

EXPLORING THE EDUCATION EXPERIENCES OF SUDANESE REFUGEE WOMEN
LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

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Violent civil conflict in the African nation of Sudan created a humanitarian crisis which necessitated involvement and support from the international community, resulting in the resettlement of many Sudanese refugees to the United States. Much of the research on refugee populations has failed to take into account the gendered nature of the refugee experience. This is especially true of the Sudanese refugee population, in which the experiences of men have been well documented, earning them recognitions as the Lost Boys of Sudan; while their female counterparts have remained, for the most, part voiceless. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how Sudanese refugee women perceive and interpret their experiences in formal education programs and how these experiences influence the resettlement process. This study addresses gaps in the literature by providing insight into the lived experiences of nine Sudanese refugee women as they reflect on their education experiences. The findings of this study indicate that refugee women have unique needs during the resettlement process. In addition to the need to learn the language of the country of resettlement, find a job and adjust to social and cultural norms, the Sudanese refugee women in this study also expressed a strong need to establish relationships, gain economic independence, and find a sense of hope in the future. The findings of this study suggest that participating in formal education can assist Sudanese refugee women in the resettlement process by fulfilling many of these needs. Formal education provided the Sudanese refugee women in this study with language and occupational skills, in addition to, and most significantly, a sense of empowerment and the agency necessary for them to redefine their lives and advocate for social change.

Education is my mother and my father

-Sudanese Proverb

Dedicated to the remarkable Sudanese refugee women of Colorado.

Your stories have inspired me.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative, phenomenological research study examines the lived experiences of nine Sudanese refugee women living in Colorado with the intent to reveal the essence and meaning of their experiences with formal education. The participants in this study were relocated to the United States at different times and with the assistance of various resettlement agencies. As a result of either their initial resettlement facilitated by voluntary agencies or through individual relocation, participants settled in Colorado, joining the largest community of Sudanese Lost Girls in the United States.

Although the participants in this study have varied individual backgrounds, they share similar traumatic experiences of fleeing Sudan as a result of civil war, becoming separated from family and living in a refugee camp. While the context of their resettlement falls outside the scope of this research project, the participants did come to the United States with the goal of pursuing education. All of the participants had previous experience with formal education before resettlement to the United States and actively sought opportunities to further their education, both in Africa and in the United States. They struggled to acquire education under challenging circumstances on both continents, suggesting that education played an important role in the lives of these nine Sudanese refugee women and these participants value formal education. To protect the psychological well-being of the participants, the women were not asked to relive or describe the context in which they became refugees, although it is understood that these prior experiences most likely influenced participant perceptions of their current education experiences.

A phenomenological research methodology was used in this study to understand the education experiences of these nine Sudanese refugee women. The purpose of framing this study within a phenomenological methodology was to allow the participants to share their views

about their educational experiences, giving voice to the women as individuals. Phenomenology asks participants to describe their taken-for granted everyday experiences in light of self reflection in order to make meaning of these experiences.

Complementing this phenomenological methodology is the perspective of third-wave feminism, which is used in this study as a justification for an emphasis on individual empowerment and personal narratives describing individual experiences (Coleman, 2009). Third-wave feminism evolved out of concern that conceptualizations of feminism were situated within Western political theories and therefore narrow in focus and inappropriate for describing non-Western contexts (Mack-Canty, 2004). In contrast to other feminist perspectives, third-wave feminism seeks to recognize the diversity of women and their experiences. By employing the third-wave perspective in the conceptualization of this study, a conscious effort was made to bring the voices of the women to the forefront of the study, allowing them to analyze the context of their own lives, without imposing Western feminist ideology on the meaning of these experiences.

The three main research questions addressed in this study are:

1. How do Sudanese refugee women perceive and interpret their experiences in formal education programs?
2. What role does formal education play in the resettlement experiences of Sudanese refugee women?
3. How can formal education assist in meeting the perceived needs of Sudanese refugee women?

Because this study provides insight into the everyday lived experiences of Sudanese refugee women, the findings of this study have practical implications for policy makers,

educators, administrators, humanitarian agencies and social service organizations that assist refugee women in the resettlement process.

Background of the Study

Every year millions of people are forced to leave their homes and seek refuge from violent conflict and human rights abuses. Some are driven by fear, fleeing to survive persecution for reasons of “race, religion, nationality, membership to a particular social group or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010a, p. 14) and when these individuals cross international borders to seek asylum from persecution they qualify for refugee status. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees the number of refugees of concern worldwide was 10.5 million at the beginning of 2009 (UNHCR, 2010b), and over 74,000 of those refugees were resettled in the United States (US Department of Homeland Security, 2010). When refugees flee to other countries, they leave behind more than just their homes; they leave family, social structures, cultural understandings and familiar environments. Upon resettling into a new country, refugees must reconstruct their lives and learn to navigate and adjust to unfamiliar cultural expectations, behaviors and social environments and overcome language barriers. The resettlement process is further complicated by the trauma associated with fleeing violent war, living in refugee camps and the loss of family (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006). Thus, resettlement poses unique challenges for refugees, as they must leave the familiar and adjust and restructure all aspect of their lives within the country of resettlement. For refugee women, the resettlement process may be especially difficult because they must negotiate changing family roles, loss of traditional support systems, barriers to seeking employment and lack of language skills (Martin, 2004).

Justification for the Study

Violent civil conflict in the African nation of Sudan created a humanitarian crisis which necessitated involvement and support from the international community. As a result of ongoing civil war rooted in religious and ethnic differences, as well as the remnants of colonialism (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006), over two million people have been killed (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010), and over 400,000 refugees have fled the nation (UNHCR, 2010b). Many of these refugees have experienced trauma, stress and violence as they have been dislocated from their homes, families and culture. Since 1999, over 23,000 Sudanese refugees have been relocated to the United States (US Department of State, 2008), with over 3,200 refugees entering the United States in 2008 alone (UNHCR, 2010b).

The most notable of these resettlement efforts occurred in 2001, when the United States agreed to resettle 3,800 young refugees, most in their late teens and early twenties, whose tales of surviving hunger, disease and animal attacks, as they wandered seeking refuge from the war in Sudan, earned them the legendary reputation as the “Lost Boys of Sudan” (Bixler, 2005). The Lost Boys were children orphaned or separated from their families as they fled their villages in Sudan and made their way to Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya. Because these children were young when they fled Sudan and did not know their ages, they were assigned ages by aid workers once they reached the refugee camps (Bixler, 2005). Although many Lost Boys are not certain of their exact age, many estimate that they were as young as six or seven when they fled their villages (Bixler, 2005). Their stories of survival and their resettlement to the United States earned them notoriety in the media and has been the subject of books and films.

Forgotten in all of the media attention and publicity are the fates of their female companions, the girls who travelled alongside the boys and faced similar ordeals. Of the 3,800

refugees known as the Lost Boys, nearly 100 of them are actually girls (Bixler, 2005). Giving this group the title the Lost Boys, not only ignores the stories of the girls, but makes them altogether invisible.

Although boys were identified as the majority of unaccompanied minors in Kakuma Refugee Camp, presumably because they were in the fields herding cattle when their villages were attacked, aid workers estimate that the number of unaccompanied minors to reach the camp included nearly two thousand girls who missed out on the chance for resettlement (Bixler, 2005). While girls were amongst the group of refugees resettled to the United States in 2001, it is important to note that their numbers were less than 100, which raises the question of what happened to the girls.

When unaccompanied minors, refugee children separated from their families, arrived at Kakuma, the boys were organized into group homes where they lived with little adult supervision (McKelvey, 2003). In accordance with Sudanese culture, once these girls reached the refugee camps, they were absorbed into foster families where aid workers presumed they would be taken care of. In reality, the girls became domestic servants or entered into marriages arranged by their foster families, so that the families could collect a bride price (Nyabera, 2002). Additionally, some evidence suggests that Sudanese elders, who played a large role determining which refugees qualified for resettlement, may have overlooked girls in favor of resettling boys (Bixler, 2005). Thus, the girls' needs became invisible and their voices silenced.

Most of the existing literature about Sudanese refugees focuses on the experiences of the Lost Boys of Sudan which, while providing insight to the Sudanese refugee experience, does not adequately address the experiences of Sudanese refugee women. Refugee women often find themselves marginalized not only in their new resettlement communities, but also within their

particular refugee communities (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004). For this reason, refugee women are referred to in the literature as “invisible refugees” (Horsbrugh-Porter, 2009; Goodkind & Deacon, 2004; Martin, 2004). The experiences of refugee women are qualitatively different than those of men as women have unique needs throughout the resettlement process. The challenges refugee women face, such as limited transferrable occupational skills, conflicting gender expectations and roles, and language barriers put them at an increased risk for marginalization within the refugee community (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004; Mango 2008; Martin, 2004). As a result, this qualitative study is necessary in order to develop greater understanding of the education experiences of Sudanese refugee women in the United States.

Agencies and personnel working with refugees increasingly recognize the role schools play in providing protection and services which assist refugees in their survival and rehabilitation (Kirk & Cassity, 2007; Mosselson, 2007; Sinclair, 2001). Schools are viewed as a constant in lives that have been defined by chaos as well as a source of security and stability for refugee communities. As one of the most constant institutions in the lives of refugees, schools can assist in meeting the unique needs of refugees. Education ultimately acts as a coping mechanism, providing a semblance of security for refugees who have learned the world can be transient (Mosselson, 2007). In fact, Sudanese parents describe opportunities for education, especially for their daughters, as a motive for resettlement in America, as opposed to Australia or Canada (Palladino, 2008; Shandy & Fennelly, 2006). However, for many Sudanese refugees, education in the United States is their first contact with formal schooling, as many Sudanese children have severely interrupted, or no prior schooling when they enter the United States (Brown et al., 2006; Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006). Once resettled in the United States, refugee students face many barriers to education and find that the formal education system does not meet their needs.

Refugee students enter a system which is foreign to them and which does not currently have effective methods of meeting the complex education needs of refugee students. The complex educational issues that arise when working with a refugee population have been documented (Brown et al., 2006; Palladino, 2008; Szente et al., 2006); however, there is limited research, especially within the United States, about how formal education can be implemented to meet the unique needs of refugee women and assist in the resettlement process.

Organization of the Chapters

The chapters of this thesis are structured to guide the reader through the conceptualization of the research questions, explain how these research questions are applicable to the current literature base, detail how the research was conducted, and describe the findings of the study and the relevance of these findings. CHAPTER II provides an extensive review of relevant literature in the field of refugee education and provides a context for exploring the education of Sudanese refugee women. CHAPTER III details the phenomenological framework in which this study is situated and describes the procedural methodology for participant selection and data collection and analysis. CHAPTER IV describes the qualitative findings of the study, which include the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of the nine Sudanese women. In this chapter the major research findings are organized into eight themes and the data is presented with a conscious effort to allow the voices of the participants to tell their stories. CHAPTER V discusses the findings of the study within the context of Sudanese culture, refugee education and women's empowerment. By bringing together literature from these different fields, the phenomena of experiencing formal education in the United States can be related specifically to the lived experiences of Sudanese refugee women. The paper concludes with a chapter

describing the implications of the study and recommendations for practical applications of the findings.

Key Terms Defined

- Refugee: While recognizing that the definition is not inclusive of the refugee experience and does not take into account all situations of forced migration, this study defines refugees according to the 1951 definition proposed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) which classifies refugees as individuals who are outside of their country of nationality and "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion...is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UNHCR, 2010, p. 14)
- Lost Girls of Sudan: The Lost Girls of Sudan fled their villages in Sudan as young children and became orphaned or separated from their families. They arrived to Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, as unaccompanied minors and were absorbed into foster families where they became domestic servants. Although little has been written about the experiences of the Lost Girls, they faced similar traumatic experiences as those described by the Lost Boys of Sudan, who have received more notoriety.
- Phenomenology: Phenomenology is a qualitative methodological approach which stems from the philosophical writings of Husserl (1964) who advocated for a "return to things themselves" (p. 13). This methodology seeks to understand the nature and meaning of everyday lived experiences as they are individually experienced.
- Third-wave feminism: Third-wave feminism is a feminist perspective which emerged during the late 1980's and evolved from a growing concern that current feminist

ideologies were largely based on a Western perspective of the experiences of women.

Central to the third-wave feminist perspective is recognition of the diversity of women, their lives, and their experiences.

- Resettlement: Resettlement refers to the process of refugees relocating and integrating into the country in which they find permanent asylum. The resettlement process in the United States is facilitated by voluntary agencies which determine resettlement locations and provide refugees with initial support upon their arrival.
- Formal education: For purposes of this study, formal education refers to education programs in which participants follow a structured curriculum in order to obtain a degree or certificate. This definition of formal education is not defined by environmental settings nor limited to traditional education structures such as high school or college, but also takes into account non-traditional education programs, such as home-based learning, and job training programs.
- Empowerment: In accordance with a third-wave feminist ideology, this study recognizes empowerment as a multi-dimensional concept which is experienced differently by individuals based on context. Recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of empowerment, this study conceptualized the term to include increased self-esteem and independence, awareness of power inequalities and the ability to organize and mobilize. However, this study does not seek to narrow the definition of empowerment to a specific illustration, but rather to define the term so that individual participants can identify empowerment for themselves.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of previous research conducted in the fields of refugee education, education for women and Sudanese cultural values. The literature review is organized into sections designed to give the reader a clear understanding of who is designated as a refugee, the unique situation of refugee women, the process of resettlement to the United States, the struggles refugee women face during the resettlement process and the role that formal education plays in successful resettlement for refugee women.

Who Is a Refugee?

First and foremost, it is necessary to define the context in which an individual is considered a refugee. The United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which was adopted in 1951, serves as the centerpiece of international refugee protection (UNHCR 2010a). The 1951 Convention provided a comprehensive legal code regarding the rights of refugees at the international level and defined what it meant to be a refugee. The United Nations grants refugee status to individuals who leave the country of their nationality due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010a, p.14) and are unable to or fearful of seeking protection from the country of their nationality or returning to that country. This definition was expanded in Africa in 1969, by the Organization of African Unity, now the African Union, to include individuals who leave the country of their nationality due to “external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order” (Organization of African Unity, 1969, p. 2).

The 1951 definition, originally intended for Europeans uprooted by World War II, is still recognized by the United Nations as the official definition for the classification of refugees, yet it

is not infallible (Edward, 2007). The 1951 Convention is a “status and rights based instrument” (UNHCR, 2010a, p. 3), which provides protection for refugees by outlining basic minimum standards for the treatment of refugees, while at the same time legally defining refugee status. It is important to recognize that although an individual may have experienced persecution, and identify as a refugee, they must meet the legal definition set forth by the Convention in order to obtain legal refugee status. Individuals seeking asylum in countries outside of their nationality must apply for and receive refugee status in order to be afforded the rights and protection of a refugee within the receiving country. Determination of refugee status is often the responsibility of government agencies within the host country, which can create a negative situation in host countries that neither recognize the refugee status of an asylum seeker nor legitimize them as legal immigrants, stripping them of certain rights and protections which are afforded refugee populations.

Refugee status inherently implies movement across international borders, so although individuals may be uprooted from their homes for reasons previously mentioned, if they do not cross international lines, they are not considered refugees. Likewise, refugee status is generally granted to those who have been targeted individually, ignoring the fact that civil wars, human rights abuses, and systematic political oppression have affected millions of people collectively (Edward, 2007). Additionally, gender is not taken into consideration in this definition, and this gender-blind approach is considered by many to put women at a disadvantage (Boyd, 1999; Edward, 2007; Spijkerboer, 2000).

A focus on refugee women.

Although the refugee phenomenon has been well documented in the literature, the experiences of refugee women are qualitatively different than those of men (Deacon & Sullivan,

2009). Yet, much of the research on refugee populations fails to take into account the gendered nature of the refugee experience (Callamard, 1999). This is an important omission as many claim that women are the “forgotten majority” of the world’s refugee population (Spijkerboer, 2000, p. 16). This lack of focus on the experiences of refugee women leaves women with fewer opportunities to have their voices heard (Horsbrugh-Porter, 2009; Spijkerboer, 2000). Refugee women become invisible refugees, both within their immediate refugee community and the larger communities of their resettlement (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004). Recognizing that men and women have different experiences is essential in the analysis of the lives of refugee women and can “yield important insights into the refugee phenomenon” (Edward, 2007, p. 134).

By exploring the refugee phenomenon through the lens of third-wave feminism, the personal experiences of the individual are highlighted and become the focus of the research. This is an important lens through which to consider the situation of refugee women because it takes a global perspective and provides a foundation on which to advocate for the inclusion of the voices of refugee women in the literature. Third-wave feminism is founded on the principles of inclusiveness and the importance of individual experience (Zimmerman, McDermott & Gould, 2009). Additionally, third-wave feminism “invites those who feel oppressed and marginalized to share their experiences” (Zimmerman et al., 2009, p. 83). This feminist perspective is useful for developing a greater understanding of the experiences of refugee women, a population which has been marginalized and made invisible both within their immediate refugee communities and within the larger context of refugee literature.

Profile of Sudan

Sudan, the largest country in Africa, is located in northeastern Africa and is “an entry point between Africa and the Middle East when traveling over the Red Sea” (Essien & Falola,

2009, p.1). It shares a boarder with Egypt to the north, Libya to the northwest, the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the southwest, Uganda and Kenya to the south, Chad and the Central African Republic to the west and Ethiopia and Eretria to the east.

The population of northern Sudan is predominantly Muslim, Arabic-speaking and characterized as “largely Arabized in culture and outlook” (Holt & Daly, 2000, p. 2). In contrast, the people of southern Sudan belong to a “bewildering variety of ethnic groups” (Holt & Daly, 2000, p. 3) and speak numerous languages (Holt & Daly, 2000; Essien & Falola, 2009). Unlike the population of northern Sudan, they generally are not Muslim, nor do they claim Arab decent (Holt & Daly, 2000). The two largest non-Arab groups include the Dinka and the Beja people (Essien & Falola, 2009).

Diversity in Sudan is not limited to ethnicity, race and religion, but also geography (Essien & Falola, 2009). The country has various geographic markers which shape the “vegetation, climate, temperature, and cultural lifestyle of the people” (Essien & Falola, 2009, p. 2). The climate in Sudan ranges from desert in the north, where rainfall is extremely rare, to “almost equatorial conditions with year-round rainfall in the south” (Rogge, 1985, p. 24). Abundant rainfall and fertile landscape have influenced the lifestyle of the southern Sudanese people, who are mostly farmers, nomads and pastoral people (Essien & Falola, 2009).

The North-South conflict in Sudan.

As this study focuses specifically on the experiences of Sudanese refugees, it is important to provide a brief background on the conflict between northern and southern Sudan. Since gaining its independence from British colonial rule in 1956, Sudan has been at war with itself and spent most of its independence locked in two major civil wars (Deng, 2005). These civil wars between northern and southern Sudan, which lasted from 1955 to 2005, with a cease-fire

between 1972 and 1983, resulted in over 2 million deaths and forced over 4 million people to flee their homes (Breidlid 2010; Central Intelligence Agency, 2010).

The conflict between northern and southern Sudan is a complex situation with roots in political, economic, religious and ethnic differences. Fundamental religious and ethnic differences between the non-Arab, non-Muslim population of southern Sudan and the Muslim, Arab-dominated government of the National Congress Party (NCP) (Breidlid, 2010) created tension as the politically and economically dominant north worked to “promote an Islamic agenda throughout the country, including the south which primarily follows Christianity and indigenous religions” (Holtzman, 2008, p. 16). The discovery of oil in southern Sudan added an additional economic basis for conflict between the northern and southern regions (Breidlid, 2010; Holtzman, 2008).

Post-independence governments “pursued policies that deliberately aimed at marginalizing [southern Sudanese] socially, politically, and economically” (Deng, 2005, p. 246). The Arab government of the north sought to impose *sharia* law on the non-Muslim population of the south and has been accused of supporting and encouraging acts of genocide and violence as well as the enslavement of non-Arabs (Essien & Falola, 2009). In response to northern domination, independence movements involving armed struggle, developed in the south (Holtzman, 2008). These movements had varying agendas ranging from the creation of a more equal, united Sudan to independence for southern Sudan (Holtzman, 2008). From 1955-1972, the leading voice in the struggle for southern independence was the *Anya Nya*, which literally translates to ‘snake poison’ in the Dinka language (Essien & Falola, 2009). This radical group laid the foundations for the later movements of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), which later became known as the

SPLA/M because of their shared political interests. (Essien & Falola, 2009). The SPLA/M sought to “create a social platform that would provide human rights, freedom of speech, education and economic opportunities for all citizens of the country” (Essien & Falola, 2009, p. 33). Despite their ideological message of peace, their radical approach to reform further contributed to the insecurity of Sudan and continued to threaten the livelihoods of the southern Sudanese (Essien & Falola, 2009; Holtzman, 2008).

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed on January 9, 2005, between the NCP and the SPLM/A established a power-sharing government for a six year period at the end of which a referendum was held in January 2011 to determine the future of southern Sudan (Breidlid, 2010). As a result of the referendum vote, southern Sudan is expected to declare its independence in July 2011.

Kakuma Refugee Camp.

In the course of fleeing the violent civil conflict in Sudan, many Sudanese sought refuge across the border in Kenya. In response to the influx of refugees, the Kenyan government established refugee camps to accommodate the arrivals. At the time, Kenya did not have national legislation addressing refugee policy (UNHCR, 2005), and the camp was governed by the UNHCR. However, in 2006, the Kenyan Parliament passed the Refugee Act which made “provisions for the recognition, protection, and management of refugees” (Refugee Act, 2006, p. 1) and appointed a Camp Manager to oversee issues relating to the camp

Kakuma refugee camp is located in the desert of northwestern Kenya and was established in 1992 to serve Sudan refugees displaced from their homes due to civil war (Jansen, 2008). Since that time, the camp has expanded to serve refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Uganda, and Rwanda (Jansen, 2008). Life at

Kakuma is difficult and characterized by poverty, over-crowded conditions, and violence (Hollenbach, 2004; UNHCR, 2011).

Primary school education, sponsored by humanitarian agencies, is available within the camp to children living at Kakuma; however, “the “possibility of any education beyond the primary level is slim” (Hollenbach, 2004). While there was no policy preventing girls from attending school, Mareng (2010) in his qualitative study of formal education in Kakuma, found that girls were being denied education, as “parents often favored male education over female education” (p. 478). Mareng (2010) also found that for those fortunate enough to attend classes, the quality of education did not satisfy the standards of many students due to insufficient materials and a lack of teachers.

Schools at Kakuma adopted the Kenyan curriculum in order to prepare students for Kenyan national examinations which would permit students to continue from primary school to secondary school (Mareng, 2010). The Kenyan education system is based on the British model of education, a remnant of colonialism, in which students complete eight years of primary school, referred to as Standards 1-8, and four years of secondary school, referred to as Forms 1-4 (Mareng, 2010).

At the end of 2000, the United States Refugee Program (USRP) worked to resettle 3,800 Sudanese ‘unaccompanied minors’ to the United States (Jansen, 2008). Since 2001, it is estimated that 25,000 refugees have left Kakuma for resettlement in Western countries (Jansen, 2008). As a result of resettlement, a “steady flow of remittances have become as much a part of the refugee environment as food aid” (Jansen, 2008, p. 572). While agencies and the UNHCR state that resettlement is a last resort option only available to a few, Kakuma has had a large number of refugees obtain resettlement (Jansen, 2008).

Resettlement in the United States

Resettlement refers to the process of refugees integrating into the society of the country in which they find permanent asylum. It can be described as the process “during which a refugee, having arrived in a place of permanent asylum, gradually re-establishes the feeling of control over his/her life and develops a feeling that life is ‘back to normal’” (Colic-Peisker & Tibbury, 2003, p.62). Refugee resettlement in the United States is facilitated by volunteer agencies which provide initial support including housing, language training and assistance in finding employment (Immigration and Refugee Services of America, 2002; Mott, 2010).

The traditional role of voluntary agencies in the US resettlement program has been to arrange US sponsorships for refugees while they are still overseas and, at their destination, to provide for their reception; for initial food, clothing, and shelter for the referral of adults to English-language training and to jobs or employment services; and a variety of other services important to early functioning in a new environment, such as enrolling children in school. (Holman, 1996, p. 17)

These volunteer agencies play a key role throughout the resettlement process, through the initial determination of locations for resettlement within the United States to the additional support they provide once refugees arrive in the United States.

Mott (2010) studied the resettlement patterns of African refugees in the United States and found refugee resettlement to the United States to be a complex process influenced by social, cultural and economic factors. Once resettled in the United States, refugees may decide to relocate to other cities based on information about quality of housing, crime levels, access to education and access to social networks. “These settlement patterns have major consequences not only for the refugees themselves, but also for the communities in which they settle” (Mott,

2010, p. 2). Resettlement is most successful in communities which have strong support from voluntary agencies, because refugees are more likely to migrate away from communities without such support.

Challenges for Women in the Resettlement Process

Research has found that refugees, having survived adversity and conflict, are resilient and resourceful (Matthews, 2008; Papadopoulos, 2007), yet the resettlement process is a “complex, multifaceted process” and is likely “characterized by a variety of problems” (Haines, 1996, p. 37). As refugees navigate the process of resettlement and move from dislocation to relocation, they have a multitude of needs (Papadopoulos, 2007). Refugees arriving to the United States have a range of migration experiences and bring with them a myriad of cultural and social histories (Sossou, Craig, Ogre, & Schnak, 2008). This is an important consideration because although individuals acquire refugee status as a consequence of socio-political circumstances, these circumstances vary. Refugees are not a homogeneous group and treating them as such “tends to erase the different histories, politics, and experiences of the refugee population, a treatment that will eventually structure the process of their resettlement” (Edward, 2007, p. 3). As such, it can be expected that refugees have varying needs and challenges during the resettlement process. Yet despite the divergent social and cultural backgrounds of refugees resettled into the United States, there are some commonalities in the refugee resettlement process and the factors which influence refugees’ early adjustment (Haines, 1996). “All refugees in industrialized countries, regardless of their family composition, face adjustment problems. These problems can be particularly acute where the culture of the home country and the new country are markedly different” (Martin, 2004, p. 131). Challenges for refugees include the need

to learn the language and the customs and norms for social interaction in the country of resettlement (Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009).

When considering the needs and challenges refugees face during resettlement, it is essential to consider that refugee women have unique needs that may differ from the needs of refugee populations in general. Women encounter numerous challenges during the resettlement process including limited transferrable occupational skills, conflicting gender expectations and roles, lack of transportation, and language barriers which put them at an increased risk for marginalization within the refugee community (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004; Mango 2008; Martin, 2004; Sossou et al. 2008).

Language acquisition.

The ability to speak the language of the country of resettlement is consistently cited in the literature as one of the most influential factors in successful adjustment and integration. It is associated with social acceptance, independence, economic self-sufficiency, ability to find housing, obtain employment and access social services (Martin, 2004; Leavey et al., 2004; McBrien, 2005; Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2007; Poppit & Frey, 2007; Shandy & Fennelly, 2006). However, refugee women may struggle with language acquisition as they often have less formal education and foreign language skill training than men (Dona & Berry, 1999). This puts women at a disadvantage in overcoming one of the most important challenges to successful resettlement.

Although refugee women may view language acquisition as important and have a desire to attend language classes, there are often external and internal factors preventing them from doing so. Refugee women face barriers to accessing language training including “cultural constraints on women attending classes” (Martin, 2004, p.136), and the need for child care and

transportation to and from classes (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009). These are important considerations as “failure to learn the new language reduces the ability of refugee women to cope with the new society” (Martin, 2004, p.137). Refugee women report problems such as isolation, dependency on others, and inability to find employment as negative consequences resulting from language barriers (Casimiro, Hancock, & Northcote, 2007; Deacon & Sullivan, 2009). These findings are consistent with research conducted by Brown et al. (2006) who found that language proficiency is not only an important factor in integration, but also a preventative measure, minimizing potential future difficulties for refugees. This is further supported by qualitative interviews with Bosnian refugees in the United States who reported that competence in the language of the country of resettlement created a sense of normalcy and allowed refugees to find a sense of belonging (Keyes & Kane, 2004).

Establishing relationships and achieving social acceptance

Establishing relationships and achieving social acceptance within the country of resettlement is linked to positive psychosocial adjustment. Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham (2009) conducted a qualitative study of the adaptation of Sudanese refugees in Australia. They sought to understand those factors which had a positive implication in the resettlement process and reported that all participants described a common theme of social support. “Intimate social support was viewed as extremely important to positive adaptation” (Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009, p. 37). One participant described a sense of belonging arising from social support, “Making a friend..that’s whereby you feel like you’re, you’re really in, in this country” (p. 37). Likewise, Kovacev & Shute (2004), in a quantitative study of refugees resettled in Australia, found a positive relationship between social support and psychosocial adjustment. Their study focused on the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents because during adolescence,

peer groups become increasingly important. Kovacev & Shute (2004) concluded that adolescents who reported having close friends perceived themselves to be more socially acceptable, highlighting the importance of peer support during the resettlement process. Achieving social acceptance also helps refugees to overcome other challenges associated with resettlement. Brown et al. (2006), reported “success with the social aspects of school was seen as key not only to fulfilling friendship needs but also as an important way of developing academic language and understanding” (p. 159).

For refugees unable to establish a sense of belonging and social acceptance in the country of resettlement, there are negative psychosocial consequences. Sudanese refugee women participating in Poppitt & Frey’s (2007) study described restricted social involvement due to the lack of a supportive social structure as a source of stress. Likewise, in a study of Bosnian women resettled in the United States, Keyes & Kane (2004) found that refugees who were not able to form associations with people in their new homes “had problems in accepting the losses from their pasts, as well as in dealing with painful memories of betrayal in their old homes” (p. 821). Finding a sense of belonging was an important factor in preventing negative psychosocial consequences such as “loneliness, shock, humiliation, inferiority and dejection” (p. 827). Keyes & Kane (2004) concluded that community programs which enable refugees during the resettlement process to develop a stronger sense of belonging may “promote positive health and successful adaptation among refugees” (p. 827).

Challenging conceptions of gender roles.

Displacement and resettlement greatly impacts family and community structures. For refugee women these changes have many consequences (Martin, 2004). Traditional family structures are often disrupted due to death or separation during flight from the country of origin.

In southern Sudan men often found themselves forced to volunteer as soldiers in the SPLA/M to defend their family, property and cultures (Essien & Falola, 2009). Therefore, women may find themselves as single heads of household and must learn to cope with changes in family structure and shifts in gender roles (Martin, 2004, p. 15).

Gender roles are cultural constructs and as such, each culture has conceptions of masculinity, femininity and appropriate gender roles (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Krulfeld, 1994). For refugees, the process of being uprooted from their home countries and resettling into a new country often requires them to negotiate and redefine gender roles (Krulfeld, 1994). Often, the gender expectations within countries of resettlement are markedly different, “with women now often having greater daily freedoms than they or their families are accustomed” (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009). Thus, refugee women often find themselves struggling with conflicting cultural expectations about their roles within society.

Sudan is a patriarchal society in which “men control every aspect of its social and political structures” (Essien & Falola, 2009, p. 137). Sudanese culture ascribes to strict expectations of appropriate gender roles and social relations for men and women. It is a culture in which “gender relations are based on the subordination of women as well as on respect and obedience of women to men—whether father, brother, uncle or husband” (Edward, 2001, p. 275). In Sudan, the father is considered “the eye of the family because he watches over everyone, and as the husband he is the one who makes final decisions for the family” (Essien & Falola, 2009, p. 137). In many societies, appropriate gender roles and social relations “prescribe that men are the key participants in the public arena, whereas women are found in the private sphere” (Boyd, 1999, p. 9). This is also true of Sudanese culture where women are traditionally responsible for domestic duties such as child care and food preparation, while “men are always regarded as

heads of the household” (Edward, 2001, p. 275). These prescribed roles, such as the role of wife and mother, may cause women to remain “confined within their homes and thus be set off from experiences that would help them acculturate to the new society” (Haines, 1996, p. 29).

Edward (2001), in her research with Sudanese refugee women, found that within countries of resettlement, the renegotiation of gender roles often leads to a shift in power relations between men and women. As the Sudanese women in her study assumed greater roles outside the home, they also asserted “greater involvement in decision-making, particularly on financial issues, an area which has been the sole domain of men in the past” (Edward, 2001, p. 282). The shift in gender relationships and accepted gender roles created tension between the men and women, as the male refugees in her study viewed the shift in gender roles with contempt (Edward, 2001). Gender-role negotiations may contribute to increased instances of domestic violence within refugee households (Martin, 2004; James, 2010). Because of the cultural expectation that men are the head of the household, James (2010), found that some men reported feeling undermined by women and would use violence in an “effort to make their wives and children obey and show respect” (p. 280).

Finding employment.

The United States model of refugee resettlement emphasizes American cultural values of independence and self-sufficiency. Legislation, including the Refugee Act of 1980 and the Refugee Assistance Amendments enacted in 1982 and 1986, “stress the achievement of employment and economic self-sufficiency by refugees as soon as possible after their arrival in the United States” (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2007). Within six months of their arrival in the United States, working-age refugees are expected to find work (Immigration and Refugee Services of America, 2002). This has significant implications for refugee women who may be

seeking employment in the public sphere for the first time in their lives (Martin, 2004).

The necessity of finding employment is most pronounced for unmarried women and single heads of household (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009). “The pressure to obtain immediate employment to provide for their families may restrict these refugee women’s ability to pursue an education that may improve their future chances of obtaining well-paying jobs” (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009, p. 280). However, the opportunity to earn an income is a welcome change to some women. Edward (2001), in her study of Sudanese refugee women, found that as women become involved in economic activities, they “realize the importance of women’s economic independence” (p. 282) and challenge the cultural belief that women must be economically dependent upon men.

The Role of Schools in Resettlement

There is growing recognition that education can provide protection for refugees (Kirk & Cassity, 2007) and is essential to the rehabilitation of refugee children (Sinclair, 2001). Humanitarian Graça Machel (1996) best summarizes the optimism surrounding the role of education in the lives of refugees when she writes, “when everything around is chaos, schools can be a haven of security that is vital to the wellbeing of war-affected children and their communities” (p. 43). Schools provide consistency and stability in the unsettled and transient lives of refugees (Matthews, 2008; Mosselson, 2006). For refugees, “education ultimately acts as a vital coping mechanism as they adapt to their new life trajectories” (Mosselson, 2006, p. 110). Sinclair (2001), in her studies of emergency education, found that the structure provided by schools can normalize the lives of displaced populations, restore an element of hope and contribute to successful resettlement for refugees by meeting psychological and social needs. Additionally, education is an important tool in building social capital and gaining employment,

therefore the ability of refugee women to access education opportunities has a strong impact on their ability to successfully navigate the resettlement process (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010).

Schools play a dominant role in the resettlement process as they are the primary institution with which adolescent refugees come into contact. The ability of refugees to access and utilize opportunities for education in the country of resettlement has a positive impact upon general wellbeing and settlement (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010). Schools contribute to the resettlement process because they impact the “overall wellbeing, successful adjustment, and future economic and occupational success in the country of resettlement” (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007, p.37), while at the same time providing “safe spaces for new encounters, interactions, and learning opportunities” (Matthews, 2008, p.32). In schools, refugees are exposed to the dominant culture of the host country and “their experiences in these social and cultural institutions are critical to their future paths of integration in the host country” (Oikonoidoy, 2007, p.16).

In general, school has a “unique and influential impact on the lives of adolescents” (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007, p. 30), giving school the position of defining and influencing an individual’s sense of community. In a qualitative study of Sierra Leonean refugees in New York City public schools, participants identified school as “by far the most significant influence on their adaptation” (Davies, 2008, p. 369). These refugee students attributed their self-confidence, resilience and ability to overcome extreme life events to the “caring, sharing, trusting community created by the school” (Davies, 2008, p. 369). They highlighted the importance of school in establishing a sense of belonging and often spoke of the school as a second family, their mother and father or home (Davies, 2008; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007).

Schools provide a context for developing relationships with peers and these friendships can influence the degree to which refugees positively adjust to the resettlement experience. Sharkey (2008) studied the primary school education experiences of girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone, and found that the girls “appreciated being at school, away from the domestic world, with its lack of peer connection, and its social isolation and ill-treatment from family members” (p. 574). For these girls, school provided the only opportunity to make friends and establish social connections.

Research suggests that strong, supportive relationships amongst women help them to continue in formal education (Prins, Willson-Toso, & Schaff, 2009). Marginalized women, such as female refugees, who are able to “establish friendships, find confidants, and exchange emotional and material support through non-formal education are more likely to experience multiple psychological and material benefits” than those who are not a part of such networks (Prins et al., 2009 p. 337). For instance, Mosselson (2006) examined the experiences of Bosnian female refugees in New York City schools and found that students’ academic achievement was linked to social and psychological advantages by “opening doors to friendship” and that students “used their academic success as a bridge out of isolation” (p. 111). These findings are supported by Brown et al. (2006) who found that amongst Sudanese refugees, “a feeling of connectedness, of being part of, and accepted by, other students provides a context within which students are willing to take risks with language” (p. 158). In a more recent study of Bosnian refugee women, conducted by Sossou et al., (2008), participants made references to the importance of early access to education during the first years of resettlement. These women viewed education as a means of providing “successful integration” (p. 375). One woman in the study expressed her concern that, “There should be some kind of education, like for six months or a year of schooling

or something where one could obtain some kind of trade to feel more stable because society is unstable enough” (p. 376).

The resettlement process, although inherently difficult, can be made easier for refugees when refugee resettlement agencies and schools work closely together (Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006). Education institutions can bridge gaps across social worlds, meeting psychosocial needs for “social support, play and affiliation” (Prins et al., 2009, p. 348). Community institutions, such as schools, can provide information, advice and encouragement as well as access to resources such as referrals to social service agencies or information about employment (Prins, et al., 2009). Teachers and school personnel who interact with refugee students can serve as a conduit, linking the home, school and social services (Fazel, Doll & Stein, 2009). For refugees, access to these services provides resources necessary to meet their needs during the resettlement process. The integration of services through institutions such as schools provides refugees with connections to the larger community. Therefore schools and families need to work together in order to create a mutual understanding and determine the best way to address the developmental needs of refugee students. Palladino (2008) suggests that encouraging parents’ involvement in the schools “created a unique bond between teachers and parents that eventually led to more in-depth dialogue about the families’ historical experiences and aspirations for their future in the community” (p. 203). For refugee families, interactions with the school may be the link through which they develop a greater social network which is associated with positive resettlement experiences. Parents can utilize the resources provided by schools in order to enhance the development of their children.

However, not all education experiences are positive. Davies & Webb (2000) studied the experiences of Somali refugees in Wales and found that schools were not equipped to handle the

unique needs of refugee students. For many of the boys, this “had the effect of seriously compounding their feeling of alienation” (p. 550). Davies & Webb (2000) suggest that a welcoming environment within the schools is also an important factor in resettlement.

Roxas (2008) conducted a qualitative research study of Somali Bantu refugees attending high school in the United States. Parents and students in this study reported trying to bridge the gap between the home and the school. “By building and strengthening networks with teachers at schools and tutors in the local community, Somali Bantu parents are trying to provide their children with educational resources and information that they themselves do not currently possess” (Roxas, 2008, p.6). This study illustrates the importance of examining and strengthening the link between the home and the school for refugee students and their parents in order to successfully navigate the resettlement process.

Empowering Women Through Education

Women’s empowerment is at the forefront of the human rights, feminist, and development discourse. The World Bank considers empowerment of women critical to poverty and vulnerability reduction (Malhorta, Schuler & Boender, 2002). Additionally, the United Nations (2010) identified gender equality as a Millennium Development Goal, recognizing the need to empower women as a means of reducing poverty. However, empowerment is not a single trajectory and does not have the same meaning for all women. As such, a consensus on the conceptualization of the term ‘empowerment’ is not evident in the literature and the term has become somewhat cliché.

The overuse and misuse of the term ‘empowerment’ necessitates defining the term for the purposes of this study. The term empowerment “has become a synonym for participation, for speaking out, or for feeling that one can accomplish an important task” (Stacki & Monkman,

2003, p. 181), yet these definitions do not fully capture the concept of empowerment. Numerous definitions of empowerment exist although “there is a nexus of a few key, overlapping terms that are most often included in defining empowerment: options, choice, control, and power” (Malhorta et al., 2002). Empowerment must be recognized as a “multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon that changes according to context, circumstances, and interests” (Agot, 2008, p. 289). The definition proposed by Stromquist (1995, as cited in Stromquist 2002), consists of four dimensions and can assist in conceptualizing the multi-dimensional phenomenon of empowerment for the purpose of this study:

The cognitive (critical understanding of one’s reality), the psychological (feelings of self-esteem), the political (awareness of power inequalities and the mobility to organize and mobilize) and the economic (capacity to generate independent income). (p. 23)

Supporting Stromquist’s (2002) argument that empowerment for women must have an economic component., Agot (2008), in her study with women in South Africa, found that women described empowerment as “those who are successful in their own right and by their own (albeit enabled) efforts” (p. 296). When asked to describe what empowerment looks like, 63% of women identified empowered women as “those who have attained an economic indicator (a successful business, economic stability, ability to support self and family)” (Agot, 2008, p. 296).

Individual empowerment is a fundamental component of third-wave feminism which recognizes the importance of individuals understanding power relations in order to end relationships of domination and oppression (Zimmerman et al., 2009). Because formal education is considered the means through which economic and class inequalities are reproduced and reinforced, education institutions are arguably the main instrument through which gender equality can be achieved (Stromquist, 2006). According to Stromquist (2006) both formal and

non-formal education can “provide protected places where women can acquire their sense of autonomy, raise consciousness about their similarities, network, organize and mobilize for change” (Staudt, Rai & Parpart, 2002, p. 240). Likewise, the apparent link between formal education and empowerment for women is supported by Hatoss & Huijser (2010) who found that Sudanese women “view education as an avenue to gain agency to change their lives and their society” (p. 156).

Ellis (1995) conducted a study of women participating in non-formal education in the Caribbean and found that women “gained self-confidence, recognized ways in which they could become more self-reliant, and realized that they could manage on their own” (Knowledge and Skills section, para. 1). The women in this study recognized a need for change and as a result of their education experiences were “able to articulate the desired change and were willing to achieve it” (Conclusion section, para. 2). These women experienced a sense of empowerment as a result of their participation in non-formal education. They were “able to define self interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able, but entitled to make choices” (Malhorta et al., 2002, p. 6). Agot (2008) found that “empowerment is not the end product in terms of food in store or safe water in the tank; it is the knowledge and assurance that you have the means and ability to obtain the food or safe water whenever it is needed” (Agot, 2008, p. 297). This suggests that empowerment is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Yet, for education to genuinely empower women, it must “facilitate the transformation of unjust relationships and values” (Murphy-Graham, 2010, p. 330). Both men and women must change in order for gender equality to be established (Murphy-Graham, 2010).

Situating the Present Study within the Literature

As highlighted in this literature review, the experiences of refugee women are qualitatively different from the experiences of refugee men and therefore further exploration of these experiences is required. Refugee women resettled to the United States face numerous challenges throughout the resettlement process including the need to acquire a new language, find employment, establish a social network and negotiate changing gender roles. As formal education is considered a means of empowerment for women as well as a vital tool in successful resettlement for refugees, there is need for a fuller understanding of how refugee women perceive their experiences with formal education in the United States and the role these formal education experiences play in the resettlement process of refugee women.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study was developed according to two foundational principles of women-centered research; (1) the first, that women should define their own experiences as social actors and (2) the second, that aspects of experiences must be explored as they are experienced only by women (Levesque-Lopman, 1988). In accordance with third-wave feminist philosophy, this study was designed with an emphasis on individual experience and a necessity to allow women to speak for themselves (Zimmerman et. al., 2009). With these principles in mind, a qualitative research approach was selected for this study because it allows for a holistic and detailed exploration of individuals in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). Additionally, qualitative research gives participants voice, a central aspect of women-centered research, and a necessary component for gaining “valuable insights into the ways in which [refugees] negotiate and construct their lives in school while in exile” (Oikonomidou, 2007, p.18).

Informing this qualitative approach is a phenomenological research methodology which aims to gain a thorough understanding of the nature and meaning of lived experiences. A phenomenological design is ideal for gaining an understanding of lived experiences because “phenomenology asks, ‘What is this or that kind of experience like?’” (Van Manen, 1990, p.9). Therefore, to best understand the lived experiences of refugee women, a qualitative phenomenological research methodology was selected for this study. This methodology places women at the center of the study and permits women’s experiences to clearly emerge, allowing a thorough exploration of the proposed research questions.

Phenomenological Framework

Phenomenological methodology is derived from the philosophical writings of Husserl (1964) who advocated for a return “to the things themselves” (p. 13). This approach involves the

description of “things as one experiences them, or of one’s experiences of things” (Hammond, Howarth & Keat, 1991, p.1). In phenomenology the goal of the research is to understand the meaning of an experience by those who have experienced it. Husserl (1970) also introduced the concept of the “life world,” which is described as the “taken for granted everyday activities and common sense meanings” (Von Eckartsberg, 1986, p. 9). The concept of the life world informs this study, as the goal of the research is to explore the structure of the life world of Sudanese refugee women and to understand the lived world as experienced in everyday situations and relations (Van Manen, 1990, p. 101). It is this through this unique perspective that phenomenology seeks meaning and essence of knowledge. The researcher describes the things in themselves in light of self-reflection, a process which involves the “blending what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage point of possible meanings” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Spiegelberg (1975) best describes the undertaking of the phenomenological research and the methodology of this study when he states,

Phenomenology follows its own laws. Whoever embarks on it has to follow it wherever it leads. It makes no promises of safe and easy solutions. But it may at least be a help in facing the state of our world squarely and honestly, without deflation or inflation, without the impoverishment of a reductionist positivism or the self-deceptive constraints of a merely conceptual metaphysics (p. 79).

Phenomenological Reduction

Phenomenology is a methodology carried out in reflection and as such the researcher must temporarily suspend all assumptions about the phenomena in order to reach the true essence of the phenomena (Husserl, 1982). This is done through a process Husserl (1982) referred to as phenomenological reduction, which he describes as a “refraining from judgment” (p. 59). In

phenomenological reduction, the researcher reflects on the phenomenon being studied while maintaining a state of neutrality. “It is Husserl’s contention that a reflecting act can be neutralized, i.e. in reflection one can refrain from taking a position with regard to the object of the act of being reflected upon, be it the same position as the underlying act or some modality of it” (McKenna, 1982, p. 151). The researcher must put aside individual assumptions and biases in order to experience the data as it is. “What is doubted are the scientific ‘facts,’ the knowing of things in advance, from an external base rather than from internal reflection and meaning” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Phenomenological research is based on the notion that “it is more rigorous to acknowledge the role of consciousness and take it into account than it is to ignore it” (Giorgi, 1997, Key Aspects section, para. 2). This rigorous reflective process justifies phenomenology as a research method through which human experience can be explored and understood.

Epoche.

The term “epoche” is derived from the Greek word “cessation” (McKenna, 1982) and is applied in phenomenology as a method by which prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas are set aside in order to allow things, people and events to enter into consciousness as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). The epoche process encourages reflective-meditation in which preconceptions and prejudgments are permitted to “enter the consciousness and leave freely, being just as receptive to them as I am to the unbiased looking and seeing” (Moustakas, 1994, p.89). Epoche requires a natural reflection and “involves refraining from performing the position-taking of the underlying grasped act” (McKenna, 1982, p. 152).

There is much debate over whether epoche and reduction are the same (McKenna, 1982, p. 148) and although Husserl does not make clear the relationship of reduction and epoche, he

does indicate that epoche makes reduction possible (Husserl, 1980/1982). Rather than assume reduction is synonymous with epoche, McKenna (1982) suggests that epoche is one method of reduction, while not dismissing the possibility that there may be others. Therefore, this study accomplishes phenomenological reduction through the process of epoche.

During the epoche process, I kept a journal of personal reflective meditations. By bringing to consciousness my internal reflections and assumptions, I acknowledged preconceptions and biases grounded in my personal experiences and was able to bracket these experiences in order to prevent past experiences from predetermining present experiences (Giorgi, 1997). In this manner I was able to accept the experiences of the refugee women for what they were, allowing them to speak in their own voice without holding preconceived perceptions about the experiences of these refugee women. While I recognize that I cannot remove myself from this study, nor do I believe it necessary to do so, by going through the epoche process and acknowledging my preconceptions and biases I made an effort to maintain a constant awareness of myself in the research. This awareness assisted me in recognizing my influence on the research, which was especially important considering my role as a participant observer. Maintaining an awareness of myself in the research also allowed me to minimize the tendency to impose my perspective on participant interpretations of their experiences.

Researcher Perspective

As my own life experiences are immediately accessible to me, they prove to be a logical starting point for phenomenological research (Van Manen, 1990). I am entering this research project as an American woman from California with a few years of international experience. My interest in understanding the education experiences of refugee women stems from my own experience as an educator, both in the United States and in Malawi, Africa. For two years, I

lived in a rural village in Malawi and worked as a community health educator with the United States Peace Corps. During this became aware of inequalities of gender parity in education, with boys greatly outnumbering girls at the secondary school level. Additionally, in the two years that I lived there, not a single girl passed the national exam, taken after the final year of secondary school, and obtained a Malawi School Certificate of Education (MCSE), which is the equivalent of a United States high school diploma.

When I returned to the United States, I was hired to teach at a public middle school in California in a city with a large agricultural industry sustained by migrant laborers. It was in this education context that I interacted with migrant families and families who had settled in the area, but at one time had been migratory. Although I did have prior experience working with refugee populations, teaching in this community gave me experience working with migrant populations who find themselves forced to migrate as a matter of circumstances.

Throughout my experiences it became evident that specific populations were underserved by current education systems. In Malawi they were primarily girls and women and in the United States they were children of migrant farm workers and students with limited English vocabulary. I saw a need for conceptualizing and implementing education programs aimed at meeting the unique need of these marginalized populations and therefore became interested in first understanding the education experiences of these populations. This study was conceptualized as a means of exploring the experiences of a marginalized population, specifically Sudanese refugee women, and allowing this population to define and describe their own experiences

Site Selection

Refugee resettlement in the United States is facilitated by volunteer agencies and generally refugees have no choice in their final resettlement locations (Sossou, et al., 2008).

This unpredictability in resettlement has created pockets of refugee communities throughout the United States, often shifting the demographic make-up of a community. One such community in Colorado was identified through extreme case sampling (Creswell, 2008) as home to the largest population of Lost Girls of Sudan; Sudanese refugees who fled their homeland as children and adolescents and were resettled in the United States. This community was purposefully selected as a research site for this project because it has the distinguishing characteristic of access to a non-profit organization providing aid to Sudanese refugee women and assisting them throughout the resettlement process. In the interest of protecting both the organization and participants, and in order to maintain confidentiality, the organization is not named or described in detail as it is unique and would be easily identified. Likewise, identifying the city in which this organization is located would threaten confidentiality and therefore, the community is referred to throughout the manuscript as the Sudanese refugee community.

Entry into the site was negotiated with the founder of the organization as well as the Board of Directors, all of whom were personally and professionally interested in the research project. In the spring and summer of 2010, I was associated with the organization in an official capacity volunteering as an intern. During this time, I developed my role as a participant observer within the organization. As a participant observer, I shared in the professional and personal experiences of research participants in both formal and informal settings and became immersed in their daily lives. This perspective allowed me to further develop an understanding of the central phenomenon.

Participants

Participants for this study were identified through qualitative snowball sampling (Creswell, 2008) with initial participants identified through contacts of the non-profit

organization. The organization, founded in 2008, by a Sudanese woman, herself a refugee, is a non-denominational, non-profit organization is dedicated to empowering Sudanese refugee women through enrollment in formal education in the United States. This organization provides financial support for women to pursue education opportunities, assists with enrollment applications and financial aid procedures, and also arranges tutoring services and transportation. The education mission of this organization highlights the central phenomenon of this study and made this site a logical choice for participant recruitment.

Invitations to participate in this study were extended to Sudanese refugee women over the age of 18, who have experienced the phenomenon of formal education by attending a high school, community college, university or a community-based education program in the United States. By including women with different levels of education, the individual experiences of these participants create a general perception of the education experiences of these Sudanese refugee women. Additionally, as interviews were conducted in English, ability to verbally communicate in English was necessary for participation in this study.

Letters describing the study and detailing the expectations of research participants were distributed during social events within the Sudanese community. Nine Sudanese refugee women agreed to participate in this study. While the appropriate number of participants in a phenomenological study depends upon the nature of the phenomenon to be studied, Skuza (2007) suggests that a sample for a phenomenological study may have as few as six participants. The sample size of nine, while small, allowed for extensive fieldwork leading to a comprehensive understanding of the individual experiences of each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age¹	Ethnicity	Years in US	Education in Africa²	Education in US
Jasmine	32	Didinga	7 years	Completed primary school in Kenya and secondary school in Sudan. Was enrolled in East African University.	Graduated with BS from US University; Currently enrolled in Master's program
Amina	24	Didinga	4 years	Completed primary school and Forms 1-3 in Kenya. Was enrolled in second term of Form 4.	One semester high school; Passed GED exam; Currently enrolled in community college
Grace	24	Didinga	3 years	Completed primary school and Form 1 in Kenya. Was enrolled in Form 2.	Completed GED; Currently enrolled in University
Miriam	24	Didinga	3 years	Completed primary school and Form 1-2 In Kenya and was enrolled in Form 3.	One year high school; Passed GED exam; Certified Nursing Assistant; Currently enrolled community college
Angelina	22	Didinga	3 years	Completed primary school and Form 1 in Kenya. Was enrolled in second term of Form 2.	Passed GED exam; Certified Nursing Assistant; Currently enrolled in community college
Sophia	22	Didinga	6 years	Completed Form 1 and was enrolled in Form 2.	Graduated high school; Currently enrolled in University
Rabecca	--	Lotuku	3 years	Completed primary and secondary school in Kenya.	Currently enrolled in University
Mercy	--	Didinga	3 years	Completed primary school, and Form 1 and 2 in Kenya. Was enrolled in Form 3.	Currently working on high school diploma
Nadia	30	Didinga	2 years	Completed primary and secondary school in Kenya. Graduated Kenyan college with a certificate in Tourism.	Currently enrolled in community college

¹ Because the women were young when they fled Sudan and were separated from their families, many do not know their true ages. The ages given are the estimates they provided on their resettlement documents.

² The education systems of Sudan and Kenya are modeled after the British system in which primary school consists of Standards 1-8 (Equivalent to the US grades 1-8) and secondary school is Forms 1-4 (Equivalent to the US Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior years of high school)

In order to establish a context for the experiences of each participant, Table 1 illustrates the background of each participant including pseudonym, age, ethnicity, years living in the United States, education level reached while in Africa and education level reached in the United States. All but one of the participants in the research project are Didinga, and while they are not all originally from the same village in Sudan, they are familiar with one another from either living together in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya or an orphanage in Juja, Kenya. All of the women in this study received formal education while in Africa, although the number of years completed and the quality of education varies.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with ethical standards, I established clear agreements with research participants as to both my role and their role in the research process, secured informed consent from participants, established a protocol for maintaining confidentiality, and outlined procedures for ensuring full disclosure of the nature, purpose, and requirements of the research (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to agreeing to participate in the research project, each potential participant received an information letter detailing the purpose and nature of the research and expectations as a participant in the study (See Appendix B). This information was also verbally explained and potential participants had an opportunity to ask questions about the study and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate and signing a consent form (See Appendix C). Participants understood and appreciated the fact that this research project focused on their interpretations of education rather than the events surrounding their refugee status. As such, this study did not pry into their experiences fleeing Sudan or living in a refugee camp in Kenya, nor did it ask participants to relive experiences associated with becoming a refugee. Additionally, participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any

reason. Participants recognized that this study included minimal psychological risk and therefore none of the participants felt the need to withdraw from the study for this or any other reason.

Upon agreeing to participate in the study, individuals signed a written consent form expressing their voluntary participation in the study. Participants were each given a \$10 gift card as an expression of gratitude for their personal time dedicated to the lengthy data collection process.

Considerations for confidentiality were of the utmost importance as participants are members of a close-knit Sudanese community and have already found themselves in precarious situations as refugees from their homeland. While the study was not anonymous, as participants were indentified for the study based on peer recommendations, names of participants were not used in data collection or reporting. Participants were assigned a pseudonym and are referred to by this pseudonym throughout the reporting. Additionally, the name and identifying characteristics of the organization are not included in any reporting so as to maintain participant confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data collection began in the summer of 2010, with the final reporting of data analysis completed in spring of 2011. The fieldwork portion of this research project, conducted in Colorado, yielded qualitative data in the form of observation field notes and interviews. Initial interviews, which serve as the primary source of data collection, were conducted in the summer of 2010 and follow-up interviews were completed in late summer of 2010.

Phenomenology attempts to “ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques, and concepts that would rule-govern the research” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 29). Thus, an inductive approach to data collection was employed, moving

from specific observations to broader generalizations. Initial data collection was exploratory and open-ended in accordance with inductive data collection, allowing for focus on the particular phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2005).

After consenting to take part in the study, each participant was asked to take part in a semi-structured, one-on-one, audio recorded interview with the aim of obtaining a “concrete, detailed description of the subject’s experience and actions, as faithful as possible to what happened as experienced by the subject” (Giorgi, 1997, Phenomenological Method section, para. 4). Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and five participants agreed to a second, 30 minute follow-up interview conducted a month after the initial interview. In most cases, at the request of the participants, interviews were conducted in their own homes. It was important that the interviews took place in settings where participants felt comfortable to keep the phenomenological interviews an informal, interactive process (Moustakas, 1994).

Interviews began and ended with social conversations in order to create and maintain a relaxed and trusting environment and ensure that participants were comfortable with the audio recording equipment (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were constructed around broad, open-ended questions concerning participants’ education experiences in order to allow participants sufficient opportunity to express their viewpoints and provide a comprehensive telling of personal experiences (Giorgi, 1997). Although the interviews were semi-structured, (See Appendix D) as a phenomenological study, these questions were altered and varied as participants revealed their experiences.

As a participant observer living in the home of one of the research participants, I was privy to personal interactions and informal conversations, which also inform this study. My role as a participant observer shifted at times to active participant as I developed personal

relationships with research participants and become involved in and developed an understanding of personal aspects of participants' lives outside the scope of the research. These experiences shaped my understanding of the central phenomenon as it presented itself in the daily lives of the research participants.

Data Analysis

Audio files from each of the interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions were reviewed for emerging themes related to the experience. Follow-up interviews, structured around these initial emerging themes, were conducted with five of the participants creating an opportunity for participants to clarify and expand upon their descriptions of the experience. Original transcriptions were sent to each participant, who were asked to review the transcriptions to ensure that their experiences were genuinely represented. Asking participants to review and confirm or change the data ensured that participants' experiences were not misrepresented (Moustakas, 1994).

Once transcriptions were verified and validated by the participants they were analyzed according to Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's method of phenomenological data analysis. This method was chosen because it is frequently employed in phenomenological studies (Creswell, 1998) and utilizes the five basic principles of analysis used in many qualitative methodologies: (1) collecting verbal data, (2) reading the data, (3) dividing the data into parts, (4) organizing and expressing the data in disciplinary language and (5) summarizing the data for reporting (Giorgi, 1997).

As a phenomenological approach is holistic, initial readings of all data including interview transcriptions and observation notes, were done to gain a global sense of the data before beginning analysis (Giorgi, 1997). While mentally retaining this global sense of the data,

each transcript was analyzed for expressions relevant to the experience. Through the process of horizontalization, these expressions were identified and listed into primary groupings. Invariant constituents were determined by asking the following two questions for each expression: (1) Did the expression contain a moment of the experience necessary for understanding it and (2) Was it possible to abstract and label this experience? (Moustakas, 1994). Expressions which did not meet these two requirements were eliminated. These invariant constituents were then clustered and thematic labels were applied. Using these themes, textural and structural descriptions of the experience were developed for each individual participant using verbatim examples from the transcriptions. These individual textural-structural descriptions were used to develop a composite description capturing the meanings and essences of the experience of the group as a whole.

Validity and Credibility

In qualitative research the term validity “does not imply the existence of any ‘objective truth’ to which an account can be compared” (Maxwell, 2005). Rather, in this tradition threats to validity, which take the form of alternative explanations, are identified after the data has been collected. This is especially true in phenomenological research in which the goal of the study is to identify the essence of the subjective truth of a lived experience. However, it is important that threats to identifying the essence of the phenomenon were accounted for and controlled.

Phenomenological research data is collected from first-person accounts of an experience. Therefore to ensure that participant experiences were not misrepresented, transcriptions were sent to each individual for review. All findings of the study were reported back to participants, who in the role of co-researchers, confirmed the validity of the identification and analysis of the

themes. The process of peer review helped ensure the interpretations of the data are both reasonable and reliable.

Additionally, in my role as participant observer I developed an understanding of the daily lived experiences of participants, and was able to triangulate data collected from interviews with personal observations and informal conversations with members of the community not participating in the research study. By collecting multiple forms of data, including observations, non-formal conversations, and formal interviews, there is a greater chance that the data collected is credible and trustworthy.

Methodological Limitations

In the interest of protecting the identities of the participants in the study and the organization with which they are associated, specific details pertaining to the city and region in Colorado in which these participants live are purposefully omitted from this manuscript. While more contextualization of the environment may provide the reader with further insight into environmental factors influencing the lives of these participants, this is a necessary precaution because the uniqueness of the organization makes it easily identifiable.

Additionally, as this study focused on the perceptions of the educational experiences of these women, evaluating the specific education systems in which they participated is outside the scope of the study. The focus of this study is not on the curricular content or pedagogical methodologies, but on the experiences of individuals. The focus of the study is not to understand what was taught, or the educator's purpose in teaching, but rather how participants experienced what was taught.

While a phenomenological methodology is ideal for understanding the lived experiences of participants, this methodology asks participants to recount their experiences. In doing so,

participants may describe their experiences in a more positive or negative light, as they have had time to reflect upon and make meaning of these experiences within the context of their current life situations.

Finally, when negotiating access to the organization for purposes of recruiting participants for this research study, the Board of Directors stipulated that research questions would focus only on the experiences of participants in relation to education. This was agreed upon in order to protect the psychological well-being of the participants, yet limited the scope of questioning. The personal lives of participants pertaining to their refugee status and the trauma associated with the refugee experience, was not specifically explored in the interviews although these past experiences may shape present experiences with education.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter introduces and establishes a context for the experiences of the nine participants in the study. To contextualize the experiences of the Sudanese refugee women, a thick description of each participant in the study is presented, followed by a description the emerging themes. The phenomenological methodology of this study focusing on the lived experience of the individual as well as the underlying feminist philosophy that women must be given a voice to speak for themselves necessitated the presentation of lengthy quotes from individual interviews in order to preserve the integrity of the women's stories.

The themes that emerged from the data and captured the essence of the lived experiences of the participants are explored in this chapter serving to answer the initial research questions about how refugee women perceive and interpret their formal education experiences and how these experiences with formal education can assist in meeting the needs of the women during the resettlement process.

For purposes of this study, formal education refers to education programs in which participants follow a structured curriculum in order to obtain a degree or certificate. This definition of formal education is not defined by environmental settings nor limited to traditional education structures such as high school or college, but also takes into account non-traditional education programs, such as home-based learning, and job training programs. The women in this study participated in formal education in Sudan, Kenya, and the United States and the programs ranged from traditional public high schools and community colleges to home-based learning and GED preparation.

Understanding the Lives of the Participants

As phenomenology is an understanding of the lived experiences of individuals, the experiences cannot be discussed separate from the individual. It is therefore essential to first establish the orientation of the individuals to the experience of the phenomena itself. All of the participants in this study had previous experience with formal education before resettlement to the United States and actively sought opportunities to further their education, both in Africa and in the United States. While the context of their resettlement falls outside the scope of this research project, the participants did come to the United States with the goal of pursuing education.

Jasmine.

Jasmine completed her primary school education in Kenya, but the threat of war caused her education to be sporadic as she frequently moved between cities:

So whenever a war would broke [sic]³ out everything will be closed. People will run. No school, no anything, you just run. You stay like 6 months without school and then next semester comes you are taken to the next class because if you are suppose to repeat the class students will not like it so you jump to the next class without even doing well in your previous class. And then like these gaps in between it's not really good. It's one of the things that affects us, affects me a lot.

After completing secondary school in Khartoum, Sudan, Jasmine enrolled in a University in East Africa where she was studying International Relations, when she was selected for relocation to the United States. Jasmine was the first Lost Girl of Sudan to be relocated to Colorado. She arrived in the United States in 2003, determined to succeed in school. She

³ Throughout the manuscript the women's quotes will be represented as they said them, without editing for grammar. As a result of numerous grammatical errors, [sic] will not be places throughout the paper.

described herself as “*courageous,*” “*determined*” and felt pressure from the Sudanese refugee community to succeed. “*I was the only girl in Colorado, the Lost Girl, and everybody was just focusing on me.*” As the first of the lost girls of Sudan to settle in Colorado, she felt the need to take a leadership role in the community and encourage other girls to pursue education.

She transferred to a University in the United States and declared a major in Political Science in order to transfer her previous credits. Jasmine graduated from the University in 2008 with a double major in Political Science and Women’s Studies. Jasmine is currently attending a University in Colorado pursuing a Master’s degree in Educational Foundations, Policy and Practices.

Amina.

Amina fled Sudan as a young child in 1994, when her village was attacked and her family killed. After three weeks of travelling, she arrived in Kakuma Refugee Camp and was placed with a foster family:

So I lived there, I started going to school but I lived with a foster care, foster family, you know, it wasn’t easy. We have to go to school a half a day and then come and do the house chores and stuff, you know. If you stay with a family in Kakuma it’s hard. The weather is extremely hot, there is not enough food, you have to go to the forest to fetch fire wood and then you have to go look for water because they have shortages of water because it’s just, it’s really hard. I managed to stay with many other girls who were not all with their families. Most of the people who live there, they don’t stay with their families.

She started her primary school education in Kakuma, but in 1999, conflict within the camp between the Didinga and Dinka caused her to flee and seek refuge in a United Nations compound:

They burned down all the houses that we lived in...Everything we had was left in the house, food, nothing, we just had one clothes that we wore that time...They couldn't provide us anything, except like in the mornings they make porridge, but for so many people, there wasn't enough...Then we stayed there about two weeks again. And then eventually the police came and they told us to go back into the camp.

Kenyan police forced her to return to the camp where she continued her schooling through Form 2. In 2004, Amina was taken in by a Catholic orphanage in Nairobi. She was sponsored by the orphanage to continue her education at a girls' boarding school:

Sister [the head of the orphanage] sent somebody to Kakuma to come and pick 16 women. And it was hard to choose who, you know. There are so many of them so it was just hard. The community elders sat down and [decided] what procedures they should take, you know, to select the 16 women. So they based their selection on who did best in school. Lucky enough, I was among the 16 that were selected.

She was at the end of her Form 4 term when she was selected for resettlement to the United States. She was resettled to Colorado where she enrolled in public high school. Her credits from her schooling in Kenya did not transfer to the American system, so she entered high school as a freshman. She turned 21 before completing high school so was forced to leave the school. She enrolled in a General Educational Development (GED) preparatory class at the local community college and passed the GED exam in 2009. She is currently enrolled in the community college pursuing her Associates degree

Grace.

Grace has been living in the United States for about three years. Although she does not know how old she is, the age she gave on her resettlement papers makes her 24. Grace was born in Sudan but fled as a small child and grew up in Kakuma Refugee Camp, where she was placed with a foster family because her family was killed in the war. Grace completed her primary school education in the refugee camp, often sneaking out of the home of her foster family to attend school:

Because I was living with foster parents so they didn't actually want me to go to school. So sometimes I have to sneak to go to school. Then after sometimes I come, they just have to cane me... I didn't get enough [education] because most of the time I have to go for once a week and then after you come back, no studying, you just have to clean, cook, then go fetch water and all this.

After completing Standard 8, Grace left Kakuma and went to live in an orphanage in Nairobi where she completed Form 1. She was enrolled in Form 2 when she was selected for resettlement to the United States. Grace was 19 when she was resettled to Colorado, where the maximum age for attending high school is 21. Because she could not continue her high school education, she enrolled in foundation classes at a community college while simultaneously studying for her GED. After failing to pass subject assessment tests, she was discouraged by advisors from studying to take the GED and was encouraged to focus solely on the foundations classes:

I failed and then he [the advisor] was like, 'oh it's really hard, you have to take like, you have to be here for like three years to prepare for your GED'. I'm like, okay. But I

didn't stop, you know. I'm just somebody who is like, do, do, do it, do it, do it, don't stop, don't, you know.

She passed her GED within six months of resettlement and decided to take the SAT exam so she could apply to colleges. She applied for and was accepted to a university where she is currently pursuing a double major in Physiology and Anthropology, a minor in Ethnic Studies and a certificate in Leadership.

Miriam.

Miriam started primary school when she was about eight years old and living at Kakuma Refugee Camp:

My mother didn't want to let me to go to school...She decided [to let me go] because her friends decided to let their daughters go to school. She said okay, you can go because no one is there hanging around.

After completing a year of schooling at Kakuma, Miriam returned to Sudan, but her stay was short lived, *"I didn't stay there, I keep moving from one school to another because of war."* At the age of 14, she found herself at the Catholic orphanage in Juja, and was able to enroll in secondary school. Miriam was enrolled in Form 3 in Kenya when she was selected for resettlement. She was resettled to Colorado in 2007 where she enrolled in the public high school; however, she was unable to transfer her credits from Kenya and had to enroll as a Freshman. *"I had to be forced to start everything from the beginning because um, I didn't have credits from my former schools and I find it hard and then I kept struggling."*

Miriam studied at the high school for one semester after which she was forced to leave because she turned 21. After her second attempt, she passed the GED and enrolled in classes at

the community college. At the community college Miriam took foundations classes for one year before being able to enroll in credit classes.

She attended a home school program to prepare her for a Certificated Nursing Assistant (CNA) program but was put on probation for not attending classes regularly and not completing her assignments. After a talk with the instructor, she became determined to complete the course and obtain her CNA license:

I left back home and I came all the way long to come and get educated and now I'm throwing the chance. So I just have to do my homework and become nice again. And then I do it and then things work out well again. Because if that's the main reason I came here I don't need to let another chance go. I think I just became so overwhelmed and so happy and sometimes I let my education go [laugh]. But I realize I don't want to let it go.

Miriam completed the home school course, graduated from a state CNA program, passed the state CNA exam and obtained her CNA license. She is currently taking classes at the community college and has applied to transfer to a university.

Angelina.

Angelina spent 13 years in Kakuma Refugee Camp, where she completed her primary school education. She was sponsored through a Catholic orphanage to attend secondary school in Juja, where she completed Form 1 and was half-way through Form 2 when she was selected for resettlement in the United States. She was resettled to Ohio, where she took ESL classes sponsored by a local church. Angelina spent a year in Ohio before moving to Colorado:

I was working full time. I couldn't have time to go to school to study. So I heard about this Sudanese community. So they are being helped to pay rent and they can be able to go to school and work part time, so that is why I decided to move to Colorado.

At the age of 20, registering for high school in Colorado was not an option, therefore Angelina decided to pursue her GED. She attended a home schooling program sponsored by the Sudanese organization and later a community-based GED preparation program. After passing the GED she completed a Certificated Nursing Assistant (CNA) program. Angelina presently attends a community college and plans to attend nursing school.

Sophia.

Sophia resettled to the United States when she was 16 years old and has been living in the country about six years. Before coming to the United States, Sophia attended a government run primary school and was in the middle of Form 2 at a private boarding school when she was selected for resettlement to the United States. Sophia was initially resettled to Kentucky, where she attended three years of public high school. At the first high school in which Sophia was enrolled, she felt a sense of discrimination because of her refugee status:

My first time I went to high school and I realized the high school is one of the bad, worst high school in the county. And I don't know why but I realized, is it because when immigrant come and they just put into that high school or I don't know why. And I went there and the students wore uniform and the doors are locked and everybody knows it's one of the worst high schools. I think they put me to that school because they expected low of me and they said you don't know anything so just put there and nobody like have any expectation of you.

Sophia managed to move to a different high school where she played high school sports and excelled academically. She was offered college scholarships but after graduation became pregnant and was forced to turn them down. Sophia moved to New York where she took a year and a half off from school before applying to local colleges:

I always thought I'll go back to school and just being able to, going to school probably will influence my daughter to go to school too and she can say, oh my mom did it so she can do it too.

Sophia then moved to Colorado where she was admitted to the University and is currently pursuing a degree in Sociology as well as a minor in Women and Gender Studies and a certificate in Peace and Conflict Studies.

Rabbecca.

Rabbecca fled Sudan when she was six and found her way to the Kakuma Refugee Camp. Unable to find her parents, she was placed with a foster family who kept her home from school to assist with domestic chores. Rabbecca would sneak away from the home to attend the primary school in the camp and completed her primary school education:

And after the war broke in Sudan, we ran to Kakuma and in Kakuma I wanted to go to school but there was no chance. It was just so hard. I had to work at home. Like of course I was staying under the foster parents, foster care, and it was really so hard. That lady wouldn't allow me to go to school so I have to do the domestic work and all that. But sometimes when she's not home I usually just sneak to school because the school was just like so near to my house. And just like that for almost 10 years I was sneaking.

Rabbecca attended a boarding secondary school in Nairobi, where she completed her secondary school certificate in 2006. She was resettled to the United States in 2007. Rabbecca

studied for the SAT with the help of a tutor and with her exam scores was admitted to the University. Rebecca is currently enrolled in University where she is pursuing a degree in International Affairs.

Mercy.

Mercy estimates that she was between 16 and 17 years old when she started her primary school education in Kakuma Refugee Camp. She had no prior experience with formal education before fleeing to Kakuma, and found opportunity in the refugee camp for her to attain an education:

Sudan was in war so children didn't get a chance to go to school. We been to war and we didn't have opportunities to like, go to school. That was something bad. And when I came, you know, I went to Kenya, you know, and the government supported us, provided us everything: shelters, food, education. And I said this is my opportunity, this is my chance to, you know, to go to school. I have to go to school and that's my opportunity. It's open for me.

She has been living in the United States for about three years, and was initially resettled to Ohio, where she lived for a year before relocating to Colorado. Upon arriving in Colorado, she began participating in a home school program to prepare her for her GED. She completed the home school courses and then enrolled in a CNA program. She is currently enrolled in an adult education program working to earn her high school diploma.

Nadia.

Nadia attended a parochial primary school in Sudan. When war broke out in the area, she and her family were forced to flee to Kenya. Once in Kenya, Nadia continued her primary school education but had to repeat some of the classes because she did not speak Swahili, the

national language of Kenya. Her parents hired one of the teachers at the school to tutor her in Swahili and English. After completing her primary school education, Nadia attended an all-girls boarding school from which she graduated in 2003. She enrolled in college in Kenya and completed a degree in Tourism. She was resettled to the United States with her family in 2009. At the urging of her father, she reluctantly enrolled in the community college where she is currently attending classes in hopes of transferring to the University to pursue a degree in Hospitality. Although she has a desire to further her education, she also is resentful of her parents' influence over her education:

It's like I am being pushed to do something, that's the way I felt. Although I wanted to go to school, but the way they did it, I didn't like it. You know how parents sometimes can be hard. I know it's an opportunity, but they should have given me chance to make up my mind. I wasn't comfortable because I was like, I'm being told to go to class, go to class. If somebody told you to do something and you are not willing, you will never do it well.

The Essence of the Lived Experience

The primary aim of this research study was to understand how Sudanese refugee women perceive their education experiences and how these perceptions influence the resettlement process. The phenomenological methodology of this study, which places the lived experience of the individual at the forefront of the research, as well as the underlying third-wave feminist perspective which advocates for women being given a voice to speak for themselves, necessitated the presentation of the findings as short excerpts from the individual interviews. The findings are presented here through the words of the participants and analyzed in relation to the literature in the next chapter.

From the textural-structural descriptions of the experience, a composite description capturing the meaning and essence of the experiences of the group as a whole was developed. From this composite, seven essential themes emerged describing the essence of education in the United States for Sudanese refugee women. The seven themes include:

1. Education provides women with a sense of empowerment
2. Challenging cultural conceptions of gender roles
3. Women have a sense of duty to help those left behind
4. Education provides hope for the future and a means to improve one's life situation
5. Peace can be achieved through education
6. Relationships with others have a significant impact upon education
7. Expectations of life in the United States

Education is a Means of Empowerment for Women

The women in this study consistently cited education as providing the primary means by which they gained a sense of empowerment. Jasmine captured this collective voice when she said, *“Education is very important. It’s essential in my life, in the life of other Sudanese women and it’s the only path that we can empower ourselves.”*

Education provides these women with a sense of independence that they did not experience in Africa. Sophia explained how education allowed her to get a job and make money, leading to greater independence:

I think jobs and working, it’s empowering. I mean you have the job you can be able to stand by yourself, you are strong. You can take it, it’s just something that it can build a person and can make them stronger and make them give them more opportunities.

Likewise, finding employment and having freedom to make decisions was a source of independence for Grace:

But here [in the United States] you have your own job, you just set your own life. I can have my own money. You decide where to live; you can choose where to go and all this. You just have freedom, you know, freedom of doing what you want. You can sleep, wake up at any time you want. There [in Africa] you just, you have, you only sleep at night, wake up at certain time, you have to do this. You can't do other things unless you ask somebody.

Not all of the women had a positive experience with finding a job in the United States. At the time of the interview, Amina was working at a job she enjoyed, however, she reflected on her first job in the United States with a sense of dread, *"It was so awful I didn't like it at all. I was crying. At my first job I was almost always crying. Like, 'no I don't want to do this job' ... I felt so bad. I didn't like it at all."*

The women described how education, especially obtaining a certificate or a degree afforded them a sense of respect within the Sudanese refugee community. Mercy said, *"I think they are proud of what I was achieving, you know, they look at me as somebody, you know, they respect me because I am focused, you know, somebody serious in life."*

Education has empowered the women to find their voice within the Sudanese community, especially the ability to voice their ideas and opinions amongst the men within the community.

Rabbecca stated:

At least I feel like right now like I have a voice as a woman. At least to stand with men and really challenge them too and say, 'no this is not right I think we are suppose to doing [this].' And they can listen to me because they believe you have knowledge too.

Than other people who are not educated, no one will always listen to them when they say something.

Nadia echoed this:

You can discuss issues with them [men] and also challenge them if there is a discussion. And that helps you a lot you know, you feel that your mind is open up and all the time there is something coming up you are aware of what is going on in this world too so you don't stay with a narrow mind.

The women also expressed increased confidence and a belief in their own abilities.

Sophia shared how education changed how she viewed herself:

You can see something greater in yourself when you are in school. You can see yourself doing something big. I don't see myself just being me after graduation. Maybe I will see something big, maybe I will get a better job, maybe I can help somebody.

Challenging Cultural Conceptions of Gender Roles

This increased sense of empowerment and independence amongst the women caused them to challenge their cultural conceptions of gender roles. The women attributed the shift in their perceptions to the education they received and expressed a demand for equality with men in the Sudanese community. Miriam strongly asserted this shift when she laughingly stated, *“Do you think I'm gonna go back home now and a man is gonna step over me? No, I'm not gonna allow that.”*

Grace said that while in Africa, girls were not expected to *“compete with the boys”* academically and that *“boys have to be on top in class doing well.”* Jasmine stated:

Usually girls are just suppose to be coming always neat, clean and quiet and very kind. And then some of them are expected also not to be doing very well because they have no

time for studies and things like that. They go home and they start looking for what to cook and go and fetch water and things like that. So girls are just expected not to do well.

All of the women in this study excelled academically in Kenya and in doing so challenged the acceptable norms for women, which led to conflict in the Sudanese refugee community both in Kenya and in the United States. Miriam explained that, “*When a woman starts going to school and challenging men then it’s gonna be something different they will not understand each other. They will feel jealous.*” Likewise, Angelina, describing her education in Kenya, stated:

The boys, they were jealous [laugh]. They usually, they read harder, they read harder so that they can, they can defeat you. Or they sometimes they talk about you. They say she’s pretending she can do. I mean they would fear you, they will be afraid of you. Because you are smart and you can show them you are smart and you can do anything.

Several women shared stories of how their education conflicted with cultural conceptions of gender roles and caused jealousy amongst their male classmates, boyfriends and husbands. Grace, who was performing at the top of her class while in Kenya, was accused by her male classmates of witchcraft, a serious offense within the Sudanese community:

There is the belief like, if somebody do well, especially women, that means they are witchcraft, using medicine and all this magic and all this. It’s something very bad in our culture. Once people call you that, it’s just, you are not a human being. You are not respected in the community.

This accusation caused her to be shunned by all of the students in the school, “*It was becoming a problem. Big, big, the whole school. Like I couldn’t concentrate, I couldn’t do*

anything. They just wanted to get rid of me.” Likewise, Jasmine experienced jealousy from her male classmates who taunted her, calling her “*Mohammed Willet,*” a name for someone who is “*half-boy, half-girl.*”

Women in the study expressed a feeling of being taken advantage of by men while in Africa and viewed education as a means to challenge cultural expectations. Angelina explained why she believes education is important, “*I think education is good for girls, like especially the women in Africa, because men sometimes they treat them like, they treat them there like animals.*” Rabeca mirrored this sentiment and went on to describe how women are treated in Sudan:

Back at home you don't have a voice as a woman. You're always home there, serve your husband, serve your kids. You don't do this one, we beat you. That's how it is at home. But here, it's kind of different. Women are like no, we are not in Africa, we are in America. You men, you have to do this, this, you don't do this one, I kick you out. So I mean like, it's just kind of like, people have voice here now, women, Sudanese women.

The women took pride in their independence and ability to provide for themselves and their families without the need to rely on a man. However, the women also shared that while their perceptions of gender roles had changed, this shift was not generally accepted by the Sudanese community as a whole. Sophia explained that, “*when women are educated they [men] just, they think they become a threat to men and men worry that they [women] will know more and they [women] will be able to like have different opportunities and be able to stand for themselves.*” Jasmine added that:

In our community, um, it's always difficult for a highly educated girls to find a stable husband. Because they say like, an educated women is always rude. Why rude? Because

she is very strong to ask questions and to find out why, and that is to our men sometimes, it's like rude.

I observed the women struggling with issues of domestic abuse and marital conflict as they demanded more independence. For some women, this made education even more important, as they viewed it as a means of preventing domestic violence. Rebecca stated:

Sometimes people get married, but at the end of the day they divorce. So a woman who have an education is independent and it's always easy for her...not to take like, all the abuses from the men. You think the men is not like, right you can always like, kick him out and you be able to stand strong and provide for your family, provide for yourself...Other than someone who doesn't have any education who is always like, just sit there to be abused by the men because you don't have any other way because, you see, he is the only provider. But if you know you can be independent you will always be proud of yourself and see the challenges and just walk though them.

Amina, on the other hand, stated her concern that such conflicts occur as the result of the women challenging traditional gender roles and are unnecessarily tearing families apart. Although she made a point to say that equality between men and women was important, she believed that the many of the Sudanese women in Colorado were pushing the boundaries of gender roles too far.

They disrespect their husbands, they go out maybe clubbing, they drink, they don't follow like what they use to do back home, they go beyond...and then their husbands would get jealous or maybe tell them 'you are not taking care of the kids' or whatever and then they get into conflicts and now they break their relationship. Most of the marriages here are getting apart, they are breaking because of that. That's not what we want to happen. We want them to stay together.

Women Have a Sense of Duty to Help Others

All of the women in this study expressed a desire to utilize the knowledge and skills they obtained as a result of their education experiences to give back to the communities which they left in Africa, particularly to assist the women and children in Sudan. The women expressed that their education and degrees had little meaning if they were not utilizing this knowledge to help others in need. Mercy explained, *“you stay with that knowledge you have but you also give to the rest and try to empower the rest and help succeed.”* Jasmine expressed her desire to return to Sudan and provide education opportunities for women:

Why getting these education and empowerment and what are we going to do with this? Because I'm like, you know, I can do this and get all the diplomas, all the degrees I need, but if I don't put it into practical then it's nothing. So of course it's going to be a tool for us to go back to Sudan and do the same to our women who are unfortunate to get the privileges that we got here in America. So it's going to be one way of sharing what we learned here and um, the experiences we got from here. We'll go and share it with our women and girls back in Sudan. And because we need to change the coming generations of women to think in a positive way and to believe in themselves and to think that um, through education things are so much possible and easy to get.

The women in this study expressed a desire to provide the women in Sudan with the same opportunities they were afforded by coming to the United States. The women in this study had a strong desire to share their newfound sense of empowerment with the women in Africa. Jasmine said, *“I felt like it will be from us women that we'll be able to liberate ourselves. And through us, we will be able to let other women realize like they can be able to do whatever they want.”*

Sophia said:

I want to empower women and give them like, voices at least. I just want to be able to give them the chances and be able to be women and be able to make choices. They can still have their freedom...all the freedom men have. And just be able to be women and be able to say, 'oh I don't want to do this and still have choices.'

Rabecca stated that it was “*her duty*” to return to Sudan and share her knowledge in order to help develop and rebuild the nation. By returning to Sudan, she believed she could be a role model in the community and inspire other girls and women to pursue education opportunities:

If we go back [to Sudan], like, all this girls go back with education, and do like, something big for the people they will get inspired. And they'll be able also to like, send the younger girls...who are not going to school to go to school. But if we don't go home, just, we be here with our education, it will make no sense to them. They'll just be like okay, 'they have gone to US, what are they doing now? It's not any help they are giving to us'. But if we go there and do it in practical is when they will believe and they'll be able to get inspired and there will be a lot of changes too.

Education Provides Hope and a Means to Improve One's Life Situation

All of the women in the study viewed formal education as the primary means through which their lives would improve. They actively sought out opportunities to pursue their education and believed that achieving their educational goals would lead to a better life. Mercy stated, “*Education actually affected the way I wanted to do something because that's the only way I can, you know, I can make my life better. That is how education had affected me.*”

Increased opportunity for employment was a motivating factor for many of the women in their decision to pursue formal education. The women described how they had few opportunities in Africa both for education and employment outside the home, and they were determined to make the most of their education in the United States. Angelina said:

I mean in Africa, they say if you don't go to school you will remain poor, you will have not anything. So that's why I decided to go to school so that I can make a better life. Yes, so that I can get a job, a good job.

Amina said:

I feel proud being a woman who is able to go to school, you know. And I just want to go to school and graduate with a degree or something and have other certificates you know, it feels better. And I can go home and just get a job and they take those people who come from American or other countries overseas because they know they are educated so they give you a chance to work and they pay you good.

The women in the study also shared stories of the difficulties and struggles they experienced while pursuing their educational goals in the United States. Despite the struggles, they chose to continue in their education because they firmly believed that their efforts would be rewarded. Jasmine stated:

It's just like sometimes I think how difficult um, [pause] for a person to struggle and really aim high is. You will not really realize all the fruits until when you reach there, you will enjoy. You will be like, 'oh my god, those days use to be like that' and so it's like, that's the beauty of that. And this is just something that we are going through right now. And hopefully when we are top there and enjoying the process that we went through to go up there.

In addition to opportunities for employment, the women also described how education had increased the possibilities which they were able to imagine for their futures. Nadia said:

As a woman you can be a mother, you can be a doctor, you can be a president, you can be anything. But without education it also narrow you so you just focus on only one thing or two things but with education it becomes broad and you become stronger.

Mercy also described the changes she saw in herself:

Yeah, I can honestly say that I, um, my life has changed. I can tell the difference when I was in Africa and here, I can tell the difference. Change because I am now going to school, you know, working. I'm able now to help myself, do what I want and that's something that changes my life. And although...I don't see right now what is coming but I have to keep pressing forward myself, you know, to go to school and work hard, you know try my best, make my life better.

Peace can be Achieved Through Education

War and conflict has dominated much of the lives of these refugee women. Most of the women are orphans who have seen their families and villages destroyed by violent conflict. For these refugee women, education takes on a significant role in achieving peace both within themselves and within their home country. Amina stated her optimism in education as a tool to prevent war, “people see major things affecting them in their communities and it's hard to deal with that if people are not educated.” She went on to say:

I think education in the key to everything because most people, I don't know how the percentage, but I think most people [in Sudan] are illiterate. So the way they handle things it's just like, they want to fight physically and I think the best way to solve your problems is to just sit down and talk and though. You say bad words to each other back

and forth, you don't fight physically...Eventually you come to a solution that will make it better.

Grace recently discovered that she had family still alive and living in Sudan and reflected on the options available to those still living in Sudan who do not have the opportunity for education:

My sister has four kids right now. They were born, grow up, one day they will have to learn how to shoot. I'm so scared, I wish I could put them in school somewhere. They just grow up, boys they do, they have to fight, go and steal cows.

Grace also described how education gave her a sense of internal peace and a means to express herself without resorting to violence:

Just see how I view things, it's not the same as what I was in Africa. I was so angry and I respond to problems, somebody hurt me, I just have to respond with anger. But right now I just feel like, you know [pause] I don't know how I get all this but I just feel like I just need peace, I need to solve things, I need to behave like this, I need to respond to things like this.

Relationships with Others Have a Significant Impact on Education

In the refugee camp, schools played a vital role in allowing the girls to make connections with others who were experiencing the same things. Schools provided a social outlet for expressing feelings and a reprieve from the oppressive situation of life in refugee camps. Grace explained:

You don't know if that education is gonna fit you fully, you just go there because you meet other people, friends, that you can talk about the same situation, telling me about 'oh, this is what happened to me last night with my foster parent'. Sometimes we just sit

together and chat and laugh, you know, have fun... That is another way to get, you know, some break from working. Part of it maybe you have school, part of it just to at least have some break from doing so much housework.

Later, when in the United States, the women described how the relationships they formed in school helped them to adjust to life in the country of resettlement. Amina described her struggle with homesickness and loneliness as she tried to establish relationships:

I missed home a lot. I just sort of wanted to go back, like 'oh I wanna go back.' After staying longer, then many people came into our life and then they help us through and I felt that I got a family. But before, because I didn't know anybody, it was 'I don't have any family here, I want to go back'. Once you make a connection with somebody then you feel you are related to them.

When asked what advice she would give to other Sudanese women coming to the United States, Nadia also emphasized the importance of establishing relationships in successful resettlement:

So you have to have that, I am going there [to the United States], I have to succeed and if I need any help I will make sure those around me to be my friends and that's the most important thing because it will help you a lot to keep you away from stress and to succeed in life.

Establishing relationships also played an important role in the academic success of the women. Relationships at school, with both the teachers and students, was an important factor in making the women feel comfortable in the school and contributed to their academic success. Sophia explained that she always tries to create time to connect with her professors. Rabecca described how meeting with her professors helped her to gain confidence. Grace also stated that establishing relationships with her professors was important:

Because since I started, all my professors, I know them. Even some I still connect, writing emails to them and all this. All the time, every semester and every professor, I have to go to their offices and just get to know them. Especially the professors...once you do school and talk to them, they're really helpful.

While establishing relationships with instructors was important, the women described the relationships they established with their peers to be essential to academic success. Miriam said that study groups with her peers helped her to understand difficult concepts. When asked what advice she would give a Sudanese woman coming to the United States, Jasmine reiterated the importance of friendships. She said:

I would advise them to make friends because through friends you will know a lot and you will be more comfortable asking silly questions and things like that. Rather than [asking] your lecturer or your teacher. Also make friends with your age mates. It's very important.

However, not all relationships positively influenced the women to continue in their education. Miriam struggled with peer pressure to drop out of school, pressure that she said came mostly from the Sudanese boys.

Some friends are not good. They always talk negative, some don't even want to talk about school. Because they say, after all you go, you have a degree, you have nothing, you don't even get a job. We are all the same, working the same jobs in America. And I'm like what about if you go home. And they're like, even home, you with your degree and gown and cap, you end up nowhere. You get like, a little frustrated and then you ask yourself, even if I graduate, so it means I'm not gonna get a job or have a better life? So sometimes then you are like, why do I then have to go and do all this?

Expectations of life in the United States

The women described their expectations of life in the United States and how the reality of their experiences compared to those expectations. All of the women in this study had plans to continue their education when they arrived in the United States. In fact, for many it was the motivating factor for resettlement. Angelina said, *“I wanted to come to the United States because it has many opportunities you can go to school and you can become what you want to be, also what you want to do.”* Grace said:

I heard United States is land of opportunity and when you go there you'll, you know, you'll be able to work, you know, go to school, be independent. And you know, make my life...I heard also just when you, when I get there, and also to make my life better.

However, upon arriving in the United States, many of the women described feelings of confusion and disappointment about the reality of the life they were living compared to their expectations. Rabbecca said:

And that was my expectation, if I go to America, I'm gonna have all that money. And I will really make you happy, the people at home, by sending them money. I felt like if I go to America, I will have my own money, I will have my own car, the first day I reach, I will have a big house. Just good things. But when I came here, it was like, oh, you have to work and get that money and send it. And yeah, also to have the car, you have to buy it and all this things. I was like, oh, I thought it was easy...I was like, 'why are we not having our cars, just taking the bus?' I didn't even know like America was like a country, just like any other country. I thought like maybe oh, maybe it was just somewhere in heaven. Like I mean, the name America was just like so famous. So like really people just think oh, America.

Miriam also described how her life in the United States did not meet her expectations:

People said it's the land of opportunity, which is true, there is too much freedom there is everything you can do. And when I came here, my people back home said you can get everything free, you just say what you want and they give it to you. And when I came here, nothing like that happened [laugh] so I was like, 'what's going on, I'm waiting.'

Although they desired to come to the United States to pursue their education goals, and had inflated expectations about life in the United States, some of the women also had fears about resettlement. They relayed the stereotypes they had heard about the United States, such as Grace who remembered:

But actually I didn't, I didn't want to come. Yeah, because there is so much negative things about here. Like if you go to America, like, white people don't treat you well...They say they don't even talk to you, life is hard, you have to work, you have to pay rent, you have to, all these things, you have to go to school and people drink and people go to jail and if you go there you are not coming back.

Likewise, Rebecca described some of the negative rumors she heard about the United States:

If you go to US, you know, Americans, they like dogs; dogs are their kids. So if you go there, you, every morning you have to brush their [dog's] teeth, you have to give them breakfast. There are a lot of rumors. Like I mean, just a lot of weird things. Like in America, you know, because they are white and you are black, you just will be treated like a slave. In the bus, when the people see you they will come all out of the bus, they will fear your color. Like a lot of discouraging things. So we are like, no, we are not going.

Mercy also heard rumors about how she would be treated in the United States:

Although I heard a lot of things, you know, there is a lot of things I heard about United States that if you go there you will brush dogs teeth [laughs] all those kind of things. I heard a lot of things. I said what I said to myself, no I don't have to like, rely on rumors let me go myself and find out.

Nadia was the only woman in the study who believed that her expectations of the United States were met. She came to the United States after living in the urban city of Nairobi, Kenya which was in many ways similar to the United States.

I just know that it would be different, but the different would be not that big gap because of living in Nairobi. Because Nairobi is more advanced than Sudan so I wasn't expected to get that much challenge in that. They have um, they have a grocery store which is like um, called what, they have um, Naco-Mart, which is like Wal-Mart, you can have like the discount card and all that stuff. During the time we are coming they were starting improving, you could use your bank card, or credit stub, but most of the stuff were already there. So um, I wasn't expecting that much of a challenge.

Summary of Findings

As a phenomenological research study, the findings of this study are intended to capture the essence of the lived experience of the nine Sudanese participants. Reflecting on their education experiences in the United States, the women described how formal education provided them with a sense of empowerment and hope for the future. They also described how formal education allowed them to develop social networks which positively affected their academic success. In discussing resettlement to the United States, the women described a link between their expectations of life in the United States and the challenges they faced in adjusting to life in the

United States. Finally, the women described a sense of duty to help women in children in Sudan and believed that by providing opportunities for education peace could be achieved in Sudan. In the following chapter, the findings of this study are discussed within the context of the literature on refugee education, refugee resettlement and women's empowerment.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The findings of the previous chapter are reviewed within the context of the literature while reflecting on the initial research questions for which this study was designed to explore:

1. How do Sudanese refugee women perceive and interpret their experiences in formal education programs?
2. What role does formal education play in the resettlement experiences of Sudanese refugee women?
3. How can formal education assist in meeting the perceived needs of Sudanese refugee women?

It should be noted that the focus of this research project was not to investigate whether these refugee women found a sense of empowerment through education and questions of empowerment were not included in the goals of this inquiry. Nonetheless, the Sudanese refugee women in this study consistently expressed their interpretation of the education in which they participated as a means of empowerment. The sense of empowerment afforded to these women as a result of their education experiences assisted them in meeting their needs and overcoming challenges during the resettlement process and contributed to positive adjustment to life in the United States. Therefore, this chapter is structured so as to guide the reader through a discussion of each of the initial research questions while situating the findings connected with each research question within the greater context of a discussion of women's empowerment.

Perception of Education

The women in this study consistently cited their experiences with formal education as providing a sense of empowerment. Jasmine captured the collective voice of the women when she said, *“Education is very important. It’s essential in my life, in the life of other Sudanese*

women and it's the only path that we can empower ourselves." As a result, the women of this study echoed the perception of education described by Hatoss & Huijser (2010) that Sudanese women "view education as an avenue to gain agency to change their lives and their society" (p. 156).

Participants noticed a change in themselves as a result of their education experiences. This change was described as a sense of empowerment by the women themselves and is consistent with the definition of the four facets of empowerment proposed by Stromquist (2002), which involve a critical understanding of one's reality, increased feelings of self-esteem, awareness of power inequalities, ability to organize and mobilize and the capacity to generate independent income. Mercy captured the essence of how education has changed her life and afforded her a sense of empowerment, demonstrating a critical understanding of her reality, "*I can honestly say that I, um, my life has changed...Change because I am now going to school, you know, working. I'm able now to help myself, do what I want and that's something that changes my life.*"

When given the space to critically evaluate their reality, the women recognized power inequalities within the Sudanese community and began to demand a shift in power relations between men and women. Miriam strongly asserted this shift when she laughingly stated, "*Do you think I'm gonna go back home now and a man is gonna step over me? No, I'm not gonna allow that.*" The women also expressed increased confidence and self-esteem as demonstrated in Sophia's statement, "*You can see something greater in yourself when you are in school. You can see yourself doing something big.*" Finally, they found employment and were able to generate their own income, finding themselves economically independent from men in the Sudanese community.

Although the women in this study equated education with empowerment, it is important to note that for most, this sense of empowerment was not the result of merely having access to formal education opportunities. All of the women in this study had access to education opportunities in Africa but did not perceive these education experiences as empowering. The women described how their domestic chores took precedent over their education while living in the Kakuma refugee camp. Grace said, *“I didn’t get enough [education] because most of the time I have to go [to school] for once a week and then after you come back, no studying, you just have to clean, cook, then go fetch water and all this.”* Amina described a similar experience, *“We have to go to school a half a day and then come and do the house chores and stuff, you know.”* This suggests that merely having access to education opportunities is not synonymous with empowerment. These education experiences must allow women the space to reflect on the reality of their lives, think critically about the issues affecting their lives, and develop the skills to address these issues. This is not meant to imply that education in the United States is inherently designed to provide a sense of empowerment, or that the formal education system in the United States is better than that of Kenya or Sudan, but rather that while in the United States these women interpreted their experiences as providing with a greater freedom to explore these ideas. In other words, exposure to new ideas and cultural and social norms in the United States had a positive impact on the education experiences of these women.

Impact of Education on Resettlement

As previously discussed, education was perceived by the women as essential for empowerment and as Mercy stated, *“the only way I can, you know, I can make my life better.”* Education was more to these women than just the opportunity to attend school and gain knowledge; it had profound meaning in their lives affecting everything from the manner in which

they perceived themselves and their roles in society, to their expectations for the future.

Therefore, it can be expected that the women in this study described education opportunities in the United States as a primary motivation for seeking resettlement.

The stories of these women revealed that formal education provided consistency and stability in their unsettled and transient lives, just as other studies with refugees have discovered (Matthews, 2008; Mosselson, 2006). Since the women came to the United States with the intention of pursuing their educational goals, formal education naturally played a vital role in their resettlement. The women participated in a variety of formal education including English language classes, GED preparation courses, a program for obtaining a high school diploma, CNA licensing school, public high schools and community colleges and universities where they pursued degrees specific to their occupational interests. Just as Kia-Keating & Ellis (2007) found, formal education provided explicit access to knowledge linked to successful resettlement, such as language skills and certificates and degrees necessary for future economic and occupational success. As a result of their various education experiences, the women gained a better command of the English language and felt more confident when speaking. They also obtained certificates and licenses which enabled them to pursue higher-paying jobs or continue in higher education. The formal education these women received also allowed them to establish a sense of community and connect with peers. Nadia described making friends as, “*the most important thing because it will help you a lot to keep you away from stress and to succeed in life.*” This suggests that social networks created as a result of participation in formal education assist women in successful resettlement (Davies, 2008; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Sossou et al., 2008).

Although the women came to the United States with the expectation that they would continue their education, not all of the women's expectations of life in the United States matched the reality of their experiences. When the women arrived in the United States, many of them expected to be given houses, cars and money and were ultimately disappointed by their inflated expectations. Rebecca described this idealized vision of life in the United States when she said, *"I didn't even know like America was like a country, just like any other country, I thought like maybe oh, maybe it was just somewhere in heaven."* Once resettled to the United States, the women had to find employment, learn to manage money and adjust to cultural and social norms. As others have found, these are common challenges which many refugees face during resettlement (Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009); however the findings of this study suggest that such challenges cause feelings of confusion and disappointment when they are not anticipated by refugees prior to resettlement. The women planned to continue their education but did not expect that they would have to manage work and school simultaneously.

Upon resettling to the United States, the women were also disappointed to find that the United States public school system is an age-based system. As previously mentioned, in Colorado, the age limit for students to attend high school is 21. As a result, some of the women found themselves unable to complete their secondary school education, necessitating their enrollment in alternative formal education provided by community organizations. Additionally, the education that the women had completed in Kenya did not transfer to the United States. Miriam described her frustration with starting over in the United States and therefore not being able to finish high school before she turned 21, *"I had to be forced to start everything from the beginning because um, I didn't have credits from my former schools and I find it hard and then I kept struggling."* These findings suggest that although formal education contributes to the

successful resettlement of refugee populations, if expectations about formal education do not match reality, the programs themselves can cause feelings of frustration, confusion and disappointment.

Nadia was the only participant in the study who believed that life in the United States, for the most part, met her expectations. She said, *“I just know that it would be different, but the different would be not that big gap because of living in Nairobi. Because Nairobi is more advanced than Sudan so I wasn’t expected to get that much challenge in that.”* This is important because unlike the other women in the study who were resettled to the United States as orphans, Nadia was resettled to the United States with both of her parents. While in Africa, her life was qualitatively different from the other women in that she had access to private education and an urban lifestyle. This is consistent with previous findings that refugees resettling to industrialized countries face more problems when the lifestyle between the two countries is remarkably different (Martin, 2004). This also had an impact on Nadia’s education experiences. Nadia described a desire to pursue education in the United States but was resentful of her father pushing her to enroll in classes. She stated, *“I wasn’t comfortable because I was like, I’m being told to go to class, go to class. If somebody told you to do something and you are not willing, you will never do it well.”* This suggests that while education does have a major influence on resettlement for refugee women, the women must see value in the education and must believe that education will positively influence their lives.

Meeting the Needs of Sudanese Refugee Women

It is well documented in the literature that refugees to the United States have unique challenges during the resettlement process, including the need to learn English, find employment and adjust to cultural and social norms (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004; Mango 2008; Sossou et al.,

2008.) While the women in this study described how formal education played an important role in addressing all of these needs, it had a much more profound meaning in the lives of these refugee women by meeting additional and, for these women, more critical needs. Through education these refugee women found a sense of belonging, independence and hope for the future; all facets of empowerment (Stromquist, 2006).

The need to develop relationships.

Formal education provided a space in which these refugee women were able to develop relationships with peers. These friendships had a significant impact on the degree to which the women positively adjusted during the resettlement process. Research suggests that strong, supportive relationships amongst women help them to continue in formal education (Prins, Willson-Toso, & Schaff, 2009). This was also true for the women both while in the United States and in Africa. While living in Kakuma refugee camp and attending primary school, the most important aspect of the schools was not the knowledge gained, but the chance to establish relationships. Sharkey (2008) noted that for girls in post-conflict Sierra Leone, school provided a reprieve from the domestic world allowing girls to escape social isolation. The women in this study described similar experiences. In the refugee camp, schools played a vital role in allowing the girls to make connections with others who were experiencing the same things. Grace explained that going to school provided a social outlet for expressing her feelings with other girls who shared similar experiences of extensive domestic chores and ill-treatment by foster families:

You don't know if that education is gonna fit you fully, you just go there because you meet other people, friends that you can talk about the same situation, telling me about 'oh, this is what happened to me last night with my foster parent.' Sometimes we just sit together and chat and laugh, you know, have fun.

Others have found that social support is linked to positive adaptation (Kovacev & Shute 2004; Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009); likewise, the women in this study reported that establishing relationships was a key factor in adjusting to life in the United States. Amina described her struggle with homesickness and loneliness as she tried to establish relationships, *“I missed home a lot. I just sort of wanted to go back...After staying longer, then many people came into our life and then they help us through and I felt that I got a family.”* Resettling to the United States as a single woman, an orphan without family connections, Amina felt a deep sense of isolation. Participation in formal education allowed her to establish family-like connections. Rabbecca echoed this when she said, *“I think, like, school like really is your mom, your dad and your everything.”* Participating in formal education is cited in the literature as a means of “opening doors to friendship” (Mosselson, 2006, p. 111). For these women, these doors were opened through education and the relationships they developed were familial-like relationships which helped them through the resettlement process.

Establishing relationships also had a reciprocal affect on academic achievement. The women reported that relationships at school, with both the teachers and students, contributed to their academic success. Sophia and Rabbecca both discussed the importance of establishing relationships with professors and Miriam and Jasmine talked about the importance of making friends with classmates. Jasmine said connecting with classmates was important because, *“you will be more comfortable asking silly questions and things like that with ah, rather than doing it with your lecturer or your teacher.”* In connecting with classmates the women found “safe spaces for new encounters, interactions, and learning opportunities” (Matthews, 2008, p.32). These findings are consistent with those of Brown et al. (2006) who reported that acceptance from peers assisted refugee students in developing academic language and understanding. All of

the women identified relationships as important not only to successful resettlement but also to academic success.

Hope for the future.

Hope for the future and a vision for a better life was a common theme that emerged from interviews with the women. Education for refugees is recognized in the literature as a means of restoring an element of hope in lives that have been dominated by chaos (Machel, 1996). Despite the challenges these women faced—fleeing their homeland, living with foster families in Kakuma refugee camp, and facing ridicule from peers for their academic achievement—they believed in the value of education and were determined to reach their educational goals. Angelina said, *“I wanted to come to the United States because it has many opportunities. You can go to school and you can become what you want to be, also what you want to do.”* This sense of hope motivated the women in overcoming what seemed to be insurmountable challenges.

Before coming to the United States, some of the women had heard negative rumors about how they would be treated. Women reported rumors of being treated like a slave, being forced to brush the teeth of dogs, and not being able to ride on a bus with Americans. Rebecca said she felt discouraged about coming to the United States and Grace said she initially did not want to apply for resettlement. Despite the discouraging rumors, all of the women cited a desire for education and the promise of a better life as the motivation for deciding to come to the United States. Mercy described this feeling when she said, *“I said to myself, no I don’t have to like, rely on rumors let me go myself and find out.”*

Miriam talked about the pressure to leave school she encountered from some of the men in the Sudanese community who told her that even with *“degree and gown and cap, you end up*

nowhere.” She expressed her frustrations saying, *“You ask yourself, even if I graduate, so it means I’m not gonna get a job or have a better life? So sometimes then you are like, why do I then have to go and do all this?”* Despite such discouraging remarks, hope for the future gave her the motivation to continue her education and seek a university degree. Grace describes this internal motivation when she said, *“But I didn’t stop, you know. I’m just somebody who is like, do, do, do it, do it, do it, don’t stop, don’t, you know.”* No matter what challenges these women faced, their belief that education would provide them with a better future gave them the courage to continue pursuing their education goals.

In addition to hope for their individual futures, the women also viewed education as the primary means of establishing peace in Sudan. Violent conflict has dominated much of the lives of these refugee women, destroying their villages and families. For these refugee women, education takes on a significant role in achieving peace and hope for the future of Sudan. They illustrated Sinclair’s (2001) sentiments that education is “forward-looking and constructive, as contrasted to talk of revenge, joining militias or participating in other harmful activities” (p. 16). Grace described a bleak situation in Sudan caused by a lack of education, *“They just grow up, boys they do, they have to fight, go and steal cows.”* She believed that education was the only way in which Sudan could achieve peace and provide hope for the people of southern Sudan. Amina echoed this thought when she stated, *“people see major things affecting them in their communities and it’s hard to deal with that if people are not educated.”* These findings suggest a dramatic perception of life in Sudan; life can either be structured around education or war. Thus, education takes on a powerful meaning for these women, and participating in formal education gives them hope for the future.

This strong sense of hope for the future positively assisted the women in navigating the resettlement process because they believed that everything that they had sacrificed would one day be worth it. Jasmine said:

You will be like, oh my god, those days used to be like that and so it's like that's the beauty of that. And this is just something that we are going through right now. And hopefully when we are top there and enjoying the process that we went through to go up there.

The desire for a better life and hope that through education this life would be attained, increased the confidence of these women in their ability to overcome challenges during resettlement. These findings support previous research suggesting that schools can normalize the lives of displaced populations by restoring an element of hope (Sinclair, 2001). This sense of hope contributed to the successful resettlement of these refugee women and also strengthened their sense of empowerment by increasing their confidence and self-esteem.

The need for economic independence.

As previously mentioned, education was perceived as a means of gaining independence and a sense of freedom. The independence the women described had very clear economic implications. When asked to describe what empowerment meant to her, Sophia stated, *"I think jobs and working, it's empowering. I mean you have the job you can be able to stand by yourself, you are strong."* Because these women held their own jobs and were financially independent of men, they felt a greater sense of independence and empowerment in all aspects of their lives.

In Sudanese culture, men are traditionally responsible for managing money and making all financial decisions (Edward, 2001); therefore many Sudanese women find themselves

financially dependent on men. The women in this study perceived formal education as a means for gaining economic independence. As Stromquist (2002) stated, empowerment for women must have an economic component. Rebecca described how women without education are financially dependent on their husbands and therefore often tolerate abusive relationships. She viewed education as a means of financial independence, which she equated with the ability to “*stand strong*” and challenge accepted expectations of women:

You think the men is not like right you can always like kick him out and you be able to stand strong and provide for your family, provide for yourself without like...other than someone who doesn't have any education who is always like just sit there to be abused by the men because you don't have any other way because you see he is the only provider.

Being financially independent of men gave the women a sense of independence in other areas of their lives. Grace said that having her own money gave her other unexpected freedoms, “*You decide where to live, you can choose where to go and all this. You just have freedom, you know, freedom of doing what you want.*” Participating in formal education provided the women with access to jobs and afforded them financial independence. Rebecca, described how this independence gave her the confidence to overcome other challenges in her life, “*But if you know you can be independent you will always be proud of yourself and see the challenges and just walk though them.*” This sense of independence had a reciprocal relationship on their education and allowed the women the freedom to further their education goals.

Recognizing Oppression and Becoming Activists

One facet of empowerment described by Stromquist (2002) is the ability to recognize oppression in one’s own life. Ellis (1995) conducted a study of women participating in non-formal formal education in the Caribbean and found that women “gained self-confidence,

recognized ways in which they could become more self-reliant, and realized that they could manage on their own” (Knowledge and Skills section, para. 1). The women in this study held these same attitudes and attributed them to their education experiences, supporting the idea that formal education has the potential to empower women by raising consciousness of oppression in their daily lives. Education allowed the women to view themselves as individuals with agency beyond their responsibilities for home and family. Recognition of oppression in the Sudanese community drove these women to a sense of action both within themselves and in the larger Sudanese community. The women in this study found themselves able to deal with the conflict caused by changes in gender roles, find their voice within the Sudanese community and then work to achieve social change by empowering other women.

The women in this study found themselves struggling with conflicting cultural expectations about their roles within society. In Sudanese culture, strict expectations of appropriate gender roles and social relations for men and women exist. These expectations are based on the subordination of women and place men as the head of the household (Edward, 2001). As most of the women in this study were resettled to the United States as single women separated from their families, they were required to negotiate and redefine gender roles upon resettlement. These roles were markedly different from the ones they had previously been accustomed to in Sudan, where Rabbecca described women as “*not having a voice*” and Angelina said, “*the women in Africa...men sometimes they treat them like, they treat them there like animals.*” Once in the United States, the women experienced a greater sense of freedom than they were accustomed to and began to challenge their cultural conceptions of gender roles.

The women attributed this shift in perception of their roles as women to the education they received in the United States and expressed a demand for equality with men within the

Sudanese community. Education provided these women with a newfound sense of empowerment and independence. However, empowerment implies a shift in power relationships between men and women and as with any social change, conflict is likely to emerge (Edward, 2001; Stromquist, 2002). Several women shared stories of how their education conflicted with cultural conceptions of gender roles and caused jealousy amongst their male classmates, boyfriends and husbands. Miriam explained that, *“When a woman starts going to school and challenging men then it’s gonna be something different. They will not understand each other.”* The women in this study confirmed the findings of previous research that gender-role negotiations contributed to increased instances of domestic violence and marital conflict within the refugee community (Martin, 2004; James, 2010). Amina shared her belief that some of the Sudanese women in the community were abusing the freedoms afforded to them in the United States. She also described how the changes in gender roles and expectations were causing conflicts between men and women, often leading to divorce or separation:

So it makes them [women] like, now they have power they can drink, they can do anything, they can go out any time and then their husbands would get jealous or maybe tell them ‘you are not taking care of the kids’ or whatever and then they get into conflicts and now they break their relationship, most of the marriages here are getting apart, they are breaking because of that.

The sense of independence and increased self-confidence provided the tools necessary to demand social change, yet because this change was not widely accepted by the Sudanese community, the women faced additional challenges. Women in romantic relationships found it difficult to maintain these relationships, and single women found difficulty in finding a partner.

Jasmine described the difficulty educated single women faced in establishing romantic relationships with men in the Sudanese community:

In our community, um, it's always difficult for a highly educated girls to find a stable husband. Because they say like, an educated women is always rude. Why rude? Because she is very strong to ask questions and to find out why, and that is to our men sometimes, it's like rude.

The experiences of these women demonstrate that although the women gain a sense of empowerment, change must occur in both men and women in order for gender equality to be established (Murphy-Graham, 2010). Despite the struggle, the women refused to conform to traditional gender roles, instead advocating for an acceptance of their redefined roles within the Sudanese community.

Although changes in attitudes towards gender roles caused tension between men and women in the Sudanese community, the manner in which the women found themselves able to deal with the conflict strengthened their sense of empowerment. They developed negotiating skills and found a voice with which they were able to “state their rights with determination and controlled sentimentality” (Stromquist, 2002, p. 29). In a culture where gender roles are strictly defined and women are expected to submit to men both in the public and private spheres (Edward, 2001), finding a voice to speak out against power inequalities and to demand social change was the ultimate expression of empowerment. For these women, finding their voice meant being able to express their opinions amongst the male members of the Sudanese community and have their ideas respected. Rebecca stated:

At least I feel like right now like I have a voice as a woman, at least to stand with men and really challenge them....And they can listen to me because they believe you have

knowledge too. Than other people who are not educated. No one will always listen to them when they say something.

As previously discussed, participation in formal education afforded these women a sense of independence and increased their confidence and self-esteem. Participating in formal education raised the consciousness of the refugee women by exposing them to alternate social and cultural norms. The women began to challenge cultural expectations of gender roles and learned to navigate the conflict caused by demanding social change. In doing so, these women found their voice in the Sudanese community and no longer remained invisible refugees.

The evolution of their empowerment did not end for these women at the individual level. All of the women expressed a strong desire to support the women and children from their villages in Sudan and had a desire to become actors for social change. Jasmine best described this attitude when she said, *“I felt like it will be from us women that we’ll be able to liberate ourselves.”* They believed that their academic accomplishments had little meaning if they were not utilizing them to help others in need. Jasmine stated:

We’ll go and share it [education] with our women and girls back in Sudan. And because we need to change the coming generations of women to think in a positive way and to believe in themselves and to think that um, through education things are so much possible and easy to get.

Education had a profound impact on the lives of these women, giving them a sense of empowerment, and they believed it was their duty to share this sense of liberation with other women. The women recognized the empowering nature of their education experiences and had a strong desire to replicate these experiences for others. As Sophia poignantly described, *“I want to empower women and give them like, voices at least. I just want to be able to give them the*

chances and be able to be women and be able to make choices.” For the nine Sudanese refugee women in this study, experiencing education in the United States, provided them not only with the practical knowledge necessary to successfully navigate the resettlement process, but also most significantly, a sense of empowerment and the agency necessary for them to redefine their lives and advocate for social change.

Limitations of the Study

As a phenomenology, this study sought to capture the essence of the lived-experiences of nine Sudanese refugee women as they navigated formal education in the United States. The findings of this study are not intended to provide generalizations about the education experiences of all refugee women or even all Sudanese refugee women. The experiences of these women are unique to them as individuals and are a result of their personal histories both in Africa and the United States.

It is important to note that the women in this study all had prior experience with formal education before their resettlement to the United States. These prior education experiences provided a comparative lens through which they perceived their education experiences in the United States. The themes discussed in this study are derived from the essence of the experience that emerged as a collective representation of this group as a whole, and while these themes are useful in providing insight into the refugee experience, these findings may not necessarily be applied to other groups.

Although the women in this study described numerous challenges to continuing their education, they actively sought opportunities which allowed them to continue their formal education. Their internal motivation to acquire education under challenging circumstances in both Africa and the United States, suggests that education played a significant role in the lives of these nine Sudanese refugee women. The importance these women placed on education and the

value of education in their lives may have influenced the findings of this study and these findings may be less relevant to populations without the same view of education.

Eight of the nine women in this study were relocated to the United States as single women, without their families. As single women, they may have experienced more freedom to define their roles than refugee women living with their parents, spouses or children. At the time of the study, seven of the women were single and their status as single women may have influenced their feelings of independence. Additionally, the acculturation process may have been less of a struggle for these women, because as single women, they did not negotiate with parents or husbands which dominant cultural norms they would accept and incorporate into their own lives.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

Much of the research on refugee populations has failed to take into account the gendered nature of the refugee experience (Callamard, 1999). Limited exploration of the specific experiences of refugee women has left women voiceless in the literature and earned women the reputation as invisible refugees (Horsbrugh-Porter, 2009; Goodkind & Deacon, 2004; Martin 2001). This is especially true of the Sudanese refugee population, in which the experiences of the men have been well documented, earning them recognitions as the Lost Boys of Sudan, while their female counterparts have remained, for the most, part voiceless. Using a phenomenological methodology coupled with a third-wave feminist perspective, the purpose of this study was to address these gaps in the literature by providing insight in to the lived experiences of nine Sudanese refugee women living in the United States by understanding how they perceived their experiences with formal education.

This study found that, consistent with previous literature, these Sudanese refugee women had unique needs during the resettlement process. In addition to the need to learn the language of the country of resettlement, find a job and adjust to social and cultural norms, these women also described a strong need to establish relationships, gain economic independence and find a sense of hope in the future. The findings of this study suggest that participating in formal education assisted these Sudanese refugee women in the resettlement process by successfully meeting these needs. Additionally, formal education provided these nine Sudanese refugee women not only with language and occupational skills but also a sense of empowerment. While the women in this study described their experiences with formal education as the source of their individual feelings of empowerment, this sense of empowerment was not derived from the education system itself, nor was it related to the curriculum or teaching methodologies. Rather, their empowerment emerged from a variety of qualitatively different experiences associated with

their participation in formal education. The findings of this study suggest the following unintended consequences of formal education: establishment of relationships; exposure to cross-cultural interpretations of gender roles; increased self-confidence; economic independence; and individual empowerment.

To begin with, one of the most important aspects of formal education for the women in this study was that it provided opportunities to establish relationships with peers and develop social networks. These relationships created a support system for the women which helped them to overcome feelings of loneliness, find a sense of belonging and normalcy and adjust to cultural and social norms in the United States. Additionally, these relationships helped the women to deal with inflated and unmet expectations of life in the United States. The social networks that the women constructed as a result of their interactions in formal education programs had a reciprocal effect on their academic achievement. Access to formal education increased their social networks, and these relationships, in turn, helped them to achieve academically and further increase their opportunities to further their education. The findings of this study confirm the reciprocal influence of education and social networks: education assisted in establishing relationships and these relationships assisted these refugee women to continue with their education. In the end, this experience assisted the refugee women with their resettlement process.

Second, exposure to other cultural norms had a significant influence on the women in this study. Formal education programs are inherently designed to expose individuals to dominant cultural and social norms, and while previous research has suggested that this can have a negative impact on the resettlement experiences of refugees (Davies & Webb, 2000), for the women in this study, exposure to cultural and social norms in the United States gave them the

opportunity to critically evaluate their own lives and become conscious of oppression within the Sudanese refugee community. The women in this study expressed pride in their Sudanese culture and did not view American cultural values and social norms as superior to those of Sudan, but rather believed that exposure to other cultural values opened the door to recognizing oppressive practices within their own community. This was important to the women, who as a consequence of their resettlement to the United States took this opportunity to redefine their roles in society. In redefining their roles, they desired to challenge gender expectations in the Sudanese refugee community and demand equal social relationships between Sudanese men and women. Admittedly, the women did not critically analyze American cultural practices, which may have been the result of not wanting to criticize the culture they were presently living in or may have been because they identified as Sudanese who hoped to someday return to Sudan. As Sudanese women, their focus was not on how to adjust Sudanese culture to fit into American culture, but rather how to learn from characteristics of American culture and possibly use that knowledge in the transformation of Sudanese culture.

Third, participating in formal education provided these refugee women with increased confidence and self-esteem. Decades of civil war in Sudan limited opportunities for formal education. Likewise, in the Kakuma refugee camp, opportunities for formal education beyond the primary school level were extremely limited. Therefore, the successful completion of educational certificates, such as a high school diploma, GED or college degree is recognized in the Sudanese refugee community as a major accomplishment. The women in this study, who actively sought opportunities to pursue formal education, believed in their abilities to succeed and as a result of their continued participation in formal education, gained a sense of independence and confidence in their abilities. This confidence translated in to their willingness

to challenge and question oppressive cultural practices and gendered expectations. As a result of their formal education, the women had the confidence to speak out against oppressive gendered expectations in the Sudanese refugee community and because their education was valued in the Sudanese community, the women believed that their opinions would be respected and valued. In challenging cultural practices and redefining gender roles, the women found a voice in the Sudanese community and strengthened their sense of independence and empowerment.

Fourth, the economic independence that the women experienced as a result of their formal education gave them the courage to question and challenge gender expectations in the Sudanese community. Gaining economic independence was most important for the women in relationships who described the ability to work and make their own money as empowering because they could leave the men and still be able to provide for themselves. Economic independence was also a motivator for the women to continue with their formal education, as they viewed education as a means to higher paying jobs and improving their life situation.

Finally, through formal education, the women in this study found a sense of individual empowerment which they desired to share with other women. The women in this study described it as their duty to return to Sudan and create opportunities for women and children to pursue formal education. Their experiences with formal education convinced them that education was necessary for improving their lives and was a means of challenging social and cultural expectations. Given the current changing political climate in their home country, with the expected declaration of southern Sudan as an independent nation, returning to Sudan and working to rebuild the country is a very real possibility for these women. While data collection for this project began before the Sudanese referendum vote had taken place, the vote for separation was highly anticipated. In light of this, the desire of the women to become activists

for social change in Sudan and in the Sudanese refugee community, may be viewed as more than a desire for social change, but as a realistic opportunity.

Participating in formal education programs provided the women in this study with the space to critically evaluate their lives, recognize oppressive cultural practices and ultimately advocate for social change. These aspects of formal education, which the women did not attribute to the educational systems themselves, were not part of the explicit formal curriculum or pedagogy in which they participated. Nonetheless, they had a profound meaning on the lives of these women, affecting everything from the way they perceived themselves and their role in society to their plans for the future and goals for rebuilding Sudan.

Implications of Research

These conclusions offer significant contributions to the field of refugee education, particularly for refugee women. While the goal of this study was not to investigate whether women felt empowered after attending educational programs, this theme continually emerged from the Sudanese women's voices. As a result, this is important for refugees, who, as a consequence of their refugee status often have limited control over their lives. However, this may be most significant for refugee women, who often face the double burden of being refugees and experiencing cultural restrictions that make them invisible within their own refugee community and host country.

It is important to note, however, that access to formal education is not synonymous with empowerment. Organizations working with refugee women must realize that in order for formal education to provide refugee women with a sense of empowerment, women must first have an internal desire to obtain education and believe that participating in formal education will positively affect their lives. In order for formal education to be empowering, it must provide

refugee women with a sense of independence, choice, control and voice. The findings of this study suggest that it was not the specific Western content or context of the formal education in which these women participated that provided them with a sense of empowerment, but rather the implicit practices such as establishing social networks, exposure to other cultural values and practices, and the freedom to reflect on and share personal experiences that allowed the women to define for themselves a sense of empowerment. By recognizing the influence of the implicit aspects of formal education and making a conscious effort to promote relationship building and provide space for personal reflection, educators, administrators, and organizations working with refugee women can assist them in defining their own sense of empowerment.

This study confirmed conclusions of Deacon & Sullivan (2009), who found that pressure to obtain immediate employment upon resettlement may restrict education opportunities for refugee women. This was also the experience of the Sudanese refugees in this study, such as Angelina, who was initially resettled to Ohio but moved to Colorado where education opportunities were available. Although she had a full-time job and was able to support herself, the hope that education could provide her with more opportunities for her future motivated her to relocate. Her story demonstrates Mott's (2001) finding that once settled in the United States it is not uncommon for refugees to relocate for reasons such as access to education. This suggests that education is not only a motivation for seeking resettlement in the United States but also a motive for where in the country refugee women relocate. This has implications for voluntary organizations working with the resettlement of refugees. Because education is linked to successful resettlement for refugee women, agencies should consider available education opportunities, especially opportunities for women, when deciding on resettlement communities.

Suggestions for Future Research

As with any research study, the more that is learned and understood, the more questions that arise. This study provided insight into how women perceive their education experiences and how education can assist women in the resettlement process. In this study, education was linked to a sense of empowerment and increased confidence and self-esteem, yet participation in formal education did not guarantee a sense of empowerment. Further research examining the specific programs and policies that contribute to the sense of empowerment amongst women may be helpful to agencies responsible for refugee resettlement. As previously mentioned, in order for gender equality to be achieved, there must be change in both men and women. To understand the full implications of gender equality in the Sudanese refugee community, future studies focusing on how men and women negotiate the shift in power relations may be helpful in addressing the negative consequences Sudanese refugee women face when renegotiating gender roles.

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APPENDIX A: HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

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April 28, 2010

TO: Leslie Pacheco
 Educational Foundations, Leadership & Policy

FROM: Hillary Harms, Ph.D.
 HSRB Administrator

RE: HSRB Project No.: H10T272GE7

TITLE: *Educational experiences of female Sudanese refugees*

You have met the conditions for approval for your project involving human subjects. **As of April 28, 2010, your project has been granted final approval by the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB). This approval expires on April 7, 2011.** You may proceed with subject recruitment and data collection.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is attached. Consistent with federal OHRP guidance to IRBs, **the consent document(s) bearing the HSRB approval/expiration date stamp is the only valid version and you must use copies of the date-stamped document(s) in obtaining consent from research subjects.**

You are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB and to use only approved forms. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures (including increases in the number of participants), please send a request for modifications immediately to the HSRB via this office. Please notify me, in writing (fax: 372-6916 or email: hsrb@bgsu.edu) upon completion of your project.

Good luck with your work. Let me know if this office or the HSRB can be of assistance as your project proceeds.

Comments/ Modifications:

The "clean" stamped consent document is coming via campus mail.

c: Dr. Margaret Booth

Research Category: EXPEDITED #7

APPENDIX B: INFORMATION LETTER

Dear Participant:

You are invited to be part of a research project studying the educational experiences of female refugees. This study will benefit members of the Sudanese community as it aims to understand how formal education can be used to meet the needs of female Sudanese refugees. With this information organizations such as the Community for Sudanese and American Women (CSAW), can improve upon existing programs and support services for female refugees.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and your name will not be used or associated with any information collected or in any reporting. You will be assigned a pseudonym, and identifying information will not be included in any reports or research. In order to participate in this study, you must be at least 18 years of age and have experience with formal education in the United States.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to take part in two interviews about your experience resettling in a new country and your perceptions of formal education in the United States. Each interview will be conducted one-on-one and last approximately one hour. Interviews will be audio-recorded unless you object to recording. In addition to interviews, you may be asked to participate in informal conversations via phone or email. Some participants may also be asked to volunteer to allow the researcher to observe them in an educational setting. Your name will not be connected to any information gathered; therefore there is no risk to your participation in this project. All aspects of this study are voluntary and you are free to withdrawal from this study at any point without penalty. Furthermore, a decision to participate or not in this study will not influence in any way your relationship with CSAW. All participants will receive a small gift of thanks for their time. If you would like to participate in this study, please complete and sign the attached consent form.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact the researcher, Leslie Pacheco, at (760) 673-9315 or at lpachec@bgsu.edu or the research advisor Dr. Margaret Booth at (419) 372-9950 or boothmz@bgsu.edu. Also, if you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716, or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

Sincerely,

Leslie Pacheco
Cross-Cultural and International Education
School of Educational Foundations, Leadership & Policy
Bowling Green State University

APPENDIX C: CONSENT LETTER

Dear Participant:

You are invited to be part of a research project studying the educational experiences of female Sudanese refugees in the United States. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and your name will not be used or associated with any information collected or in any reporting.

Before deciding to participate in this study you should have:

- Reviewed the information in this form
- Had the opportunity to discuss this study with the researcher
- Had the opportunity to ask any questions you may have

Your signature below means that you have received this information and have asked the questions you currently have about the research and those questions have been answered.

By signing this consent form, you indicate that you at least 18 years of age and are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Please include your contact information, as it may be necessary to contact you by email or phone to arrange an interview time.

Preferred Method of Contact _____

Phone _____ Best time to call _____

Email _____

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact the researcher, Leslie Pacheco, at (760) 673-9315 or at lpachec@bgsu.edu or the research advisor Dr. Margaret Booth at (419) 372-9950 or boothmz@bgsu.edu. Also, if you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716, or hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviewee _____

Date _____

Time _____

Introduction

You have been selected to participate in this study because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your education experiences. This research project focuses on the experiences of Sudanese females participating in educational programs in the United States. In order to facilitate note-taking, I would like your permission to audio tape our conversation today. As a reminder, the information you share today is confidential and your name will not be associated with it in any reporting. Your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. This interview will last no longer than one hour. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.

SECTION A: Participant Background

1. How old were you when you came to the United States?
2. Where do you live in the United States?
3. How long have you lived there?
4. Who lives in your household?

SECTION B: Resettlement in the United States

1. Let's start by describing your experience of resettling in the United States.
2. What resources have been available for you as you have adjusted to life in the United States?
3. Which of these resources have been most helpful?
4. Describe a specific experience where you utilized these resources.
5. What are some of the challenges you faced adjusting to life in the United States?
Describe a specific experience in which you negotiated these challenges.
6. If you were going to start an organization to support Sudanese women living in the United States, what types of programs would you offer?

SECTION C: Education in the United States

1. How much education did you have before coming to the United States?
2. What are your education goals? (Probe: Why are these your goals? Are they related to a career choice, personal development?)
3. Have you participated in any formal education in the United States? For example, have you attended school or taken classes in the community?
4. If yes, describe the type of program or class you attended? (Probes: Where was it located? How often and for how long did you participate?)
5. Please tell me more about this experience, what do you do in this program?
6. How did this experience affect you? What changes do you associate with the experience?
7. Why did you decide to participate in this program?
8. What do you like best about school?
9. What do you like least about school?
10. Describe a typical day of schooling.

SECTION D: Perceptions of Education in the United States

1. How has your education experience influenced your life?
2. In what ways have formal education been beneficial?
3. If you met a Sudanese woman entering formal education in the United States for the first time, what advice would you give her?
4. If you could design an education program for Sudanese women in the United States, what would it look like?