turn into pointless *wanasa* on the internet. I think we Sudanese are still doing things in certain ways. The internet is not a serious medium, but there is a need for such a medium.”

⁶⁸ Paltalk and MSN Messenger are two internet programs that allow people to meet in chatrooms and talk or write each other instant messages. They are free services that can be accessed by people from anywhere in the world.

Conclusion

This group represents part of the future of the Sudanese women in the USA and in the Sudan. Since the beginning of the 1980s mobility of women has increased, despite the official ban on women's travel. The steady decline in the Sudanese economy increased the number of women who participate in the finances of their families. While the societal intention has been to use them as reserve workers their experiences with being heads of households and of holding jobs inside and outside the Sudan, has widened their horizons and caused a noticeable change in their attitudes and their feeling of their self worth.

Young women feel the bane of traditions and express their fear of their condition as circumcised women. They are educated but their access to information on sexuality and on how to deal with their condition of circumcision is limited. They lost the support of older women who may educate them at wedding time. They are looking for information and support among married women who are themselves engaged in a new experience regarding FC. Although they feel fettered by the traditions, they adhere to the Sudanese culture as an easy way of survival and gaining points in the Sudanese sex auction block, an area they compete with American women in.

Despite their realization that ability to make independent decisions is still not fully gained, they say that they made a decision that they are going to keep, they vowed that their daughters will under no circumstances be circumcised. They take note of the fact that the limited freedom given by a financially pressed society is growing. Society cannot contain the changes that are taking place now, women who ventured out may appease society by keeping some rules but there is no going back. They are also ready to

resist any revocation of that permission or their decision making power by husbands who may try to claim their traditional power over them. They acknowledge the difficult choices they have to make and believe that they have the ability to increase the pace of change without disturbing the social fabric, or further entrenching the term *mataliq*.

The fact that they are circumcised leaves them with major issues to tackle at the personal as well as the social level. They are already living with the repercussions of breaking the first barriers and leaving home with the intent of settling in USA. Getting married is still a major requirement within “little Sudan” as well as the larger Sudanese society in the homeland. They think that they need some quick changes in the host culture, a change that may avail them as circumcised women access to information and medical attention. The next step is to start working to bring about these changes.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

This study is an attempt to find out whether Sudanese women who immigrated to the USA have experienced any significant changes in their cultural beliefs in general and on FC in particular, and the reasons for the change if any. Research on immigrant Sudanese women is rare; this study is attempting to bring into the literature personal stories that may prove or contradict existing theories about Sudanese women, their culture of learning and their ability to change their lives. The discourse of nostalgia and liberation illuminates the Sudanese women's ability to adapt and accept new ideas and survive well under the emotionally and economically pressing conditions of migration.

I found that a decision has been made about FC, by the participants in the groups and the women I interviewed in depth. They will not only stop the practice of FC, they intend to raise a generation that does not remember it. If they remember it or read about it in the future they will not have any background to support it, they will only know it as a discontinued old custom. What are the factors in this firm decision?

The literature revealed that for mothers who decided not to circumcise their daughters a high level of education is a factor in that decision (Carr, 1997; Mazharul Islam & Mosleh Uddin, 2001; Yount, 2002). However Yount explains that "a majority of the daughters of highly educated mothers ... are still circumcised." This supports my finding that education is a factor that facilitates access to information when mothers decide to think about whether to circumcise daughters or not. Education may not be a factor at all in making a decision about FC, if mothers did not have new experiences or access to new information. The participants in this study stressed that back home they

were not active against FC despite their knowledge of its consequences. They disliked it but did not think of stopping it. They all agreed that removal from the culture, immigration, changed the way FC has affected them in a profound way.

Immigration is a positive factor in gender relations within homes. It increased women's ability to make decisions about their children and greatly reduced the power of relatives in making decisions. The almost exclusive power that mothers of these women or their mothers-in-law had in making decision about girls' circumcision at home has been greatly reduced. Without the social fabric, that finds adhesion and strength in traditional practices, those practices lose their social benefits. I found that the women were not thinking about a new set of ideals provided by the new culture when they decided to stop FC as in the modernization theory mentioned by Yount (2002). They did not care much about the ideals of the new culture; as a matter of fact they were extremely critical of it when it comes to sexuality.

The participants' focus was on a social institution called FC and how it harmed them. Social institutions are created by human beings to serve their interaction with each other. Human beings interact as they are influenced by the social environment in which they exist. In the process they think, reflect and accept certain actions. John Dewey (1916) tells that reflection on our acts is acceptance of our responsibility for future consequences.

The immigration factor becomes one of the important factors that may speed FC eradication alongside intervention programs. This finding is supported by Yount's finding that exposure to the controversy affects mothers' perceptions of FC. The health issues stressed in urban areas show that women in urban areas are more likely to seek its

medicalization. By contrast immigrant Sudanese women declared their strong stand against the practice and not its medicalization. This study sees the exposure factor not as a “here is a set of new cultural ideas that you may want to adopt.” It means a fresh look at the existing culture and people changing it on their own terms, albeit helped by being in a different culture.

What emerges here is the difference between controversy where the practice is almost universal and familiar to medical practitioners, and controversy in a culture that has no knowledge or at least no recent memory of the practice where women face what they term life and death situations. What caused immigrant women to advocate eradication of FC are not the opinions in the host culture, but the physical dangers and the psychological ordeals during childbirth.

The participants noted that life in the Sudan went on with minimum planning. The extended family is expected to come to the rescue when one of its members is in need. Major in the support system for women is attendance during childbirth and for as long as a month afterwards. The participants had no doubt that the support they got within the family was a direct cause for not being able to see the negative sides of FC. Or when the negative side is visible the fact that women shared the negative consequences was a factor in minimizing the effect (Dorkenoo, 1994). The effects became magnified in the new culture and are too obvious and painful to ignore or treat as normal.

A surprising finding in this study is how women of different cultures make assumptions about each other's sexuality and victimizations. Similar assumptions to those made by writers such as Hanny Lightfoot-Kline (1989) and Ann Cloudsley (1984), are by older Sudanese women. Talks with the older women's groups revealed how myths

about sexuality and FC are sometimes identical in the host and immigrant cultures. An example may be found in the imagined reasons for sodomy of wives by husbands. Hanny Lightfoot-Kline imagined that penetration of infibulated wives was extremely difficult, therefore Sudanese women were sodomized or men engaged in homosexual activities. The same was imagined by the older Sudanese women who thought that uncircumcised women were sodomized for their vaginas were wide open and as such not possible for them to satisfy men. Because of that wideness sodomizing wives or homosexuality was common among men in the west.

More findings in this study include the profound change in gender relations inside the home, especially between husbands and wives, to which the women attribute their ability to make the decision of not circumcising their daughters. The younger women group revealed more devastating feelings about FC and family control. While they feel that they have more freedom they are entrapped in a circumcised body. Their chances of being married outside the culture are eliminated; they do not want to explain their condition to husbands from outside the culture. They see their chances of marrying Sudanese men minimized by competition with American and other women.

Women in Charge

This study found that conventional theories of exposing women to educational programs about FC and its consequences as means to its eradication (Shell Duncan, 2000; Toubia, 1996; Babatunde, 1997) may take longer to affect change, if women are not in charge of their lives. Feminist social theories argue that dominance over women stems from certain social, economic and political arrangements (Jackson and Jones, 1998). The participants have no doubt that the absence of direct social pressure and new

responsibilities for immigrant women, have caused them to seek such programs. One of them particularly pointed out the fact that she was exposed to such programs in the Sudan. She was convinced of the harmful effect of FC but did not act accordingly. Tostan experience found that as women learned about other rights they came to realize the harm of FC. The addition by this study that supports that finding, is that a personal experience is more profound in changing attitudes than generalized statistical or other scientific facts. The participants were able to articulate the change of attitude towards FC since they came to the USA. They said their stand against FC is no longer a rhetorical one. Their stand now has taken a sharp turn that takes rhetoric into action. It is not just an opinion expressed it is a practical step applied first to their own homes.

It is not only making decisions about circumcision but their passive role in the family has changed into a participation in all aspects of the family life. They contribute financially and participate in decision making. Their statuses are greatly enhanced by changes in their income and direct participation in their children's lives especially their schooling. Some of them said that financial contribution did not change their status in the Sudan and therefore did not think that it is the reason for change here. By analyzing such a statement it became evident that while women's financial contribution in the Sudan may be dispensable, in the USA it is not. The social background against which their financial contribution was trivialized has been replaced by a new environment that it is essential.

The young unmarried women talked about the community and family control yet they clearly had a handle on their lives, immigration was like a magnifying glass that enabled them to see beyond the oppression. There was clarity in their statements that

their immigration had a positive effect on them despite all the societal criticism. The gender relations are being dismantled and reconstructed by fearless young women who are sure that their destiny had changed and their lives earn a well deserved freedom despite beginnings that relied on familial and community help.

Wanasa as an educational tool

The Sudanese of. Discounted back home as just trivial small talk and *gate'ia*, *wanasa* proved its value as educational tool for immigrant women. It is a medium for exchanging mostly new information, from new products in the market and annual sales at department stores to names of doctors who have experience with circumcised Roberta S. Lacefield (2002) argues that,

Women's talk is devalued in both style (hesitant, qualified, question-posing, high pitched) and in content (concern for the everyday, the practical, and the interpersonal) by men and women both. ... It is important to allow women to use talk in the construction of knowledge.

Women's talk and the ways they use it to communicate is valuable not just in a formal educational setting but also in learning through socialization is in the case of Sudanese women. The loose networks that served them in times of mourning, wedding or sickness continued to be a medium for educating adults in the new culture and youngsters in the home culture. J. Dewey (1916) acknowledges the fact that a person, "learns in consequence of his direct activities." The participants used expressions such as "I discovered that" or "I found out" or "I just did not know that" a use that indicated that they are adding to their knowledge everyday.

Many of them said they "didn't know that" when told about the health programs available to women in general and the special services available to immigrants in

particular. I myself exclaimed that “I didn’t know that!” when two of the women told the group that “*they found out that* it is their right to have a translator when they communicate with doctors or government officials. There is a need to increase awareness of the immigrant women of what services are available for them within the system. Women as recipients of medical and other services need to be listened to; their suggestions treated as passing certain experiences, to those concerned, especially on issues of education and the best ways they feel they can be educated about the system in general and about their condition as circumcised women.

The *wanasa* allowed women to reflect on their lives before immigration. They reflected on why FC continued without interruption for thousands of years. The participants cited the emotional support of family life in the Sudan, how women in the family would take care of each other and provide psychological support and experience, as a reason for not thinking about FC as a practice that should be abandoned. One of the major effects of immigration is the separation from that system that resulted in women’s focusing their thought on FC and its consequences. The participants also noted that men who would spend a lifetime in the Sudan knowing nothing about childbirth, were forced into delivery rooms where they experienced the emotional distress and the dangers of infibulation.

While most of the literature is concerned with analyzing public policy, race relations, or theorizes about gender relations on generalized basis, individual stories strengthen that literature by adding the real life side to theory, and by hearing women, who do not use the social science terms, articulate their needs and their lives. In the case of Hajja Mama and the older women, they articulated why their attitudes would not

change. They were isolated from the new society because they did not speak the language, and because they did not view the host country as home in any sense of the word. This study adds to the highly abstract and theoretical work of Janice Boddy *Managing traditions* (1999), who tried to explain Sudanese immigrant's experiences through another practice called *zar*. This study adds experiences with a focus on FC. Accumulation of these experiences would allow future comparisons and contrasts or conceptual relationship between the status of women and the persistence of traditions such as *zar* and FC.

Methodology

In feminist research the normal everyday living and conversations are encouraged as a method and technique. Such methods may use vocabulary available for social scientist but as a technique uses women's own accounts as a source of knowledge about those women. I included in the study women of different social status who are in the USA for different reasons and who have different aspirations, despite their belonging to the same community. *Wanasa* became my major tool and method to enter the lives of those women.

Actually on the first meeting for each group the women discovered that they share many daily life issues specifically issues related to FC, marriage and childbirth. Therefore *wanasa* made it possible for women to express what might have been suppressed by a formal setting of questions and answers. Dorothy Smith (1987) pointed to what she termed "the line of fault" from which she embarks on inquiring the alienation of women from their experiences.

As members of an intelligentsia, we had learned, furthermore to work inside a discourse that we did not have a part in making, that was not “ours” as women, the discourse expresses, describes, and provides the working concepts and vocabulary for a landscape in which women are strangers. That strangeness is an integral part of the socially organized practices constituting it. This is the same rupture in consciousness- the line of fault from which this inquiry begins.

Adopting a feminist perspective in this study afforded me the chance of using women’s own discourses to tell their stories. Using social science theories to analyze the data proved that women do provide narratives through their own methods, and such data can easily be analyzed to generate theories.

Saba Mahmood (2001) gives an argument on how women’s own expressions should be treated.

I want to emphasize the importance of being attentive to the elisions any process of translation entails, especially when the language of social science claims a self-transparent universalism, and the language used by "ordinary people" is understood as a poor approximation of their reality Simply put my point is this: if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes "change" and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but allowed to emerge through an analysis of the particular networks of concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may very well be a form of agency-one that must be understood in the context of the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, a genitival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that consult in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability.

I partly relied on my knowledge of the Sudanese community and the Sudanese culture as well as being part of the community and a participant in its activities at one time. This knowledge eased the women’s consciousness “about issues of face” they knew that apologetic explanations of culture were not needed when we engage in *wanasa*.

Actually after a few minutes into the chats, whether with individuals or groups, women

tended to forget that there was a tape recorder, although the first thing that they would make sure of was whether the tape recorder was connected and recording.

To deal with an issue such as FC in the USA such closeness and trust was much needed. Noland (2000) found that one of the shortcomings of her study among Indian women was,

... the fact often many of the women were simply telling me what I wanted to hear. Along with this is the fact that the women in this study were very conscious about issues of face. They did not know me and were somewhat reluctant to disclose more representative symbols of their identity.

I can comfortably say that there was clarity and openness in our *wanasa*. The participants declared their trust and their support of this research.

Managing Two worlds

Women's strategies to manage their lives as immigrants can easily be detected in how they manage their children's education on religion and traditions. They were determined for example to teach children Islam and Arabic, yet they did not surrender to the pressure of the strong fundamentalist curricula. Almost all of them left the Sudan because of the Islamic fundamentalist hegemony. Many took their children out of those schools and spent time and effort starting their own school with parents volunteering to teach Islamic education and Arabic. Women feel a sense of accomplishment by starting this school because strong parental control over what students learn in the Sudan is non-existent. The participants showed strength in dealing with their fears and hopes as they try to make use of the freedom afforded them in the host culture, while trying to prove to their home culture that they are faithful to it.

I tried to illuminate some of the issues that may be kept as private, such as gender

role changes and how women are managing to keep homes while they feel that their independence may estrange them from their husbands. In the case of younger women parents try to confine them to their traditional role as wards who need guardians, even if they live thousands of miles away from home. Young women strategies to deal with this control ranged between defiance and a gradual “get them used to it.”

Losing Proximity Gaining Perspective

The three age groups of participants acknowledged that experiencing how the medical profession and others in the American society perceived FC and shunned it as a peculiar behavior, had caused them to rethink it as a tradition and a physical change to their bodies. All of them reported that their attitudes had changed in one way or another. My observation is that the longer the participant has been in the host culture and the stronger her intention is to make the USA her permanent home, the more open she is in her rejection of the practice.

While the older women insisted that FC benefited girls they acknowledged the difficulties their daughters and daughters-in-law had faced in the USA. Three of the participants in the older women’s group accepted the idea of letting girls decide whether to undergo FC or not. They felt confident that subjecting young women to the pains of deinfibulation while they lack the support system they enjoyed in the Sudan was not fair to them.

For the married immigrant women the immigration experience caused them to develop a totally different perspective regarding the value attached to FC and its social benefits. For the majority of them the arguments of gender disparities made sense and a whole new perspective developed in their thinking of what was worth keeping and what

deserved to be abandoned. All of them were aware of the law in the USA that prohibited FC and were strong advocates of having a law in the Sudan.

Other Cultural “Practices”

Some observations and suggestions are worth mentioning in these concluding remarks. The participants in the group of married women were at least thirty minutes late for all the meetings. They attributed that to their expectations of each other rather than to being inconsiderate or lazy. Suad was of opinion that a Sudanese would never be late for a meeting with Americans, “but with each other each one does not want to be the one who would break the habit. We want to play it safe and always wait to see who and how many would follow someone who breaks a norm. We all want to be the busy one who would show up when everyone is already there, rather than appear to be someone with nothing to do and would show up in time.” Other participants such as Haya and Safiyya thought that one of the reasons of persistence of FC is that each individual does not trust the others to stop if she or he stopped. No one wants to be the only one behaving differently.⁶⁹

While the participants acknowledged the change in their behavior and how their children were conforming to the American rather than the Sudanese culture, there were certain behaviors in the American culture that they found totally unacceptable, e.g. pre-marital sex. At the same time there was a unanimous rejection of some of the policies at home, e.g. the Sudanese government’s schemes to support *Sunna* circumcision and to

⁶⁹ During the time of these meetings a Sudanese man raised the issue, of Sudanese not showing up for anything on time, in the chatting board of Sudan Nile. He told the joke of the Sudanese who was asked what he was waiting for; he said “I am waiting for my friend, he should be here at six. I will wait for him till seven if he does not show up till eight I will leave at nine.”

link that to health and religion. A reference was made to the occasional programs on television and radio that advocate *Sunna* type of circumcision. Actually two months after we concluded our interviews and meetings, the government convened a conference at the Islamic University of Omdurman at the female students' college supporting *Sunna* FC (*Al-Ayam*, May 27, 28, 2002). This prompted many Sudanese NGOs to form a coalition against FC and take the concerned Ministry, the Ministry of Guidance and Endowments, to task for trying to undermine the efforts of half a century against FC.

What do Circumcised Women Need?

Women's agency is culture based. Although each woman was speaking her mind the interaction between them created an agency for demanding services at community level and for specific needs. Carl Ratner (2000) maintains that, "The fact that individualistic agency is fostered by, adapts to, and functions to perpetuate specific social relations demonstrates that it is socially intentional like all agency is." The participants were clear about their needs in the USA, those needs may be summarized as follows:

Health information: The participants said they needed to learn more about their bodies and how FC had affected them so as to be able to express themselves to doctors, nurses and other professionals. In addition they needed to know what ailments were specific to FC. To ensure that women would access educational materials, Arabic should be the medium whether the material is on paper or on the internet. Furthermore they were convinced that sex and biological education was best provided to their children by teachers rather than by them at home. Therefore teachers should be trusted with teaching children about their bodies.

As far as FC is concerned they felt that they would rather have the children forget

it or not learn anything about it at all so that it would be erased from their memory.

Concluding from the above: The participants gave information on what type of knowledge they lack, the best language to communicate that information to them and the medium for its communication, as well as who should receive what type of communication.

Education for medical professionals: The participants were of the opinion that despite the wide publicity of FC the medical profession was still not aware of the problem and the knowledge of FC among them was a theoretical one in most cases. As Serene put it they needed specialists with “a professional eye rather than a tourist eye.” Participants also felt that the doctors and nurses were the most suitable to disseminate information to women. Brochures written in Arabic and left at the doctor’s office were certain to be picked up by women.

The participants added that workshops for the medical profession are necessary and should be compulsory to at least prepare them for receiving circumcised women especially those in areas known for having big communities from practicing countries. Those workshops should also contain information about honoring the human rights of women and the confidentiality of their status.

Clinics: The experience of the Wellness Clinic in London and the clinic at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, are two successful trials that are worth repeating in many other cities. The participants suggested hiring of Sudanese and other experienced doctors as consultants in such clinics. There are also other experiences in countries where infibulation prevails that communities such as the Sudanese should bring

to the attention of the medical associations and the Department of Health and Human Services.

One hospital unit in the Middle East dealing with refugees from Sudan has been attempting to perform antenatal opening up of the closed vulva (reversal of FGM or “deinfibulation”) in the middle trimester of pregnancy (20-28 weeks). The aim is to remove the physical barrier created by the genital mutilation and allow the area to heal well before labour. The subsequent risk of trauma in labour is thus reduced, obviating the need for prolonged hospital confinement. This intervention needs further testing; so far, it has only been used in one area for women who live a considerable distance from hospital. Pilot testing could establish whether the procedure is suitable for wide application in the prevention of major perineal trauma. It would have to prove culturally as well as medically acceptable if its use is to spread to district health centre level and possibly village level (WHO, 1997).

The participants felt that such procedures can actually be encouraged and spread in the home countries by immigrant women who return for short family visits.

Changes in the type of medical attention they get: Awareness about certain ailments that are specific to FC needs to be raised among women as well as among members of the medical profession. The statement that women with circumcision give natural births was contested by the participants because they suffer cutting sometimes by untrained doctors and midwives and end up suffering for weeks. With such physical suffering comes the mental suffering. After birth a woman can hardly move or breastfeed while sitting; they said that there is nothing natural about this.

Obstructed labor is long a woman may be seen by three different doctors through different shifts. Serene said, “My doctor wanted to go to dinner I protested, he stayed. Our experiences with doctors are valuable to women. We need to be comfortable with the doctor because we come with this fear of being circumcised added to the general fear

of giving birth. A woman in labor for 24 hours has to deal with three different doctors, that increases her stress.” Serene indicated that having the same doctor attend the birth might be of mental value to women giving birth.

Visas and family members: Participants pointed out that the most beneficial thing that helped them physically and mentally was the presence of mothers or other family members during or shortly after birth. They suggested that the Sudanese community try to present such a need for mothers to the Immigration and Naturalization Services, so that they can treat an application from a pregnant woman for a visit by her mother or aunt or older sister differently than other applications.⁷⁰ One thing that they stressed though was to never let go of the newly gained “tradition” of husbands attending births. Other family members should not “release” the husband from presence with his wife during labor and birth. They felt that this had changed men’s attitudes towards women and what they suffer during birth.

Our Own Feminism

Many of the participants confirmed the strong demand by some Americans that they be assimilated in the host culture for that would make their lives easier (Pickus 1998) would argue in support of such surrender to assimilation. While there was a consensus that people immigrated for their physical and mental well being, the participants felt that they have already broken and left behind many of their cultural practices ((Danquah 2000). Acculturation is a process that is taking its natural course. However living the culture and feeling affinity to those of the same culture is a process

⁷⁰ The United States government has further tightened its visa process for Sudanese nationals for security reasons and mothers are not exempted from the new procedure.

that helped them get the emotional support necessary for accepting the changes in their lives as immigrants.

In the experience of these women immigrant communities provide services that may be difficult or impossible for the host country to provide. Such services include guidance through the system, psychological stability and help during financial need. As the participants had put it even when the state is ready to give financial help it will not be able to provide it if the person is not able to access that service. Fran Markowitz (1996) supports the same in her study of Muslim Bosnians in Israel. Her study found that living in limbo preserving certain features of their community provided psychological stability as well as gender complementarity in the family.

As regards feminists and the attack on FC and other cultural practices (Walker, Daly, and Hosken) the participants voiced no concerns. They were of opinion that “experience teaches everyone.” They pointed out recent dealings that helped shape and pave the way of understandings of how women of other cultures deal with their problems. Feminisms are produced in particular places but are articulated in local terms. Margot Badran argues that,

Yes, the term [feminist] originated in the West, specifically France. No, feminism is not Western. American feminism is not French (as both Americans and French would loudly acclaim). Egyptian feminism is not French and it is not Western. It is Egyptian, as its founders attested and as history makes clear (Badran, 2002).

A culture uprooted and placed in another culture creates a type of feminism that is utilitarian and in some way latitudinarian in its belief in feminist theories and culture.

New Old Ethics

The participants felt that they were being introduced to some new old behavior such as seeking self actualization in work, new work ethics that made any type of work, valuable and honorable. Serene insisted that in the Sudan such ethics were not as strong as they used to be. Participants were also thankful to the training they get on the job site.

None of them reported a discrimination incident which came as a surprise to me. They said they were usually hired in low paying jobs where their labor was needed and in places where American workers change jobs frequently. Department stores, supermarkets and fast food chains would be more than happy to have a worker continue with them for five years. Professionals among them such doctors found jobs in Arab countries embassies. They compared the atmosphere of work in those embassies to the general work conditions in America; they concluded that the American job conditions and training were superior.

The less discriminatory situation in other countries may not be as rosy as it is portrayed. In a recent study Ankomah Baffour found that there was hypocrisy on the Swedish government side regarding African immigrants. He found that the government offers financial aid instead of jobs to Africans to keep them from holding jobs. On the social scene, he said there were still bars that would openly refuse to serve Africans (Baffour, 2001). The participants did compare their situation with others in various countries and concluded that they were better off than all of those who live in other countries. They did say that they should be able to get better jobs, but they have to attend the American school system as the Americans do prefer those educated in their own

system. They kept referring to ways of how to get into the system and overcome it, but words such as 'racism' were not commonly used.

Shortcomings of this Study

This study does not include the men's side of the story. One of the issues that kept being raised throughout the meetings and interviews was the involvement of men and their role in enforcing gender differences and insisting on maintaining traditions where women were concerned. This study does not include men's attitudes. Men's attitudes will make a separate, and may be a longer study. FC will be discussed openly, by Sudanese men, with a man rather than a woman. Such issues are subject to gender barriers within the Sudanese society. Women themselves discouraged me from asking men questions around FC, yet they wanted me to encourage a man who might be doing a study at a university to tackle the subject.

This study was done in one city, including other areas may strengthen the analysis offered in this study. It was done with the feminist perspective that women's own stories make for a valuable source of knowledge about themselves, therefore there is no quantitative data in it.

Because the focus of this study is circumcised women of Northern Sudan it did not include women from the South for example. Two factors are affecting Sudanese immigration to the USA and changing the demography of the Sudanese immigrants particularly in two aspects: ethnicity and education. The visa lottery availed Sudanese with lower schooling to immigrate to the USA, with spouses who may have different levels of education, therefore changing the higher level of education that prevailed among Sudanese immigrants. On the ethnicity aspect Southern Sudanese make the largest group

of Sudanese to come to the USA in the past five years. I did not research these changes as they are still taking place.

Leaving Something Behind

The meetings for this research were a welcome opportunity for women to learn many things about FC. They thought of formalizing such meetings by forming an association that educates them through gatherings and oral discussions as well as provides written materials on the subject and names of doctors who treated circumcised women before. They strongly called for including men in all the educational programs as the participants suggested that men were ignorant about women's bodies.

When I recently contacted the participants to inquire whether they felt that they had gotten anything out of my presence and meetings with them, I received positive answers. The women's association was formed. Despite its difficult birth, "after all it was being born by circumcised women" they joked, there was resilience on the part of women to bring about such an association to ensure certain services for circumcised and other women.

Others were thankful for the positive results they received from some of the immigration work or visits to public offices that I helped with. Over all I am cherishing the new friendships with women of all ages that I gained during this study.

In conclusion I am hoping that this study has reflected the present situation of these women. They are immigrants with a special need. Their educational and health needs are clearly stated by them. While in detail each one of them tells a different struggle story, they meet at their willingness to participate in and adapt different approaches to their specific needs. They are not oblivious to the prejudices of the new

world, yet they feel welcomed and are thankful that they have shed some of the social burdens and the political fears that weighed in their lives at home. So far their limited numbers and level of education and the loose networks they formed have helped their settlement and adaptation with the new culture. The same factors make them perfect for engagement in the existing programs, whether governmental or non-governmental, and for participation in future programs for the rapidly increasing Sudanese immigrant population in the USA.

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