

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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presented on September 11, 2000. Title: Academic Achievement: Case Studies of a  
Group of Yemeni Women.

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Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

 Joanne B. Engel  \_\_\_\_\_

This qualitative study explored the life experiences of a small group of Yemeni women who are academically successful and identified factors perceived by this group to have played a major role in their academic success. One of the key objectives was to gain a better understanding of the processes which promoted these factors.

Data were obtained from six Yemeni women through the use of multiple in-depth phone interviews scheduled and conducted by the researcher. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded with analytical themes emerging from the data. Cultural, financial and language barriers were identified as factors that may have negatively affected the educational process of some of these women whereas family support, good home environment, and certain identifiable personality traits were prospectively the major factors related to their academic success. The data were investigated from the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's framework in relation to the four levels of the Ecological Systems Theory. The study also utilized aspects of Social Cognitive Theory as outlined by Bandura. The

findings indicated that the respondents' education was influenced by the effects of Bronfenbrenner's four ecological systems. However, it was the "microsystem" that received significant attention in this study. Parental support and encouragement had the most significant effect on the participants' educational attainment and achievement. At an early age the participants internalized their parents values and standards of behavior notably academic achievement. The parents played a major role in placing value on education and in enhancing both motivation and competence in their children. All participants came from intact families where relationships between fathers and mothers are strong. This strong family relationship provided stability and harmony in the lives of the respondents.

Recommendations for further research were suggested and presented. Few past reports paid attention only to the eradication of illiteracy problems in Yemen. Research in the area of successful academic Yemeni women to determine the factors that promote success will yield a better understanding about how to encourage plans for the education of Yemeni women that have a higher chance to succeed.

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Academic Achievement: Case Studies of a Group of Yemeni Women

By

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A THESIS

Submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirement of the  
degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Presented September 11, 2000

Commencement June, 2001

Doctor of Philosophy thesis of Faiza Al-Saaidi presented on September 11, 2000

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to all people without whom this thesis could not have been accomplished. First of all, I am enormously indebted to my major professor, Dr. Joanne Engel, for guiding me through this study. Dr. Engel's suggestions and comments were always constructive and inspiring. My respect and appreciation toward Dr. Engel is difficult to put into words. I am grateful for her constant encouragement and thoughtfulness during my entire doctoral program at Oregon State University.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to all my committee members: Dr. Warren Suzuki; Dr. Wayne Haverson; Dr. Larry Kenneke; and Dr. Judith Bowker. I thank them all for their useful comments and availability.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all the women participants in this study for their courage and willingness to share their life experiences and insights. I admire and appreciate their valuable contribution and active participation during the interview process.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for the love and endless support I received from them. I am most grateful for my husband's constant encouragement and enthusiasm during my program of study. I thank him for being there for me and for his ceaseless efforts to help me overcome all the obstacles that stood in my way to finish my education. I would also like to thank my parents for their support and for helping me in any way they could to make my dream come

true. Thanks to all of you who believed in me and in my ability to finish my doctoral program.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
I. 1. Personal Educational Journey.....	1
I. 2. Theoretical Framework .....	13
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	15
II. 1. The Context of Education for Yemeni Women .....	21
II. 2. Low Enrollment Rates of Females .....	22
II. 3. Obstacles to Women's Education .....	23
II. 4. Women in Higher Education .....	25
II. 5. Yemeni Women and Public Participation .....	26
III. METHODOLOGY.....	33
III. 1. Searching for an Appropriate Methodology .....	33
III. 2. Researcher's Disclosure .....	40
III. 3. The Selection of the Participants .....	43
III. 4. Data Collection .....	44
III. 5. Data Analysis & Procedures.....	44
III. 5. 1. In depth tape-recorded phone interviews .....	45
III. 5. 2. Audio-taping .....	46
III. 5. 3. Transcription .....	47
III. 5. 4. Informed consent .....	47
III. 5. 5. Member check .....	48
III. 5. 6. Reflexive journal .....	48



## TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
III. 6. The Respondents .....	48
IV. THEMES AND DISCUSSION .....	54
IV. 1. The Family .....	54
IV. 1. 1. Parental value of education .....	55
IV. 1. 2. Early educational experiences and home study environment .....	59
IV. 1. 3. Family support and encouragement as a source of empowerment .....	62
IV. 2. Personal Characteristics and Success .....	73
IV. 2. 1. Persistence .....	74
IV. 2. 2. Locus of control and achievement .....	76
IV. 2. 3. Spirituality and the role it played in the lives of the participants .....	80
IV. 2. 4. Resilience .....	91
IV. 3. Auxiliary Emotional Support .....	98
IV. 4. Language Barriers .....	100
V. EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE, CONCLUSION, DELIMITATION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	103
V. 1. Epistemological Perspective .....	103
V. 2. Conclusion .....	106
V. 3. Delimitation .....	109
V. 4. Recommendations .....	109
CODA .....	112
REFERENCES .....	116
APPENDICES .....	123
Appendix A: Human Subject Approval Form .....	124

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
Appendix B: Copy of the Informed Consent Form .....	125
Appendix C: A Copy of Questionnaire .....	126
Appendix D: Stress List .....	129

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>		<u>Page</u>
1	Illustrates the sources and the processes regulated by self-efficacy .....	18
2	Illustrates the levels of the environment in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory .....	20

***“...and say: My Lord!***

***Cause Me to Grow in Knowledge.”***

# ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: CASE STUDIES OF A GROUP OF YEMENI WOMEN

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### I.1. Personal Educational Journey:

As I contemplated the lives of female characters portrayed in The Land, Oh Salma (1986)<sup>1</sup> by Abd al-Wali, I was thinking of my own experiences and struggles against social conventions in Yemen. Despite his desperate attempt to address women's issues, the author's women characters are not able to articulate their ordeal. Salma, for instance, is non-existent as a voice independent of the author's. The only line she was allowed to speak comes at the end of the story as an unspoken vow. The most striking feature of The Land, Oh Salma (1986) is its specific social purpose: to bring attention to the problems caused by immigration. Until the late sixties, the northern part of Yemen passed through very difficult and complicated periods, due to drought, poverty and the tyranny of the ruling Imams who, for decades, kept the country in isolation to serve their own interests. All these factors forced Yemenis to seek a better life outside their homeland. That is why most of the women characters encountered in The Land, Oh Salma are left

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<sup>1</sup> Translation copyright: Faiza A. H. Al-Saaidi; Permission to translate granted by the author's estate. It is important to note that the translation of the short story, "The Land, Oh Salma," should not be regarded as an exact rendition. It is difficult to reflect the subtleties and the flavor of the original Arabic, a language known for its wealth of metaphor. However, the story may pave the way for those who are interested in less well-known cultures and who need access to Arabic short stories for their own scholarly pursuits.

behind by their husbands. Salma is a lonely young woman in rural Yemen who has been deserted for a long period of time by her husband, Derhim. Salma's husband left her with his parents while he emigrates, for economic reasons, in order to provide for all the members of his family. Salma, however, is expected to take care of her in-laws and the land. It has been five long years since her husband left and Salma is still waiting, yet doubtful of his return. Desperate for his return, Salma considers a divorce as a way out but soon resolves to wait and keep the land. Salma dreams of a better life with Hassan who may offer her the happiness she did not achieve by marrying Derhim. But she gives up her musings after realizing her weak position, perhaps for the first time. Divorce is not so easy and is considered detestable. Moreover, she cannot guarantee happiness with Hassan because he is like any other man in the village who thinks of leaving his family behind after getting married. Salma denies herself what the reader might consider as salvation because she goes against her personal impulses. Her decision, however, seems to be an act of sacrifice, something to be avoided in some cultures and admired in others, such as in Yemen.

The author, Abd al-Wali, felt the need to criticize what he saw as the injustices of the society surrounding these women. He wanted to draw attention to those women who are worse off than all others, but are not even aware of it. Left behind by their husbands, they cling to one last hope- the land. The powerful conventions of family life in the Yemeni village must be felt if the reader is to understand the lives of the characters in The Land, Oh Salma. The narrator's

comments help the reader to maintain sympathetic attitude toward the characters. For instance, the voice addressing Salma says, "This is your life everyday . . . is there anything new?" (Al-Saaidi, 1996, p. 198). Later, the voice says, "You can't get a divorce, especially after your father's death, for no one will stand by you" (Al-Saaidi, 1996, p. 199). It is here that the reader comes to understand the oppression in Salma's life and how it came about. The situations of all women characters are related to the social structure which determine the content of their daily lives, lives controlled by rigid customs. They find themselves obligated to act according to the wishes of their society. Moral and religious principles are not distinguished from social conventions. Salma is afraid of the consequences of her attraction to Hassan, "Did you notice the town folks with their curious eyes upon you, following you everywhere? Didn't you notice their suspicious looks?" (Al-Saaidi, 1996, p. 199). For Salma, duty calls, and it will win out. Perhaps Abd-al-Wali's point of view here is that, while realizing they are trapped, these women also know they do not have the means to break free. The writer's perception is that the condition of these women must be blamed on an entire social, economic, and political system. The author is not railing against the restrictions imposed by religion, but is rather complaining against the social conventions based on ignorance. In his statement, " . . . a women has no right to get a divorce," (Al-Saaidi, 1996, p. 199) he is obviously attacking society's narrowness on this view. Under Islamic law, a woman does have the right to divorce if the husband neglects his duties towards her. However, in the case of Salma, divorce is difficult because it will leave her financially insecure.

Above all, she would be a divorced woman. Islam does not deny women the privilege of free will but a tradition-bound society does.

Foreign readers of these Yemeni short stories may encounter some intercultural stumbling blocks to understand the stories themes. They might wonder if things are really "bad" for Yemen women? Abd-al-Wali's women characters do not represent Yemeni women in general. Therefore, it is my intention in this thesis to present another reality and to give voice to other perspectives.

It is important to note that the oppression of women is not essentially due to religious ideologies but is due to social conventions based on ignorance. During the Islamic era women played an important role and occupied a prominent place in culture and in the social and economic life of their people. The history of the Arabs is full of copious examples of women who actively participated in political struggles, wars, and battles. It is clearly understood that women during the time of the prophet Mohammed obtained rights and privileges that do not exist today in most Arab countries. So what went wrong? Simply women in these countries suffer because they are not aware of their legal rights. The Qur'an granted women equal rights with men. As some Muslim modernists indicated:

The Qur'an made women the equal of men in all essential respects, that certain inequalities that had existed in Islam were largely due to social custom-- much of which was anti-Islamic -- and that some of these inequalities were due to misperceptions of the purpose of the Qur'an by medieval lawyers. (Rahman, 1981, p. 30)



It is necessary to mention that neither the environment I was brought up in nor the socio-economic background of my family was similar to the one depicted in Abd-al-Wali's short stories. In Yemen, cultural differences between the North and the South are rooted in history. North Yemen was under the Imamate, a religio-political regime that stressed traditions. This isolated the North and froze it in time until the mid-1960s. South Yemen, on the other hand, was under the colonial influence from 1839 to 1967 known as Aden. Differences persist.

Many North Yemenis fled to the South to receive an education. Others managed to escape to neighboring countries, mainly Egypt, for further education. I was raised in South Yemen (Aden) which was a British Colony until 1967. This was a time of political change in both the history and culture of South Yemen. Britain and the Soviet Union imposed themselves on South Yemen in the form of colonialist regimes. The goal of British education during its occupation was worldly, utilitarian, and pragmatic rather than humanely oriented. Carlyle (1967) wrote of utilitarian England that education was no longer an "indefinable tentative process, requiring the study of individual aptitudes, and a perpetual variation of means and methods," but rather a "straightforward business, to be conducted in the gross, by proper mechanism" (p. 24). Charles Dickens (1854) echoes this in his novel, Hard Times, with his "inclined plane of little vessels" (p. 2) which were to have "facts poured into them until they were full to the brim" (p. 20). Mr. M'Choakumchild has " . . . taken the bloom off the higher branches of higher mathematics and physical science, French, German, Latin, and Greek" (p. 7). The

children's rock samples "broken by those tremendously hard instruments their own names" (p. 9) are all examples of the rigid stoniness of their education. Dickens certainly feels as Carlyle did. In Hard Times the metaphor of the sterile garden or of spoiling a fruitful one is a metaphor which represents Grandgrind's (the headmaster) inhuman utilitarianism. Facts to be planted and all else rooted out. That represented the situation of the education system in Aden (South Yemen) during the British occupation.

The forces that expelled the British in 1967 were labeled as extreme leftists. The revolution in the South led eventually to the birth of the first and only Marxist Arab State in the world. (Recently Yemen again experienced political change with the unification of the South and the North in 1990.) This political change in the government left a great impact on people's lives. It was this system that affected me the most and affected the well being of my entire family. The economy was on the verge of collapse following the departure of the British. The country was dependent on economic support from Communist countries. The situation deteriorated when this economic crisis was accompanied by political conflict. A more radical wing overthrew the first president and forced far-reaching social reforms and more dependence on the Soviet bloc. All local and foreign enterprises were nationalized followed by a system of centralized planning. Many people fled the country to escape such a harsh regime. In the name of equality, the new government seized and nationalized all our possessions and properties for their ends and interests. My father, along with my older brothers, was among those who fled leaving us (my

mother, three daughters, and a son) behind. We went through upheaval but managed to survive hoping that some day our men would be back and things would return to normal. The days passed, then months, and then years, but there was no sign of them coming back. Life wasn't easy, but we survived.

Education has been exploited mainly to serve the needs of those in control of power. The increase in the hegemony of socialist ideas has been accompanied by a total disregard of moral ethics. The ruling Yemen socialist party was "seeking to steer a path between Chinese and Soviet influences, and its declaration on world affairs during the 1970s were further to the left than those of the leading countries in the communist world" (Hamalainen, 1991, p. 22). The new government did not consider the ontological or ideological view that had previously governed South Yemen. The goal was to change people's consciousness.

Leaders applied an empowerment model of education similar to that proposed by Paulo Freire (1990). Freire's theory of adult education is "set within a larger framework of radical social change. Education, for Freire, is never neutral; it either oppresses or liberates" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 262). The same principle of change that characterizes Freire's theory also underlies Marx's idea of salvation, "Empowerment involves the important notion of praxis-reflection and action" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 298). It was stated that "learners who become aware of their oppression become empowered to take action to change not only their situation but the social structure that led to oppression in the first place" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 298). Freire's method was essentially similar to

Marx's. According to Marx, Communism was not an ultimate goal but a phase in historical development that was to set people free from those socioeconomic and political conditions that make them prisoners of things, machines and their own greed (Formm, 1976).

The best parallel to the situation in South Yemen is depicted in George Orwell's Animal Farm (1954). Like the animals who seized power from Mr. Jones, the owner of Manor Farm and announced that all animals are equal, the new government soon took control over the country.

The government of South Yemen made dramatic changes in the curriculum and operated under the license of communist ideologies. Religious studies were increasingly moved away from everyday life until they were replaced by anti-religious communist ideologies. The theory of equality was used by politicians who, in the name of progress, exploited their people only to satisfy their own ends and interests. The goal of education fit nothing but the model imposed by the new socialist regime.

The major event that changed my life took place immediately after finishing high school. My top priority was to go to college outside South Yemen. I strongly believed then, and now, that studying abroad is a valuable and wonderful experience. My decision left my mother in great agony. She was caught between her fear for the safety of my life and her desire to make my dream come true. I had no choice but to convince my mother to count her blessings and let me go. At seventeen, I was faced with one of the biggest challenges in my life--to escape. The

plan was to flee to North Yemen by traveling to my grandparents' village, cross the border, stay in the North until the necessary arrangements were made so that I could take off to Egypt where my father was residing. The journey was a daunting one--an experience that is still vivid in my mind with every specific detail. I was so young and too persistent. Once I started to hasten my footsteps in the dismal valley, under the blazing sun, a whole world of freedom opened up for me. But it was scary because I could not see what was hidden for me behind the far away mountains. I was running towards an unknown destiny. Everything was racing in my mind, and my tears started pouring like rain. But the one thing that I dreaded the most was getting killed. I was afraid, not for myself, but for my mother and the ordeal my leaving had created for her. But eventually, I made it to the border and the long, frightening and exhausting journey came to an end.

North Yemen is a conservative society and culture. From the Islamic point of view, men and women alike are supposed to obtain as much education as they can. Western education is introduced in the university yet adult students and teachers as well are also committed to the preservation of Islamic values in their quest for higher education. Teachers and learners can address anything as long as it does not conflict with Islamic teachings. However, it is necessary to emphasize that Islamic teachings do not encourage passive, uncritical thinking. On the contrary, people are encouraged to contemplate the secrets and the signs of God's creation in the world. Muslims are urged to think, to do research, and to acquire knowledge. However, the techniques used by many teachers teaching adults in Yemen today

are based on the dictation of facts, similar to the "banking model of education, in which knowledge is deposited into the heads of learners" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991, p. 295). Rarely do instructors make a real effort to train students how to think or how to be critical thinkers. Students are taught without the ability to exercise their minds. Notably, the defect here lies within the teaching methods adopted at schools.

North Yemen has been occupied by a number of local and foreign forces for a long period of time. Prior to the 1962 Revolution, North Yemen's was living under the Imamate's regime. Men as well as women suffered equally in a climate of backwardness and ignorance. During the Imamate's regime, for instance, only the male could participate in Yemeni society. The female had no part to play. Although the 1962 Revolution had created a firm belief in the liberty of all Yemeni citizens, many women still believe that home is where they are supposed to be. Women are moved to the side of their own lives and they have not been what they can be. Furthermore, it is a widely held belief that women's goals must take into account the needs of their community. In other words, goals must be molded to account for the welfare of the family and the community. There is a strong sense of commitment to social interdependence. Islam indicates that men and women are equal but they are not the same. Therefore, differences between them should not be condemned but are rather welcomed and appreciated. However, the culture has not succeeded in embracing this aspect of its religion.

The public participation of women today is improving but at a slow pace. The Yemeni laws have been promoted to ensure women's participation in various fields of activities and the constitution guarantees women equal status with men.

It was in the North that I met my husband. We both shared the same dreams, one of which was to pursue our graduate studies abroad. In the United States of America, my husband was able to finish his doctorate, but I had only received my master's. Upon his completion of the Ph.D. degree, my husband was urged by his family to return home. Being the oldest son, he had an obligation towards his family. It was a hard decision because I had to give up my plans for a Ph.D. program. Family needs come first, and I did not wish to argue against that.

Although it is perfectly acceptable for a young woman to pursue an education, it was not to be single-mindedly sought once she married. My personal passion for learning, for instance, made some people uncomfortable. However, I was not ready to give up. Teaching with a Masters degree, for instance, does not allow participation in decision making at the university. A Ph.D. would help me participate in educational decision making. After five years of teaching at the University of Sana'a, my husband and I decided to come back to America. Our decision stirred some questions in the family.

My reasons, this time, were different. I had the opportunity, and I wanted to take it. Being a student with a family and to have to attend to domestic duties while attending school is unlikely to appeal to many women in Yemen. But again our plans were delayed. A devastating event took place in the history of Yemen. In

April 1994, a fierce civil war broke out turning our lives upside down. The war was randomly destroying private and public buildings, and killing thousands of innocent civilians. The Yemeni civil war ended in July 1994 with the victory of the unionist forces thereby reaffirming the unified Republic of Yemen that was founded in 1990.

I struggled to pursue my Ph.D. in Adult Education. The social battle surrounding the acquisition of my degree is not over yet and may never end. But I believe that individuals in any society are capable of change and of achieving their dreams as long as they dare to hope. As long as individuals keep striving to improve their lives, then there is always a possibility of having a decent and happier life.

This personal educational journey is just one of many that illustrate how one's understanding of the world flows from the values that one cherishes most. I am cognizant that the context of my background will determine the direction of my life. The voices of the women participants in this study will be presented in the following pages in the hope that their experiences will provide inventive strategies for removing obstacles that fall along the paths of other Yemeni women. The main research questions addressed in this study were: What factors played a role in Yemeni women's academic achievements and how do academically successful Yemeni women in higher education handle various barriers encountered in their educational journey?



## **I.2. Theoretical Framework:**

The life experiences of Yemeni women were explored in an attempt to gain knowledge and understanding of these women's perceptions of success and modes of resilience and personal persistence. What factors contributed to their success? Why are these women different from other Yemeni women? Are they different from other Yemeni women? Was their academic orientation affected by the meanings that these women constructed about their personal efficacy and persistence? If so, what drove these women to push to continue their education?

This study was grounded in Social Cognitive Theory as outlined by Albert Bandura (1977, 1986). Within the context of Social Cognitive Theory behavior, environment, and cognition are considered as key factors in development. All three factors operate interactively. Hence, Social Cognitive Theory was used to guide the present study in an effort to explore life experiences as well as attitudes towards the self and their impact on behavior and environment.

Another theoretical framework for this study was Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological System Theory. This theory references the entire network of people as well as the social setting to which the developing person must adapt psychologically. These women participants were products of their environment. Their success and behavior were undoubtedly influenced by the people around them. Family members, peers, relatives, schools, the community, and culture, are the multiple contexts that impacted the development of these women.

In this study, cultural, financial and language barriers were identified as factors that may have negatively affected the educational process of some of these women whereas family support and specific identifiable personality traits were the major factors related to the academic success of Yemeni women in higher education. These findings highlight the importance of both the Social Cognitive as well as the ecological approach to the problem of lower participation of Yemeni women in higher education. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological System Theory stresses the interaction between the individual and the environment. In other words, this perspective recognizes the influence of the environment on individual development and therefore indicates how behavior is a function of the environment within which individuals find themselves. This ecological approach seems to be an appropriate theoretical framework for this study because the environment in which Yemeni women grow up could have implications for their educational attainment and success. For example, girls who grew up with parents who were aware of the importance of education for women place value on education, have higher expectations for their children and provide a home environment that is more conducive to learning are more likely to continue their graduate studies and to achieve academically.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the main objectives of the literature review in this study was to shed light on the Yemeni environment within which the participants live. Thus, the literature review was aimed at providing a succinct historical, cultural, and educational background to gain a better understanding of both the current status of education and the life experiences and struggles of these Yemeni women who managed to succeed academically. In an effort to identify some factors that may have played a role in the academic achievement and success of these women, the study examined the concepts of resiliency, persistence, and self-efficacy in relation to Bandura's (1986), Social Cognitive Theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological System Theory.

Self-efficacy beliefs and resiliency play influential roles in human agency. Self-efficacy, according to Albert Bandura, refers to people's beliefs about their own ability to perform specific tasks. Therefore, "People who expect that they can perform a certain task are said to have high self-efficacy about the task" (Gray, 1991, p. 589). The term resiliency was defined as the "set of attributes that provides people with the strength and fortitude to confront the overwhelming obstacles they are bound to face in life" (Sagor, 1996, p. 38). There is a considerable amount of research on resiliency with respect to risk factors among children and adolescents (e.g., Werner, 1992; Gramezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). Much of this research has identified several personality, familial, and environmental factors that promote resiliency in youth at risk. These studies provided tremendous help in formulating

the questions addressed in this study. However, for the purpose of this study, the concept of resilience was associated with educational success. (LePage, 1997). The participants were referred to as resilient mainly because they were academic achievers who were able to overcome barriers and to attain high educational degrees.

The literature on self-efficacy suggests that changes in people's attitudes towards themselves may be related to changes in effort and achievement. Level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively the case (Gorrels, 1990). Bandura attempted to determine if these efficacy beliefs establish causal directions and operate as causal factors in human functioning. The results of numerous tests indicated that efficacy beliefs do contribute significantly to human motivation and attainment (Bandura, 1992). Bandura (1986) also reported that learners obtain information about their self-efficacy from four sources as it is illustrated in Figure 1. These sources are:

- (A) Performance Attainment: Beliefs of personal efficacy increase by the constant successes of the individual. Frequent failures undermine efficacy beliefs, especially "if failures occur before a sense of efficacy is firmly established" (Bandura, 1995). The development of individual self-efficacy requires experience to overcome and manage ever-changing life circumstances.
- (B) Vicarious Experience: Beliefs in self-efficacy are to some extent influenced by social models. Individuals' self-efficacy, in other words,

is increased by observing other people who are similar to themselves perform successfully.

(C) Verbal Persuasion: Individuals who receive verbal persuasion regarding their capabilities in mastering given activities are more likely to believe in themselves and mobilize greater efforts.

(D) Physiological and Emotional States: People rely on their physiological states and mood in judging their personal efficacy and their capabilities. Tension is often interpreted as a sign of vulnerability to poor performance. Also positive mood enhances self-efficacy while negative mood diminishes it.

Albert Bandura (1995) pointed out the significance of cognitive processes and their effect in judging personal efficacy. Other factors, including personal, situational, and social ones, were also called into attention as they affect how efficacy-relevant experiences are interpreted:

For example, the extent to which performance attainments alter perceived efficacy will depend on people's preconceptions of their capabilities, the perceived difficulty of the tasks, the amount of effort they expended, their physical and emotional state of mind, the amount of external aid they received, and the situational circumstances under which they performed.  
(p. 5)

Thus, Bandura (1995) remarked that an individual's cognitive beliefs about his or her capabilities are gained and shaped early in life within the family setting.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological environment (1979) is conceived as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next . . . at the inner most level is the immediate

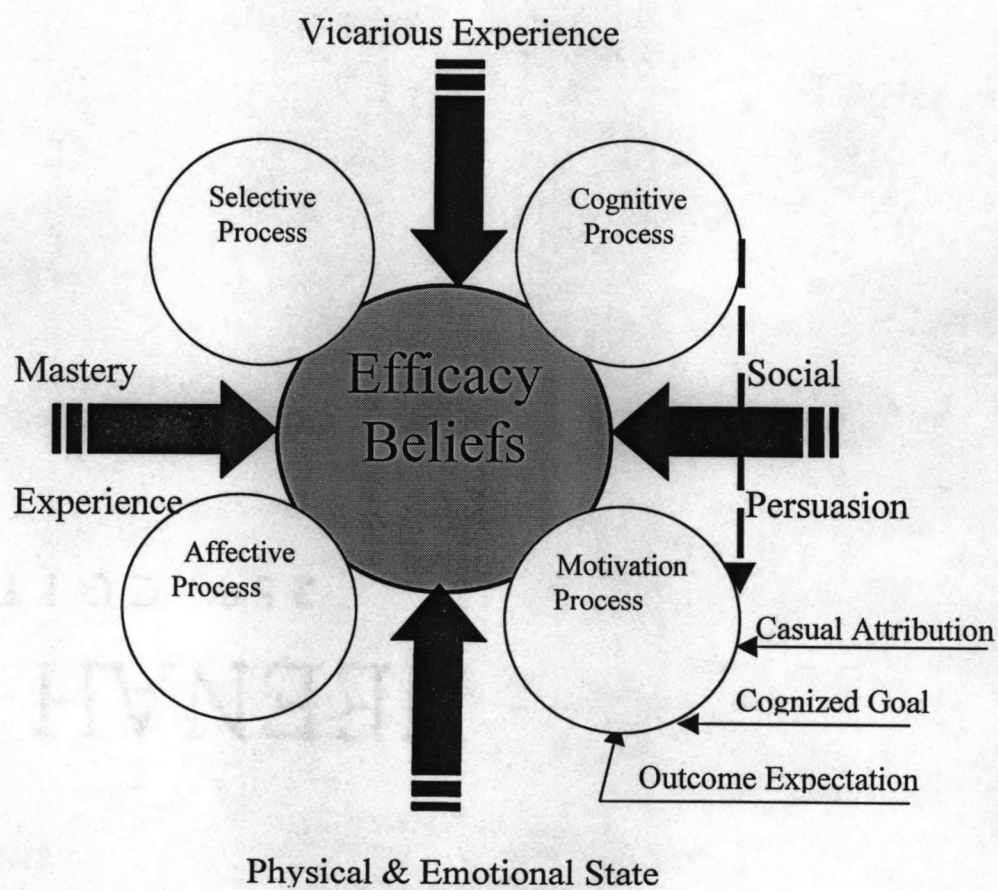


Figure 1. Illustrates the sources and the processes regulated by self-efficacy.

setting containing the developing person” (p. 3). Figure 2. Illustrates the levels of the environment in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological System Theory. Immediate influences and complex interrelations that affect the developing person occur within this microsystem. The family is considered as the main microsystem. As soon as the developing person participates in or moves into a new setting such as a school, a new system, called the mesosystem is formed. This mesosystem involves the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively interacts. Settings such as the parent’s place of work that do not involve the developing person but in which events that occur affect what happens to the person’s immediate environment are referred to as exosystems. The macrosystem involves attitudes, customs, belief systems, laws, and ideologies in a particular culture. The sequence of these nested ecological structures present

Bronfenbrenner’s theory of environmental interconnections and their impact on the forces that directly affect psychological growth. Developmental research entails knowledge of both the immediate and the remote aspects of the environment that are critical for the cognitive, emotional, and social development of the person. Bronfenbrenner has stressed the importance of the phenomenological approach in developmental research. The characteristics of any environment are as important as the characteristics of the people being researched. Thus, what is important, according to Bronfenbrenner, is the environment as perceived by the individual rather than as it may exist in objective reality.

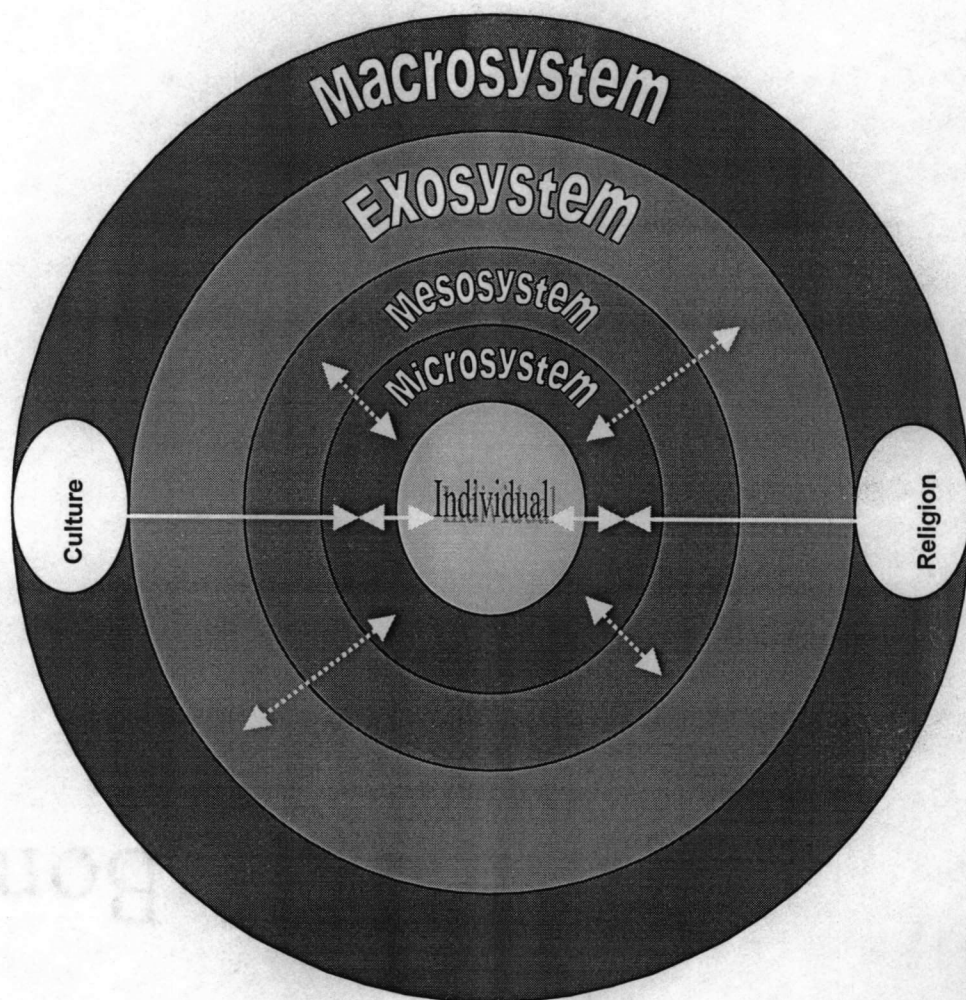


Figure 2. Illustrates the levels of the environment in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory.



Investigating a small group of Yemeni women's life experiences and their self-beliefs about their academic capabilities to overcome barriers is a topic that deserves our attention, for these beliefs are important components of motivation, persistence, and academic achievement. Therefore, the present study focused on the following research objectives: 1) examining the life experiences of this small group of women from their own point of view 2) exploring factors that they believed have strengthened them against obstacles and helped them use education to their advantage.

## **II.1. The Context of Education for Yemeni Women:**

Little is known about Yemeni women in higher education. Published works, mainly reports offered by UNESCO and the World Bank, are focused on basic education, illiteracy rates and statistics that reflect lower enrollments rates of girls and women in all levels. Reliable figures are difficult to find. The representation of Yemeni women in higher education is rather bleak. Despite the education reform undertaken by the Yemeni government, problems still remain and the country is desperate for a solution. Women's lack of access to schools is a serious issue and must be addressed.

## **II.2. Low Enrollment Rates of Females:**

Despite the government's major strides in the field of education since the establishment of the Republic of Yemen in May 1990, the enrollment rates for girls in school are among the lowest in the world. According to recent statistics, 52% of the Yemeni population is under the age of 18 years. Children enrolled today in schools represent only half of the school age population. According to the same statistics, the situation is even worse for girls. The chances of going to schools for girls are slim and range between 1:3 at the primary level, to 1:10 at the secondary level, and 1:50 at university level (Sa'ad, 1998). All available statistics indicate that the level of illiteracy among women is very high. ✓

A large gap was also recognized in a 1998 report on progress towards world population stabilization. Again, among the developing countries Yemen has the highest gender gap score. Several other reports (NET, 1997; 2000a,b,c) written by local agencies echoed similar concerns over the disparity of accesses to education and the high illiteracy rates among females in Yemen. The Women National Committee (NET, 2000a), for instance, had emphasized that its primary concern was with the 76.2% illiteracy rate for Yemeni women. Thus, the Women National Committee pushed for illiteracy eradication, equitable education, and practical measures to prevent girls from dropping out of basic education. It was noted that the inequality between the educational opportunities available to boys and to girls, and also between urban and rural regions is stark. Such disparity between the genders exists in all educational levels. Table 1 is an educational indicator for 1996

(NET, 2000b) that provides a summary of male and female enrollment in all levels of education and the number of schools and institutes in the Republic of Yemen.

### **II.3. Obstacles to Women's Education:**

In their chapter, "The Education of Women in the Arab World" Massialas and Jarrar (1983) articulated three sets of obstacles that prevent satisfactory educational attainment by women. These obstacles are "cultural factors that inhibit full educational participation, the program of studies and its relevance to local or national economy, and the prevailing instructional methodology in the classroom"(p. 233).

The low enrollment of females in Yemeni schools can be attributed to several factors. There are complex and multiple significant reasons for the lag in educational opportunities for Yemeni women. The economic status of the government and social, cultural and traditional barriers were frequently identified as obstacles to women's education in Yemen. In a traditional society like Yemen, decisions to send girls to schools are often influenced by social norms and customs. Conservative attitudes towards female education still prevail particularly in rural areas where parents are reluctant to send their daughters to mixed gender schools located miles away from their homes and in which most classes are taught by male teachers. The situation is even more difficult for girls once they reach puberty. Girls' movements become more controlled and monitored, ostensibly because the honor of the family depends on the daughter's chastity. Most parents believe that

Table 1. Educational Indicator for 1996: Summary of male and females enrollment in all levels of education.

Indicator	Numbers
Number of formal schools	10,007
Number of students at formal education	2,425,472
Male	1,744,015
Female	681,457
Percentage of males	71.9
Percentage of females	28.1
Number of Secondary Schools	1,396
Number of Students in Secondary Level	254,255
Male	203,514
Female	50,741
Percentage of Males	80
Percentage of Females	20
Number of formal Scientific Institutes	1832
Number of Students at Scientific Institutes	288,848
Male	215,690
Female	73,158
Percentage of Males	74.7
Percentage of Females	25.3
Number of Secondary Scientific Institutes	390
Number of Students in Scientific Institutes	30,640
Male	26,581
Female	4,059
Percentage of Males	86.6
Percentage of Females	13.2
Number of Students in Vocational Training	5,698
Male	5,470
Female	228
Number of Government Universities	3
Number of University Students	97,190
Male	80,438
Female	16,752
Number of Teachers at Different Levels	85,688
Yemeni Teachers	79,044
Non-Yemeni Teachers	6,644
Number of Teachers at Secondary Levels	11,469
Yemeni Teachers	7,703

mixed schools would only encourage and allow interaction and close contact with boys and male teachers. Further more, parents see limited economic benefits to educating daughters. Unlike boys who are expected to support their parents and help them financially, girls are expected to marry at an early age and leave their families. Costs for books, fees and transportation are also considered as barriers to educating girls and therefore contribute to the decline of girls obtaining an education.

#### **II.4. Women in Higher Education:**

Modern education for women in the Arab world is a product of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the end of the French and British colonization of the region, many Arab countries struggled for political, social and economic equity. The education of women was emphasized because it was seen as fundamental for the construction of the new society. In Yemen, however, higher education is relatively recent. It is important to indicate that up until the end of 1960s, college education did not exist for anyone in both South and North Yemen. The University of Sana'a, a gift from Kuwait, was established in 1970 and the University of Aden was founded in 1973. These two are state-run universities and they mark the beginning of higher education in both the former North and South Yemen. Although the presence of higher education provided more access for Yemeni youth of both sexes, enrollment is still predominantly male.

## **II.5. Yemeni Women and Public Participation:**

The discussion about women's role and the proper level of their participation in Yemeni society has been debated and expanded. The government of Yemen is cognizant that education is a major contributor to social development and therefore emphasis on the importance of developing and expanding educational opportunities for all is necessary. In her report on women and public participation in Yemen, Carapico (1991) noted that Yemeni women are "... constrained by patriarchal social structures and by their limited earning capacities ..." (p. 15). However, according to Carapico, Yemeni women are considered the most "liberated" in the Arabian Peninsula. She also drew attention to the distinctive roles assigned to women in the former Yemeni states, South and North. Carapico has a point in that respect. The role of women in Muslim societies attracts attention and is constantly under debate. Women's role expectations, for instance, vary and differ in the former states of Yemen.

Until 1962, North Yemen was extremely isolated from the rest of the world. Prior to the 1962 Revolution, the country was a Muslim theocratic state under the Imamate regime that had ruled Yemen for a thousand years. After the revolution, modern education was introduced and was made available to all. However, despite the significant reforms, women's labor outside the house is still disapproved of in some parts of Yemen. There are many barriers that impede the integration of women into the workplace. The notion of disgrace associated with the idea of seeking labor outside the home only out of necessity discourages many women

from looking for jobs and public participation. Statistics proved significant differences in men's and women's economic roles. According to the UNDP Human Development Report for 1995 (NET, 1997):

Women earn 10% of the total national income, while men earn 90%. Approximately 25% of women are literate, while 50% of men are literate. Men work in the market, while women work in the unpaid care economy. Men have more access than women to a wage income, credit, land, property rights and education. Women also face more constraints than men in terms of lower wages, job segregation, time pressure because of their obligation to getting permission of their husbands or fathers for credit, wage labor, property or even mobility. (pp. 1-2)

However, this was not the case for their counterparts in the southern part of Yemen. The public participation of women in the South was extremely visible. The labor law in South Yemen was reformed to take account of the new roles that women play in the economic development (Molyneux, 1985, 1991). Under the Marxist regime, South Yemen had introduced the 1974 family law, which involved reforming codes that were derived from Islam. Kandiyoti (1991) reflected the following:

The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, by contrast, introduced the 1974 family law which, despite numerous concessions to Islamic laws and local customs, aimed to free women from traditional forms of kin control and create possibilities for their emergence as economic and political actors in the service of national development. (p. 11)

One of the proposed measures to eradicate illiteracy and ignorance as an effort to integrate women in the development process entailed raising awareness of the

importance of their participation. The concept of a woman's participation within the family and the importance of her role in society were frequently emphasized. With the birth of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1967, a number of reforms affecting all aspects of the society had been introduced. Women were encouraged and allowed to participate in all state activities. Family reform was seen "as a precondition for mobilizing women into economic and political activity and as an indispensable adjunct of both economic change and social stability" (Moghadam, 1993, p. 86). The new government sought and advocated the emancipation of women. Literacy was seen as the first step towards achieving that goal. However, such reforms and improvement in women's status were developed on the basis of the principle of scientific socialism. Molyneux (1991) commented that "in its espousal of the Marxist doctrine and in its economic policies, the PDRY differed from those other Muslim countries-Egypt, Algeria, Syria, Iraq and Libya-which also proclaimed themselves to be 'socialist'" (p. 242). The government was committed to draw women into political activities and to integrate them, with no restriction, into public life. In 1982 the World Bank estimated women's employment at more than 20 percent. The number of women in the public and mixed sectors had even doubled between 1976 and 1984 (Moghadam, 1993).

There is no previous research on Yemeni women in higher education. This study was the first that addressed Yemeni women who obtained high academic degrees. Lack of resources that deal with Yemeni women in higher education necessitates the need for searching other realms.



Studies conducted on Arab women in higher education are also not available. As a result, I turned into research conducted on women in higher education with emphasis on minority women in the United States. As I researched and read several studies, I was struck by the common struggles of both Mexican American women and Yemeni women in higher education. Although considerably limited, the existing studies conducted on Mexican American women in higher education provided a rich source of information for this present study. This population was chosen as a comparator because it shares common themes with the sample of this study. The literature indicates that Mexican American women constitute "only a fraction of a percent of the M.D., J.D., and Ph.D. degrees that are conferred annually by the nation's universities" (Gandara, 1982, p. 167). The literature also relates that this underrepresentation in academia can be understood in terms of the cultural norms and values of Latino communities. Research conducted on high achieving Mexican American women (e.g., Gandara, 1982; Padilla & Alva, 1987; Alva, 1991) indicates that academically successful women seem to have a supportive network of family members, friends, and teachers who provide educational advice and guidance when needed. The capacity of a mother, a father, or spouse to provide encouragement and support were found to affect the academic achievement among Mexican American women at university level. In several studies, Mexican American students referred to parents as the major source of support and encouragement (e.g., Gandara, 1982; Padilla & Alva, 1987; Alva, 1991). These studies reported that parents were honored and recognized by the

participants for having provided love and support that resulted in a sense of empowerment. Gandara (1982) conducted a study on 17 Mexican American women who came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and who also succeeded in completing high academic degrees. Gandara's participants were considered as disadvantaged because they were first generation in America and most of their families spoke Spanish in the home. Her findings revealed that a mother's encouragement to persist, a strong work ethic in the family, a non-authoritarian style of parenting, and equal treatment of boys and girls were important factors in promoting success. Garcia (1996) has also examined factors perceived by Hispanic-American women, currently holding Ph.D. degrees from recognized universities within the United States, to have positively influenced their attainment of the Ph.D. degree. The findings reported that family background, finances, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, leadership, and acquiring Standard English had positively influenced these women's attainment of the Ph.D. degrees.

LePage (1997) explored the experiences of academically successful women who were disadvantaged as children. Her participants did not simply cope with personal and societal obstacles; they resisted their limitations and excelled beyond the boundaries imposed on them. They attained exceptional academic, professional and personal success. Ramirez-Lango (1995) investigated characteristics that may predict success in Mexican American women continuing their education in graduate studies. Her findings revealed that Mexican American female students were taught to be self-reliant by their parents, mature, committed to an education,

have attended a high school represented predominantly by Caucasians, and have been integrated easily into mainstream dominated society because they tended to come from middle income families. Simoniello, 1981; Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon 1995 indicated that family support and especially the mother's is the major contributor to the academic success of Mexican American women. This aspect, as it was reported, worked as a major incentive that encouraged these women to take more nontraditional roles, attitudes and behaviors.

Several other studies conducted on Mexican American women (e.g., VonDestinon, 1989; Alva, 1991; Cardoza, 1991; Gandara, 1995) have investigated other factors that may have contributed to women's academic achievement. In such studies, personal characteristics were identified as typical in successful students. Academically successful students are found to have a positive view of their academic status at schools.

The Middle Eastern family is of crucial importance as it plays a role in women's experiences and education. Female students that grow up in families supportive of education are more likely to go to school and continue their education. Barakat (1985) has described the Arab family as "patriarchal, pyramidally hierarchical (particularly with respect to sex and age), and extended" (p. 28). Yet, Barakat has also stated that the Arab family has been undergoing significant changes and therefore must be investigated in the "context of the transitional nature of Arab society, the ongoing confrontations, and the struggle for social transformation in response to formidable challenges" (p. 27). Attitudes

toward the education of women have changed rapidly. Social reformers as well as Muslim scholars pointed out that Islam accorded women equal rights and obligations as men. Islam does not deny women the privilege of free will and education, but tradition-bound societies based on ignorance do.

The impact of early education and familial support on the academic success of Yemeni women should not be underestimated. Women who received encouragement from their parents to continue with their studies and who have positive role models appear to have developed a positive self-image that helped them handle obstacles and continue their education.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The first scene of Charles Dickens' novel, Great Expectations (1939) opens in the churchyard with Pip's 'fancies' of his dead parents and younger brothers. Soon, a terrible voice interrupts and startles Pip, "hold your noise!" asking him to identify himself. An escaped convict appears, seizes Pip, and turns him upside down. Like a newborn in his first moments of birth, Pip is all a possibility:

The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself- for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet-when the church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread, ravenously. (p. 12)

#### III. 1. Searching for an Appropriate Methodology:

Choosing an appropriate methodology in order to carry out a suitable research design was challenging for me. The multiple lines of inquiry introduced in research courses during my doctoral program had nourished my curiosity and I received them with an open heart and mind. Like Pip, such an introduction gave me the opportunity to look at various lines of inquiry from different perspectives. At one point I thought I had it all but only to discover that was just the beginning. As I embarked on my journey to do research, the struggle began. For a certain period of time, I was searching for the "best" and the "appropriate" methodology--a

methodology that would allow me to give a more complete picture of the realities being investigated.

I consider research essential because it deals with critical inquiry and examination that is aimed at discovering and interpretation of new knowledge. People do research for a number of reasons and motives. Some do research to gain knowledge, to assess current beliefs and processes, to contribute and broaden their horizon, while others do research to challenge power, to fight oppression, to emancipate, and to improve the quality of life. I do research for most of the above reasons.

It is stated that researchers differ, and therefore, make different epistemological assumptions about the nature of scientific knowledge and how to acquire it (Gall et al., 1996). Researchers who choose a specific set of assumptions will conduct one type of educational research. The type of research, in other words, is based on the set of assumptions chosen. Quantitative research and qualitative research, are used by researchers to make a clear distinction between types of research; mainly positivist and postpositivist research which differ in the nature of the data collected and sample selection (Gall et al., 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Knowledge, according to positivists, is credible as long as it is based on the logic of tangible observation and experimentation. The discovery of mysteries, laws, and the universe becomes limited only to those, which can be revealed and identified by the means of the five senses. It is obvious that empirico -positivist-behavioral and social science frameworks are narrow approaches in their

understanding of complex human behavior. Positivists, on the one hand, have total disregard for the impact of spiritual influences and innate human personality traits on human behavior. These traits, according to them are invisible and contrary to the positivistic history and to an objective scientific understanding of the world.

Therefore such traits should be discarded at once because they could not be studied by traditional observation (Abu-Rabi, 1990).

Postpositivism, on the other hand also known as the constructivist approach maintains that “social reality is constructed” (Gall et al., 1996, p. 18).

Constructivist movement in cognitive psychology does not disregard the importance of other types of human knowledge. On the contrary, it emphasizes the role of the individual’s cognitive dimensions in the shaping of human behavior and focuses on the study of the individual’s personality. Postpositivists drew attention to the importance of incorporating into their perspective distinct human factors as active elements which impact individual behavior. Beliefs and values are real components of the human makeup and their impact on human behavior is real and should not be ignored.

Social science researchers saw the need to develop new ideas and new theoretical frameworks to cope with the new challenges and problems faced by society. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, which marks the era of modernism, was more complex than that of the industrial revolution. It was a period that witnessed two world wars and therefore, was full of widespread turmoil and suffering. Many thinkers such as Luther, Marx, Nietzsche and Hegel have reacted to the world

around them (Abu-Rabi, 1990). Modernism “has its roots in the enlightenment which promoted the advancement of knowledge through scientific observation” (Gall et al., 1996, p. 33). The idea of progress was one of the most distinguishing features of modernity. Postmodernism, on the other hand, was developed “as a reaction against modernism” (Gall et al., 1996, p. 33). Concerned with social and philosophical movements:

The core of postmodernism is the doubt that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the “right” or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge. Postmodernism suspects all truth claims of masking and serving particular interests in local, actual, and political struggle. (Richardson, 1994, p. 517)

In short Postmodernism argues that there are multiple realities that are not necessarily related.

Social science researchers felt the need to re-examine how they approach inquiry. It is claimed that researchers can not entirely liberate themselves from their inclinations, values, and interests in going about studying phenomena which belongs to each field. Objectivity and subjectivity received increased attention and were addressed and investigated by researchers. Social scientists, for instance, often belong to a particular school of thought and work within theoretical paradigms, which can not be entirely bias-free. Qualitative researchers concluded the following:

There is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations



socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 12)

As a consequence, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive methods. Some examples of these theoretical paradigms and perspectives are: feminism, ethnic models, and Marxist models. Amongst the various paradigms, epistemological racism drew my attention. Most of the sociological theories and paradigms are derived from Western experiences. Researchers concluded that Western theoretical constructs, models, paradigms, and methodologies failed to comprehend or appreciate the ethos of non-Westerners. The epistemology of Western civilization has become a dominant mode of inquiry to the exclusion of other, alternative ways of knowing. Colonial rulers based their reform, not on what had already existed, but introduced and imposed a new model of society based on western lines and models. There is no doubt that this epistemological imperialism has left its impact on most parts of the world since the European colonial invasion which regarded the scientific rationality as the only legitimate method for understanding the world and nature. Stanfield (1985) articulated the following statement:

When any group-within a large, complex civilization – significantly dominates other groups for hundreds of years, the ways of the dominant group (its epistemologies, its ontologies, its axiologies) not only became the dominant ways of that civilization, but also these ways become so deeply embedded that they typically are seen as “natural” or appropriate norms rather than as historically evolved social construction. (p. 7)

As it is known, the Arab world until recently was part of the colonial world. The western perception of the Arab world is very negative. However, no one argues against the fact that the Arabs had developed a sophisticated civilization long ago. For most people in the Arab world that had been under colonialism, the guiding principles had been knowledge irrespective of cultural origins. Efforts to link the educational process with the cultural experience and background of the people concerned were never attempted or initiated by western leaders. In the field of education, Western education carries elements of materialism and individualism, which are at odds with the traditions and customs of the people colonized. The Islamic religion does not advocate individualism; it cherishes social interdependence, responsibility towards others, and it instills a sense of place within the family. Differences in norms and values between western education and Islamic education were visible. The development of an educational institution perpetuating the values of Muslim society was necessary. Therefore, with the political independence of most of these countries, social and cultural development became a necessary sequence to the political independence.

Western theories based on Western epistemology were viewed as biased and became hardly applicable in non-Western cultures. Thus, the need for an alternative epistemological framework was urgent and drove many researchers to undertake the indigenization of the social sciences. "All knowledge is relative to the context in which it is generated" (Gordon et al., 1990, p. 15). According to Scheurich and Young (1997), "anyone doing research outside the social history of

the dominant race's paradigm uses an epistemological framework that reflects their membership in a racial/cultural group that fits their social history" (p. 7). As a Ph.D. student who is doing research about my personal educational journey and those experiences of other Yemeni women, I believe that researchers have a responsibility to develop alternative paradigms of knowledge that are relevant to their needs and to their society's.

Feminist scholars had introduced theories that tackle women's issues and women's oppression. Positivists, according to feminist writers, represent patriarchy. However, it should be noted that most of the feminist ideologies adopted to address women issues in the Muslim world have failed because of their inadequate assessment of the contextual realities relevant to the situation of Muslim women (Hussain, 1984). The term "feminist" is looked upon as a Western import and therefore is not well received in the Middle East. The literature on Middle Eastern women is grim and portrays women as the victims of traditions. Arab women are conceived as veiled, passive, silent, and oppressed. These existing stereotypes of the Arab women are said to be Western gender constructs. Badran (1992) commented that "the feminist project was caught up in contradiction, being seen both as a source of indigenous liberation and as a means of colonial subversion" (p. 30). It was also argued that the colonists who occupied the Middle East undermined the local culture. Similarly, the discourses of Western feminist "devalued local cultures by suggesting that there is only one way to emancipate women---adopting Western Models"(Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 14). Western

Feminism, according to many Muslim women, is not an adequate source of theoretical analysis for Muslim cultures. In her article on Muslim women, Smith (1996) wrote the following:

Muslim women are trying to provide a self-definition that is not shackled by western presumptions, that does not buy into the restrictions of traditional patriarchy, that does not sacrifice their indigenous identity, and yet also does not reject the possibility of global feminist discourse that can proceed on some ground. (p. 211)

Accordingly, Muslim women should be studied within the framework of their roles in their societies and therefore, knowledge of Islamic culture is essential for any research conducted on Muslim women. Researchers must be aware of Muslim women's roles that have been influenced by the history and the tradition of the Arab world.

### **III. 2. Researcher's Disclosure:**

As a researcher participant, I might be accused of my subjectivity. As a Muslim woman who is writing about other Muslim women subjectivity became inevitable. Here is where the two terms, emic and etic mostly used in the anthropological discipline, come into play. Stake (1995) stated:

Etic issues are the researcher's issues, sometimes the issues of a larger research community, colleagues and writers. As stated, the issue statement may not fit the case circumstances well and need repair. Issues evolve. And emic issues emerge. These are the issues of the actors, the people who belong to the case. These are issues from the inside. (p. 20)

As a researcher who is a member of the cultural group selected for the study and whose personal journey is incorporated in this study, I sought to integrate and mediate between the emic and etic perspectives. To maintain objectivity I tried as much as possible to detach myself by researching other studies conducted on Muslim women in other parts of the world. I also sought other women's advice when I wrestled with some of the findings in the study. To that end, two outside women observers, an American and a Middle Eastern, were asked to evaluate the interpretations of the women's interviews. I intentionally chose the American woman because of her different outlook. I wanted to "see" things through different lenses. My main intention, however, was to find out whether or not the findings and the interpretations were supported by the data. Exploring factors perceived by Yemeni women as elements that have affected their educational process is a method that may conflict with the traditional scientific model of research that stresses objectivity in conducting research. I must admit that my personal interest in exploring this realm stems from my own self-study therefore, the potential for bias is inescapable no matter how hard I try. What I was writing about was part of my life therefore, my personal experiences would definitely have an impact on my interpretation. My opinions and perceptions of things are based on my epistemological framework and therefore, should be attributed to the way I look at a given phenomenon and the meaning I attach to it. The important thing for me as a researcher was to both identify and acknowledge these biases and be upfront with my prejudices. There are many social researchers who have "argued against this

facade of value neutrality” (Berg, 1998, p. 126). In addressing the notion of value-free research, Borg, Gall and Gall (1993) pointed out that qualitative researchers should frequently emphasize that value questions should not be overlooked since research is value laden. Therefore, “rather than avoiding the issue of values, they make explicit their personal values and try to expose the values that are embedded in the context being studied” (p. 197). My selection of the present topic was a result of my passion and determination to give voice to those who have not been heard before as accurately as possible. My position as a researcher was far from being the expert. However, I strongly believe that having the same frame of reference as the participants in the study helped me better develop rapport with them and interpret the meaning of their responses.

A qualitative design was selected for the purpose of this study. A qualitative approach seems to be the most appropriate when dealing with women’s lives and experiences as it delves into the dynamics of life histories that would consequently open the gates for new inquiries and interpretations. This qualitative approach helped me in providing unique insights and rich materials for understanding women’s own perceptions of their experiences, their environment, and the forces which derived them in shaping their lives the way they do. As Bateson, M. C. (1989) stated in her book, personal narratives “reflect that act of creation that engages us all – the composition of our lives” (p. 1). In this study, I planned and used the participants’ reflections and perceptions of their experiences to highlight what I personally consider as basic dimensions of my own life, and to bring to light

my own perception of events. Such an approach is not only a tool for recording someone's life history but also a way to understand more about someone's perception of reality.

### **III. 3. The Selection of the Participants:**

This present study was an extensive investigation using a case study method of six selected women who demonstrated academic success. Academic achievement was the main factor for selecting and identifying the participants in this study. To qualify for the study, each participant must have succeeded in completing a graduate degree, a Ph.D., M.D. or working towards one. The selection of the participants was accomplished by personal contacts. Once identified, the respondents were contacted by phone in order to introduce myself and explain the nature and the objectives of the study. Three of the six participants have doctorates; two are doctoral students working on completing their theses; and one is a physician. All six graduated at the top of their class in elementary, primary, and secondary schools. All reported that they received some type of academic achievement award for their outstanding achievement. Four of the participants were married and two were divorced. They all have children except for one of the two divorced. The participants were all Yemenis between the ages of thirty and thirty-nine. Two of the women were born in the southern part of Yemen, while four were born in different parts in North Yemen. Pseudonyms were used in order to replace the real names of the participants.

### **III. 4. Data Collection:**

The method used for data collection consisted of open-ended informal phone interviews. A questionnaire was administered and sent to the participants following their consent to participate in the study. Appendix C lists and illustrates the questions that were used during the interview. Also, a list of stressful life events was also sent to the participants. A copy of this list is attached in Appendix D. The primary goal of this list was to provide a second opportunity, in a completely different format, for the participant to report stressful events experienced by them or by their parents. During the phone interview information was acquired about their family background and education, the parents educational status and aspirations, parents attitudes towards their daughters, education status of the respondents, their perceptions and aspirations toward continuing their education, and their attitudes towards women's roles and employment. Another follow up questionnaire was sent to the participants and another interview was scheduled to collect further information. The follow up questionnaire is also included in Appendix C. Further correspondence with the participants was accomplished via e-mail.

### **III. 5. Data Analysis & Procedures:**

All the interviews were analyzed inductively. Following a thorough reading of the six interviews, I noticed patterns and themes emerging from the data



available. The process of coding helped me identify these patterns and themes. I organized pieces of quotes according to the themes that emerged. In other words, the information given by the participants was grouped together according to answers given. This process was useful during the interpretation phase.

### III. 5. 1. In depth tape-recorded phone interviews:

A semi- structured interview Questionnaire was administered by the researcher. Appendix C lists and illustrates the questions that were used during the interviews. The first section, as indicated, was asked first of each interviewee. Five of the respondents speak fluent English while one speaks French yet, understands English fairly well. During the interviews, the participants were given a choice to use their mother tongue, Arabic, instead if they preferred using it. As a researcher who is of the same ethnicity as the respondents, the Arabic language was encouraged during the interviews to enhance cultural sensitivity. Three of the interviewees used English during the interview while the other three preferred using Arabic. These three interviews were translated into English by the researcher for transcribing purposes. Initially, as was mentioned earlier, all six women participants were contacted by phone twice prior to their interviews. The first call was made in order to introduce myself and to explain to them the nature of the study and the purpose of the interview. It was appropriate to provide my respondents with the interview questions that would be asked so as to give them enough time to reflect on these questions. It was explained that these in-depth

interviews would be tape-recorded and transcribed for coding purposes. It was also explained that the questionnaires would include open-ended questions about barriers encountered and would specifically require the respondents to report how these obstacles were handled and whether or not they affected the educational process. The purpose was to allow each participant to extensively explore her ideas, attitudes, and feelings about her education and to discuss what each one thought influenced her life and her educational experience. The second call was made to arrange for the phone interview. The participants were given the opportunity to select the appropriate time and date of the interview. The participants were contacted for the third time for the purpose of the interview. A follow-up questionnaire was sent and another interview was set up. Each interview call lasted for almost two hours. In depth interviews offered a good opportunity for inductive reasoning where I was able to look for patterns of similarities and differences followed by interpretation of those patterns. The participants were contacted via e-mail to clarify some of the areas covered during the interviews.

### III. 5. 2. Audio-taping:

The reason for the audiotape was to transcribe verbatim in preparation for analysis. Audiotaping was helpful in recalling the manner in which each event was described during the interview. Listening to voice tone and expressions of each participant gave me a clear perspective of the manner and the power of words spoken and used. Problems with recording on the phone did not occur during the

entire process of the interviews. Frequent inspection of the tape recorder, the small microphone device, the tape, and the batteries prior to each interview, helped me avoid problems with the recording.

### III. 5. 3. Transcription:

The participants were notified that taped interviews would be transcribed into a hard paper-copy for the purpose of accurate quotes used by them. Dialogue quotes were coded and listed. Transcripts were marked by fictional names selected by the researcher to identify each one of the participants. The participants had the opportunity to review these transcripts.

### III. 5. 4. Informed consent:

All participants were provided with informed consent forms that explained the nature of the study as well as the risks and benefits involved as a result of their participation. Appendix B provides a copy of the consent form sent to all respondents. It was clearly explained that their participation is voluntarily. The participants were told that their identities would be kept confidential. Fictional names were used instead to ensure this confidentiality. It was important, once again, to assure them that they have the right to withdraw from the study any time or to decline to answer any questions they feel uncomfortable disclosing.

### III. 5. 5. Member check:

The participants were given the opportunity to engage in the interpretation process. In fact, the participants were given a copy of their transcript in order to allow them to provide feedback and to assess how they were represented. This technique, called “member checking” by Lincoln and Guba (1985), allowed the participants to determine whether or not the interpretation was supported by the data presented. Member Checking was also used to enhance interpretive validity, which refers to the degree to which the participants’ experiences and responses are accurately portrayed.

### III. 5. 6. Reflexive journal:

It was important to be engaged in what is known as reflexivity. Keeping a journal to record personal reflections, feelings, and thoughts helped me minimize my potential biases and also enhanced the integrity of the study. These reflections and thoughts were written down following each phone interview.

## **III. 6. The Respondents:**

**Muna** obtained her doctoral degree in pharmacy from a university in the USA. She lived in the former South Yemen, but her family moved to North Yemen when she was just a child. She was the oldest of six sisters and two brothers. She described herself as “very responsible” since she was a child. Her parents, as she said, were “just simple people who cared about their children and about their education.” Her

father had a high school education while her mother had a fourth grade education. Her parents' goal was to educate their children and to provide the best home environment for learning. All her sisters and brothers have advanced degrees. This success, Muna admitted, was attributed to their upbringing. Muna honored her parents for the way they raised their children. When she earned her baccalaureate in science she was awarded a scholarship to the USA. She was married with two children when she arrived in the USA. Muna reported encountering several obstacles during her educational journey but managed to deal with them. Muna was able to overcome financial constraints and limitations. She, her husband, and her four children lived on her scholarship money only. Muna achieved her educational goal by her unyielding commitment, persistence, optimism and determination. She returned to Yemen and currently occupies a prestigious post.

**Arwa** earned her degree in medicine from a university in the USA. Currently she is preparing herself to go back to Yemen and start practicing medicine. Arwa was recently divorced. She was the oldest among three children. She received her early schooling in Yemen but moved with her parents to another Arab country. Arwa considered her father as a role model and as her source of inspiration and support. Her father, a highly educated person himself, had faced multiple hardships in order to pursue his education. He was very independent as a child and worked hard to support himself financially and therefore "came to appreciate the value of education and the value of having a family." Arwa's mother was the only mother in

this sample who was actively involved in community services in Yemen. The mother was a self-educated woman who learned the Qur'an and provided free Qur'anic lessons in her own home. Arwa described her relationship with her father as strong and best. Arwa is an impressive woman with a strong will and determination. Like her parents, Arwa is a devoted woman who gains happiness and satisfaction in helping others in need. Her confidence, self-esteem, and persistence were clearly sensed during the interviews. She is someone who dared to hope and follow what she thought was right for her.

**Lamia** is currently working on her doctorate in economics in an Arab country. She was born in an urban city in Yemen, but later her parents moved to the capital city where her father worked. Her father was an educated person. Her mother was able to read and write. All her brothers and sisters have obtained higher education degrees. Lamia is married and has a child. She is a very ambitious woman who believes she has a responsibility towards her society and Yemeni women who are illiterates. She has many concerns and dreams to improve the conditions of women in Yemen. She commented that women in urban areas at least enjoy a small portion of their rights, but her heart goes to those women in rural regions where they carry all the burdens and responsibilities. "Yemeni women need role models", Lamia reported. She said that part of her mission is to address women's issues. Women are entitled to education and that they should be taught about their rights. Lamia's husband is pursuing his doctoral degree in an another country and has agreed to her

decision to live alone and take full responsibility of her child while going to school. Such an arrangement is not convenient but “only temporary” Lamia said. “It is very hard to try to do the best when you are alone but these sacrifices must be done to reach our dreams,” she continued. Lamia credited her parents for her success and achievement. Books were always provided to them when they were children. Both her mother and father were her source of encouragement. Lamia is a woman with an impressive and a strong personality.

**Samia** earned both her master’s and doctoral degrees in the social sciences from a university in the USA. She was born in South Yemen. Due to the political circumstances in the former South Yemen, her father left the country escaping the new socialist regime. Samia moved to the northern part and received her bachelor’s degree. Her outstanding performance granted her a scholarship to the USA. Upon her arrival in the U.S. she discovered that her scholarship was given to another student instead who was currently in the USA working on his master’s degree. Determined to beat the odds she endured and managed to overcome several obstacles and eventually succeeded in securing a scholarship. Samia met other challenges when she made a decision to pursue a doctorate. She credited her parents and her husband for her success. Her parents did not stop supporting her financially during her struggle to continue her education. Her husband stood by her despite pressures from home to return. Samia has two children and is determined to provide them with a better environment than the one she lived in.

**Najwa** pursued a doctoral degree in England. She was born in North Yemen into a family of five children. Her father earned a doctorate from a recognized university in the USA. He is a self-made person who also earned his degree with his hard work and determination. Her mother can only read and write. Najwa's strong will to continue her education was attributed to her father who provided all the support and encouragement when she needed it. Najwa was married and had children at an early age. Marriage and children did not discourage Najwa from continuing her education. She indicated that her children and family are her top priority. She quit school for a short period of time to raise her children and to attend to her other duties as a mother. One of Najwa's salient characteristics is her high sense of self-efficacy. She said that before she finished her degree she "foresaw nothing less than a Ph.D. degree as my ultimate goal. I could not settle for less and I made it."

**Huda** is finishing her doctoral degree in business in an Arab country. She was born in South Yemen. Her parents moved to the North when she was ten. She was the oldest in the family and learned to be responsible from an early age. Her father has a high school education and managed his own small business. Her mother did not receive any sort of education. The education of girls was important to her father. "My daughters must finish their education to secure their future and to achieve independence," her father used to say. Huda was married when at a young age and now has two children. She was divorced because she made up her mind to finish



her education. When her ex-husband proposed to her, he consented to her wishes to pursue a graduate program but later he changed his mind. Huda is a very bright woman who encountered a number of difficulties when she decided to finish her education in another country. One of the biggest challenges was leaving her children with her husband. She said that she spent all her savings and tried to take care of them for two years, but “could not continue without having the financial resources to cover all the expenses while they stayed with me during my study here. Being alone with limited financial support is very tough.”

## IV. THEMES AND DISCUSSION

### IV. 1. The Family:

There is a considerable body of literature on families and student's achievement. Lockheed et al., (1989) contended that: " Families continue to influence students' achievement by providing their children's with material and nonmaterial support for learning activities, by raising their children's educational expectations, and by reinforcing their children's motivation and effort" (p. 245). Similarly, in their study, Rumberger et al., (1990) found that family does influence the academic achievement of their children by transmitting the appropriate values and motives needed to succeed in school. Data from the present study appear to confirm those findings. ✓

There has been little significant work on family history in the Middle East and on the female experience of the family. This lack of attention may give a narrow view of the Arab family as a mediator of patriarchal values that stands against women's wishes, goals, and aspirations (Tucker, 1991). Women's contributions, "are no longer so totally obscured" (Tucker, 1991, p. 233). This opened up the possibility of investigating the role that the family, as a fundamental institution, played in mediating gender roles and relations in society. The family in the Middle East has changed over time, and new outlooks on the role of women in society are emerging and need to be taken into consideration as future decisions are being made. Exploring the Yemeni family from the participants' point of view was ✓

very informative. Each participant indicated quite perceptively that her family was seen as the mediator of adversity through its support and challenging levels. In fact family support and encouragement was the strongest theme that took up a good portion of the interviews, and it played a major role in the academic success of the women participants in this present study. Such support manifested itself in various forms and included stressing the value of education by parents (e.g., parental value of education), providing suitable home study environment for learning (e.g., early educational experiences and home study environment), and encouraging children to succeed academically (e.g., family support and encouragement).

#### IV. 1. 1. Parental value of education:

The attitudes towards education and the value placed on it have strong and positive effects on the women's participation and success in school. ✓

Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological System Theory describes the processes that foster the development of human competence and character. The family is seen as a microsystem. The influences that occur within this microsystem can produce different effects on children in different cultures. The child, or the developing person, is placed at the core of Bronfenbrenner's (1990) theory:

In order to develop--intellectually, emotionally, socially, and morally--a child requires participation in progressively more complex reciprocal activity, on a regular basis over an extended period in the child's life, with one or more persons with whom the child develops a strong, mutual, irrational, emotional attachment and who is committed to the child's well-being and development, preferably for life. (p. 102)

The parents of the participants in this study communicated with their children the priority of education and its relevance in their lives at an early age. In other words, these participants grew up with parents who repeatedly emphasized the value of education. In response to the question, "Did your family provide information about education," all responded affirmatively by indicating that education was seen as a way forward and as an obligation that must be pursued. The following excerpts illustrated how the parents made a great effort in stressing the value of education.

Najwa: Oh yes, yes, both my parents provided information about education and were both very supportive. My father was even more effective and had a great effect on us in that respect. Education was something that he talked about and cared about. He brought a whole library with him from Egypt and that helped our education very much. So my father cared a lot about education.

Samia: I grew up knowing that education is important and essential in ones life. There is no argument against that. All sorts of books were available in the house. I remember that my older brothers would bring different kinds of daily magazines, newspapers, and children books. I loved and treasured the books my brothers brought home. All the books would be placed neatly in the library room. I was always curious and able to read books to quench my thirst for reading. Although my parents did not help me in my homework, they provided the means for helping me learn. I felt kind of special to them when I expressed my love for school. Education seemed like the only path to see and discover the world.

Others related how important education was to their parents.

Muna: My father would always say there is nothing like an education. I may not afford giving you everything you

need except education; it is very important. . . .  
 Education will open the doors to many opportunities in life and without it you cannot be what you want to be. My mother would say that she dreamt of going to school and that she was only allowed to finish up into her fourth grade. She did extremely well but did not get the chance to continue so her wish now was for us, her children, to continue our education.

Arwa: My family provided a lot of information. Education was always important to both my parents. My father would always take me to the library to choose books. He directed me how to choose books. I became interested in them because he introduced them to me. . . . He always gave me books as presents.

Lamia reflected:

Absolutely. My family provided all the necessary information about education. Books were always available at home; various books, different subjects; just name it. We all grew up around books and therefore, learned to love reading and writing. There is no doubt that my parents played a crucial role in our education. They just expected us to pursue knowledge, to go beyond high school and college and to attain the highest degrees possible. My parents gave us direction and helped us set our educational goals.

Huda expressed a similar reaction:

My parents were the main reason why we loved school. Both mom and dad communicated with us the importance of education. My dad, in particular, was always concerned about our education, especially his daughters education. He would always say my daughters must finish their education.

All the participants had siblings and reported that they too were academic achievers. "All my sisters and brothers have degrees," said Muna, and "two of my sisters are physicians, the third one is in medical technology. My two brothers have

academic degrees and occupy good posts.” Huda too mentioned that all her brothers and sisters are physicians. Lamia indicated that her brother and sister are both studying in different parts of Europe finishing their graduate studies. Her youngest sister is getting an education in an Arab country.

The participants indicated that they received equal if not better treatment from their parents. In response to the question, “were your family more supportive of men or women in the family,” the respondents believed that they received equal support and encouragement to achieve as equally as their brothers did. Arwa gave an interesting answer:

We were treated the same but in most cases I have to admit that I had more voice than my brother. I was always the one speaking my mind and always listened to. My word was always heard, encouraged, and accepted.

The rest of the participants replied with similar comments.

Muna: My family never differentiates between their daughters and sons. We are all the same to them. They never thought in terms of boys or girls.

Najwa: Although we have only one brother yet we never felt that my parents gave him more attention or gave him a special treatment. Maybe because he was born thirteen years later after two daughters, I do not know. I think I should ask my two younger sisters if they felt differently. But overall, my parents are supportive of us all.

Lamia: We received the same support regardless. We all enjoyed the same rights and the same treatment. We all enjoyed so much freedom. What really mattered was each one of us as an individual with his or her ability to do the things we wanted to do.

Huda: My family was more supportive of women in the family. My father supported and encouraged us more

than our brothers. Until this date he is still supportive of his daughters.

Samia: We all received equal treatment. I can even say that my parents were softer toward their daughters.

#### IV. 1. 2. Early educational experiences and home study environment:

The participants' academic success is related to their early educational experiences. They referred to their early educational experiences both as positive and "enjoyable." Clark (1983) drew attention to parents' effects on students' achievement. He believed that, "parents influence learning through enforcement of normative standards, and by the specific behaviors which contribute directly to learning" (p. 155). The data in this study supported Clark's finding, as it was clear that doing well at school did not depend solely on the quality of education received in school but also on the parents' attitudes toward learning. Two of the informants in this study referred to their schools as meager and deficient. Serious manpower shortages and lack of resources were major factors for the poor quality of schools in Yemen. The rest of the respondents reported that their schools were good and not crowded as schools nowadays. Regardless, the participants noted that as children they did well because the parents instilled high standards in them and nurtured their aspiration. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, home and school are two immediate environments of a child and the relationship between the two is very essential to the child's development. Two of the respondents indicated that their parents attended school meetings and conferences while the other four reported lack of involvement in schools' meetings. Despite this absence of relationship

between parents and schools, the participants recounted good experiences. When they were asked “can you tell me about your experiences as a child in school?” the respondents all recalled positive experiences. Muna answered: “I had good experiences in schools. I loved school so much and never missed a day except if I was very sick. I did very well. No one ever told me to study or do your homework. I would do things by myself.” She remembered how her family members liked to show her off to people because she was bright for someone her age. Najwa too, indicated how happy and active she was as a child: “I liked school very much, and I remember that I enjoyed school days tremendously. . . . I was very active.” Najwa had successfully passed the examination for the high school diploma, achieving the third highest score in the country. Her ambition and determination to continue her education opened the door for receiving a scholarship to the USA. Arwa shared a similar reaction to her childhood experiences in schools. She said: “I was very happy and with good experiences and memories.” However, she admitted that getting good grades in elementary school was not one of her main concerns. It was only later at the age of 12 that she started to pay attention to good grades. The schools as she commented were in “a bad shape” and that it was only when she moved with her parents to an Arab country she started to pay attention to grades. “I was among the top in my class,” said Huda, “I did very well despite the fact that the quality of schools was poor and far from being good in that part of the country.” Lamia said that she was among the firsts in school. “I was an excellent student but I recall that I was very mischievous. The only consolation for my family was that I



was doing extremely well in school. I would escape punishment because I was an excellent student.” Samia recounted that she was one of the best in her class. She said:

Getting the best grades and becoming one of the firsts in class was something that I always wanted and worked hard for. My teachers were always fond of my performance at school and used to praise me in front of everyone. At the end of every school year, I was among the ones who received awards for their achievement. It was always a joyous event for me and I worked hard to perpetuate it. I also remember that my father contributed a lot to the schools that my brothers and I went to. I was very popular and I received so much attention from teachers.

It was also important to indicate that the children’s academic achievement was enriched by their parents’ provision with good environment that was conducive to studying.

Muna: The atmosphere was oriented towards nothing but studying. Our socialization was very limited. We would only visit our grand parents, aunts and uncles, but I do not recall that we participated in other events outside our extended family. My family got us used to a certain daily routine at home, and we all followed it. We would go to school in the morning, come back around 1:00 PM, do our daily house chores and then straight forward to our homework. The whole afternoon would be spent on nothing but studying and doing homework.

Samia: Doing our homework was like a ritual. I remember that my family did not have to remind us as children to do our homework; we just did it by ourselves. Once we return from school, we would eat dinner, rest for an hour and then do our homework. We would spend the entire evening reading and writing regardless if we finished or not. Thursday nights were the only time for fun because we did not have school on Fridays.

#### IV. 1. 3. Family support and encouragement as a source of empowerment:

Although still old-fashioned when compared with their Levantine or North African sisters, constrained by the patriarchal social structures, and limited in their earning capacities, Yemeni women play at least a token role in contemporary political and economic life. They may well be the most "liberated," though not the most privileged, women in the Arabian Peninsula. (Carapico, 1991, p. 15)

There are complex and multiple significant reasons for the lag in educational opportunities for Yemeni women. Other issues addressed by Massialas and Jarrar (1983) such as veiling, honor, or teaching methodology emerged in this study and occasionally referred to by some of the participants.

In Yemen, where cultural and traditional beliefs are strong, women's and girls' educational attainment is considerably low. The strong traditional cultural norms in Yemen are the main reason for this slower pace in societal change. Again, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory addresses the effects of cultural values and beliefs on individuals. The cultural context in which the participants grew up, for instance, should not be undermined as it could have different implication for the educational attainment of women. The "macrosystem," which represents the entire set of beliefs and values that characterize certain societies and groups, differs from one culture into another. The cultural role of women in Yemen is limited. The social structure in Yemen may strike the foreign eye as extremely patriarchal where gender differences and roles are distinctively defined. Despite the government's emphasis on female's education and participation in socio-economic development, only a small number of women are visible in few prominent positions and other

public spheres. Yemeni women are still restricted by a number of old customs, which prevent them from taking a major role in society. Traditionally, males in the Arab world are the providers and the decision-makers, while females are the child bearers. Nontraditional roles, therefore, require women who endorse high levels of instrumental attributes in order for them to overcome various internal as well as external barriers facing them. It is important to note that such restrictions imposed on Yemeni women are not based on religion but are traditionally bound. Islam does teach equality of men and women. Yet, Yemeni women still find it difficult to get the education they need and even find it far more difficult to go to work. For a Yemeni woman to participate in the country's cultural life, she must be prepared for that by her family early in her childhood. Society's vision and outlook towards the importance of women's participation and contribution must be enhanced. Society, in general, must also be informed and educated to consider women as active partners with men. Women can retain their Muslim traditions and still can participate as useful citizens.

In this study there was a dichotomy between the families of the participants and the cultural context in which my respondents lived. Extended family as well as the community had influenced women's achievement. Although the participants in this study possessed the courage to defy the various cultural challenges that stood in their way, their academic success would not have been accomplished without their families' support and encouragement. When I asked my participants to reflect on and identify some of the barriers they encountered, the conservative nature of

the Yemeni society revealed itself. Najwa's ordeal seemed the hardest. Being in Yemen, she faced pressures in various forms. Her husband was always the target of attacks because he allowed her to travel alone for the sake of education.

My husband faces a lot of pressure from society as to why and how he allows me to travel alone. He always encounters social pressures. . . . His friends bring up the subject of mahram<sup>2</sup> and women who travel alone. . . . It was like he was targeted. It is not fair, or easy for him, for our children or for me.

Najwa also expressed her concerns over the restrictions imposed on her teaching where she was not allowed to use the word "gender" because society associated it with "sexuality." She said:

The public does not understand the word gender or what gender means. They associate the word gender with homosexuality and lesbians. . . . Now I am very careful not to use this word when teaching this course.

Najwa voiced a sense of disappointment for such misunderstanding: "Conflict everywhere, conflict at work, and at school." Earlier, Najwa articulated her feelings towards society's reaction to her father's ways of bringing up his daughters:

My father allowed us to cover our hair with a scarf without covering our faces, for instance, and that was considered something strange at the time even though we still covered our hair. That enraged most of the members in the extended family and many other people as well.

Najwa related how safe she felt, having her family around to support her whenever she needed help:

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<sup>2</sup> Mahram: A male member in the family such as a husband, a son, a brother, an uncle, or a father who should accompany a female in her travels outside the home.

My relationship with my family is the best. I feel safe at home, safe having them around. It is very important to me. When I get tired or feel deceived by the public life or shocked by the public life outside and how hard it is, I have my family to turn to. They are the ones who understand and listen.

Early marriage for girls is common in traditional societies such as Yemen.

Marriage is considered a normal expectation. Those who are fortunate to finish school are expected to marry before it is too late. Muna shared some of her remarks towards society's traditional attitudes towards marriage. When her father decided to postpone marriage proposals for the sake of education, people started talking.

Muna: Other parents would not turn suitors away because they prefer to marry their daughters off at an early age. . . . You know what I'm talking about . . . our society is very conservative. My father used to say, "My daughter is pursuing a noble message, and as long as she is not doing anything wrong or against our religion I will not stop her."

And earlier she said that she had to move into the capital city in order to go to college. Although she had family members who lived in the capital city, her father allowed her to live in the dormitory:

Despite my uncles' insistence on living with one of them, my father allowed me to live in the dormitory.

Such a progressive attitude initiated by Muna's father exemplified a sense of trust that goes against the traditional prevailing attitudes towards girls' education as "unnecessary." There is a common notion that girls need to be "protected" and kept at home where they "belong" and where they are mostly needed, even when given the opportunity for an education, it is always directed towards teaching them how

to be good wives and mothers. However, the participants' parents thought otherwise and believed in education as a tool for protection and independence. Huda said that her father used to say, " Education is security. You never know what will happen. But if you are equipped with education you do not have to worry about anything. I want you to be independent and self-reliant even when you get married." Samia relates the following:

Since I was a child I felt very special because I was smart as everyone said. Once my father comes home from work he would call me to come and relate to him what I did at school. No one else had or enjoyed that privilege in the house. He would listen to me and would give me anything I asked for.

My parents told me that education would give me value and worth. You are somebody because you are educated. People would enjoy your company when you are around and would listen to you because you are a learned person and would always have something important to say. My parents, for instance, never brought up the subject of marriage when I was in school. They knew that it was too early to address such a thing. As long as I am at school, marriage was not an issue. They derived joy when I said I wanted to be a doctor or an engineer.

I remember that my parents disapproved of my uncle's decision when he decided to marry his three daughters off at an early age. They thought he was insane to do such a thing. His daughters, they believed, were entitled to get an education.

During the course of the interview, Samia also continued her conversation about this issue of marriage. She shared the following information too:

It was only when I was a junior in college and living with my relatives in the other part of Yemen that I got the impression that marriage is important for a girl my age. During my visits to my father's, although not overtly stated, he would insinuate that it is not wise to lose

eligible suitors when they propose. I think my father knew that I intended to pursue my graduate studies after obtaining my bachelor's degree and therefore, he was concerned that I have no intention in getting married at all.

My father was not against the idea of pursuing my education; he was only concerned about when if ever I would accept a marriage proposal. It was like it's perfectly okay to finish your education but getting married would complete the picture. You know what I mean, people would stop talking and would leave you alone if you were married. Anyway, when my father realized that the subject of marriage made me uncomfortable he didn't mention it again. He was very sensitive to my feelings and was very careful not to hurt these feelings.

Arwa indicated her disregard to social pressures as long as her parents were supporting her. She commented:

Well you know in our country, people will talk about you if you do things they do not like or agree with but if you have supportive parents you do not care. For example, in middle school, people said and complained why I was not covering my face and why I was playing with boys but my family did not care. As long as I'm not doing anything wrong, it did not really matter what people say.

Huda talked about some of the obstacles encountered during her educational journey. She was divorced at the beginning of her program because she chose to pursue her doctorate. Society, as she said, is merciless:

Back home everyone is blaming me for this decision, for coming here and leaving my children. Even professors, unfortunately, use me as an example of the woman who left her children for the sake of education. They make fun of me and warn other female students to be careful and not to follow my footsteps.

When I inquired about how she coped with such hurtful and insulting remarks, she referred to how her family and friends played a role.

Huda: I try to forget about them. My family and friends support me a lot. I believe that as long as your family understands and is supportive it does not matter what others say. Anyone outside my circle or even outside my immediate family members does not have any control over my life and can not make decisions for me.

Most of the respondents indicated that they were recognized as role models for other girls in their families. Such recognition was an incentive for these participants to carry out the responsibility seriously. One of the participants said that she became a role model in the family. She mentioned that when her brother in law visited them during her study in the U.S. he kept saying that he wished that all the daughters and all the women in the family were like her and would follow her footsteps. He was impressed at how well she carried the responsibility of being a mother, a wife and a graduate student at the same time and how she managed to cope in a completely different environment far away from family. Now when one of the women in the family complain about school back home, the immediate reaction would be, "Muna did it successfully, why wouldn't you?" Another indicated that all her relatives referred to her as the best example of the woman who, despite her overwhelming responsibilities, excelled academically. She said, "All looked at me with respect and appreciation and wished their daughters were like me."



All the respondents acknowledged family members as critical to their achievement. They perceived their families as having been supportive throughout their education. It was this strong support that helped the participants cope with difficulties as they surfaced. Of prime importance to each woman in this study was her close relationship with her parents. Significant to this study is Gandara's (1995) findings that the most important predictor of success of Mexican American women was the mother's support and encouragement. The results of this study also supported Gandara's findings, however, it was the father, not the mother, who on several occasions, was referred to as the main source of support and encouragement and noted to have inspired their daughters' learning.

The fathers' support was not only strong but also consistent in all the interviews. The data revealed fathers who were defying cultural norms by their unyielding support towards their daughters. The provision of education became a necessity, a goal that should not be undermined. Albert Bandura (1995) discussed the impact of parents' beliefs on their children's lives and how these beliefs are considered as "a more influential contributor to beneficial guidance under disadvantaged conditions than under advantaged conditions where resources, social support and neighborhood controls are more plentiful" (p. 15). Such an assertion was supported by the data of this study. The challenges that faced these Yemeni women promoted the fathers to turn inward for their daughters' support. These fathers had high sense of efficacy in their efforts to promote their daughters'

competencies. When asked about the role of their families in their educational journey, my respondents immediately credited their fathers for their success.

Muna: When I finished my bachelor degree, my father realized that I was capable of taking good care of myself and able to pursue my graduate program. First I was nominated as a demonstrator in the College of Science and soon was the first to receive a scholarship to the United States of America. My father was thrilled. He said, "now this is your chance to get a better education, you earned it with your hard work. You are mature and worthy of pursuing your dreams; I will not let anyone stop you. All I can do is pray for you and ask Allah for His blessing."

Arwa: My relationship with my father is a good example. He is loving and supportive all the way through. The real help and support came from my father. What is different is my family. I am fortunate to have such a family who is educated and understanding.

Najwa: We had a chance to go with my father and visit different places in the country, visit museums, go to restaurants. So, his job was in a way an opportunity to reach and contact the outside world too. It gave us more exposure to the outside world and that was something uncommon in Yemen at that time. It was unusual for a father to take his daughters with him on these tours . . .

I worked as an announcer in the radio station for four years since high school and that helped me a lot and gave me courage. My father supported me. Actually he was the one who dealt with other family members. My cousins, for instance, refused that idea completely. But since my family said no to them, they could not do anything about it.

The participants stated that going to college and pursuing a graduate program was something expected in their families. Their parents, as reported, perceived education as a tool to gain independence and as a means to improve the quality of their lives. To many parents, education is a means of enhancing one's

status both socially and financially. When I asked, "Why was education important to them and to their families," the responses, interestingly, revealed what Gandara (1995) referred to as a "culture of possibility." Through their faith in the future and through the stories told by their parents, Gandara's respondents believed that everything was possible and attainable if they achieved academically. Similarly, the participants in this study had indicated that academic achievement is an important asset and is the key to a better future and a better life. For some, education is a means to achieve what other family members missed in life.

Samia: I always knew that my excellent performance at school was my mother's and my aunts' source of joy and pride. In a way, my education was a sort of compensation for their own lack of education. They always reminded me that it is my chance to get an education and to accomplish what they couldn't accomplish when they were young. It was as if they were counting on me to take the path that was closed to them during their early years.

Lamia's answer was interesting:

I just grew up with parents who cherished education. For a woman, education is important. A woman, according to my family, has a responsibility to get an education not only to enhance her image or her situation but also to play a role in her society where she can help other women, resolve their issues and improve their situation. The world is in constant change. The value of education, however, will always be there. Education will grant us security and independence. As women, we do not have to rely on others when we need something. We will be better off with education.

The parents also made other critical sacrifices to support their daughters' education and to further assure their chances of high academic achievement. In some situations the parents were ready to take care of their grand children.

Najwa: When I returned from Egypt, I wanted to finish college but then I had my first child. My family actually helped me a lot during that time and asked me to move in and live with them. So we did. My husband, my son, and I stayed with my parents until I finished college.

Arwa: When I was in Medical school, I had a scholarship for seven years. However, even if I didn't get any financial aid, my father would have helped me at that time. He would send me money if I asked him to. He would help me even if it takes selling the family house.

Najwa too reported that her father paid for her education instead when she was expected to receive a scholarship from the government. She said, "When I was in the States, my father was the one who paid for school. I was supposed to receive a scholarship but I never did." When asked, "Do you think that your family was the same or different from the families of your friends?" all agreed that their families were somehow different from their friends' families. Najwa said, "Compared to other family members, my father was different. He was very open and liberal. His approach was very democratic. He gave us the freedom to do whatever we wanted to do; he would never mind." Arwa expressed her father's sense of devotion, "My father is different from my friends' fathers ... My father's top priority was his children. He spent a lot of time with us, teaching us, and taking us to school. . . . He would prepare breakfast and sandwiches for us to take to school." Muna's reaction to this question was different and revealed a somehow an authoritarian approach.

She said, “maybe the nature of my family is different. The atmosphere at home was much more oriented towards nothing but studying. If I had parents who allowed us to go out anytime we wanted, things would have been different.” Obviously, Muna was always proud and appreciative of her upbringing.

The fathers’ support served as a protective factor against cultural pressures. The fathers here were emblems of love and encouragement, which nurtured the participants and contributed to their strength and motivation to continue their education. It was very clear that the families of these participants played a major role in buffering them against factors that may have impeded their academic progress. One of the respondents articulated this point precisely.

Najwa: I realized that in Yemen, if you have a supportive family who is one hundred percent behind you, encouraging you all the way through, then society’s pressures become less vital and less effective. It does not really bother you or even affect your progress. I thank Allah for this. I thank him for such a loving and supportive family. My parents and my husband and my children are my source of strength and happiness. I think I’m lucky!

#### **IV. 2. Personal Characteristics and Success:**

It is necessary to explore other realms in order to gain a better understanding of what else might have promoted academic success among this small group of Yemeni women. Perhaps it was important to ask how did these women reach their academic potential in school and attain success later in life while other Yemeni women did not? Along with family factors, specific

personality factors contributed significantly to the academic success of the participants in this current study. In the previous theme the parents of the participants tended to have high aspiration for their children's educational attainment. Parents were credited for their daughters' educational attainment and success. However, the focus now shifts toward the internal compasses of the women themselves.

#### **IV. 2. 1. Persistence:**

Persistence in this study was determined by the participants' commitment to pursue a goal and complete their education. The data indicated that the respondents believed in themselves and in their ability to achieve academically. Self-concept is defined as "... a collection of beliefs about the kind of person we are" (Hamachek, 1990, p. 677). It is an essential aspect of phenomenological reality. Each person acquires a set of beliefs, which "collectively constitute his or her self-concept and understanding of the world, and which provide the foundation for decisions about how to behave"(Gray, 1994, p. 580). According to Bandura (1977), persistence is the result of a "self-belief of efficacy" which consequently determines how much effort individuals put forth and how long these individuals will persevere when encountering difficulties. In fact most of Bandura's research centers on people's beliefs about their "own ability to perform specific tasks, which he refers to as self-efficacy" (Gray, 1994, p. 589). Thus an individual's self-concept helps determine how he or she will react or behave in certain situations. In this study the women's

perceptions of themselves promoted their competence. They had high opinion of their abilities to do well. However, it should be noted that ability and persistence together enabled these women to emerge somehow intact and able to flourish.

Personality questions addressed in this study revealed a sense of personal determination, spirituality, and resilience. When the question, "How would you describe yourself to yourself" was asked, the participants reacted in the following way.

Muna: I am very persistent, tolerant, responsible and organized. I was determined to finish my education and I knew that I had to work twice as hard to achieve that goal. I succeeded but my success did not come the easy way. I did my best to not let my success be on my family's account. I think I knew from the beginning the nature of the tasks I will shoulder and also knew that being a mother, a wife and a student, require strength and determination.

Arwa: I am a person with a strong faith in God and in myself. I am very spiritual and very determined. I wanted to complete my education and become a doctor, and I did accomplish my goal. Nothing could stop me when I want something because I am hard headed. However, I judge everything through God's eyes first.

Samia: I am always persistent and determined to do what I think and believe is right for me. Since I was a child I loved school, and I learned that the pursuit of knowledge has no limits. My goal was to obtain a high educational degree from a recognized university in Europe or America. I guess I believed in myself. I knew that if I worked hard, I would be able to accomplish my goals and dreams. . . . When I do something I intend to do my best. I want perfection in everything. I want the perfect family, the best home environment for my children, and also the best career.

Najwa: you can say that I am a woman who is determined to do things . . . determined to accomplish something in my life. For example, I am determined to finish my Ph.D. and do my best to reach that end. You see, finishing school and getting a Ph.D. became a dream that I wanted to come true. I put it in my mind as a goal and I could not settle for less than that. Getting married and having children did not stop me from completing my education.

Lamia: Ambitious, very ambitious. I am also determined to do things when I want to. My goal is to get my doctorate. Focusing on my studies and working hard would make my goal obtainable.

Huda: I see myself as an ambitious person who is very eager to learn. I also believe that I am courageous enough to be on my own and to accomplish what I embarked on. I tolerated a lot to finish my degree because I believed in myself. I think it is very important to have confidence, and to believe in yourself. I knew from the very beginning that with determination, I can do it. Even when I got married, I made it clear that finishing my education is my top priority.

#### IV. 2. 2. Locus of control and achievement:

Also essential in this study was the concept of locus of control. Internal locus of control, for instance, refers to the degree of control that individuals have over the events in their lives. Individuals with a strong locus of control, who encounter difficult situations believe in their ability to both confront and handle these problems expecting their behavior would make a difference. In contrast, external locus of control refers to those individuals who feel powerless when confronted by problems and therefore depend on defensive coping strategies instead (Rotter, 1966).



A strong relationship was found between students' achievement and their locus of control. According to Dweck (1975) high achievers are more "internals" and thus put more effort into their work than do low achievers who are "externals." Davis and Stephan (1980) reported that students who make high grades associate their success with internal factors such as ability and effort. While students who make low grades attribute their failure to external factors such as luck and context (Lloyd, Chang, & Powell, 1979). The women participants in this study had potential for high academic achievement and education as an important role in their lives. Their previous education and continuous success influenced their educational aspiration. They did well on their own as children and worked hard to perpetuate their success. All of them received excellent grades since they were in elementary school. As part of their efforts to make good grades, they developed a number of strategies to make their studying more efficient. In these ways, the behavior of these women had influenced their thought and their thought consequently influenced their behavior. Najwa achieved highly in high school and was sent to the USA to study English. Muna's success encouraged her parents to send her off to college and to live in a hostel in the capital Sana'a for the sake of education. Arwa was granted a scholarship in the medical school. Huda, Samia, and Lamia were excellent students since they were in elementary school. Such success raised these women's confidence in their abilities. Their perception of progress was derived from their performance outcomes.

Muna: Some professors said that my grade point average was very high and that switching to pure science will

open a lot of opportunities for scientific research in the future.

Najwa: When I finished high school, I got the third place in the Republic so I had a big chance to receive a scholarship.

Samia: My professors in college suggested that I teach at the university upon my graduation. "We want you here because we need you," they used to say.

The participants were also asked "If they feel that they have little influence over the things that happen to them, or if they think they have control over what happens to them?" They reacted in the following way.

Samia: I know for sure that I have a lot of control and influence over what happens to me. I always make my own decisions regarding important matters that happen in my family. No one had ever forced me to do things that I did not want to do. I chose to get married, to have children, to travel, and to get an education. I faced many obstacles during my graduate program of study but I survived because I personally made these choices, such as finishing my education. I knew it was not going to be easy, but I decided to move on because I was in control. Perhaps I could not control people back home . . . people who denied my rights in getting a scholarship, but surely they did not succeed in terminating my program of study.

Najwa: It depends on the situation; I feel both. Sometimes I feel I have control over things and sometimes not. But for the main choices in my life, such as marriage, having children, continuing my education and getting a job, I was the one who made these decisions and chose what I thought serves me best. Maybe some circumstances have influenced my choices, but no one ever forced me to do things that I do not want or wish to do.

Arwa: I feel I have a lot of control over the things that happen to me. In my opinion it is all a matter of choice. If, for instance, we want to improve our relationship with someone, it is our choice to do so. I was able to make my relationship with my husband work, but I chose not to. I do not lay the whole blame on him because I too was responsible for the end of that relationship. Everything is a matter of choice even if you got sick or had a stroke. It means that you have neglected your health. So, whatever happens to me, happens because I did something to make it happen.

Huda: Only in the face of death and illness, I can tell you that I feel I have little influence over the things that happen to me. Before my divorce, I had a minor influence over the events of my life even though I insisted on continuing my graduate studies. I made a decision to pursue my education abroad and here I am. I have a strong will and determination. I am positive and I feel I can control what happens to me.

Lamia: I believe in fate and destiny. But we should not forget that Allah has endowed us with hearing, and sight, and minds so that we can think before we take a step farther. Therefore, I think and consider the consequences before I make any decisions in my life. I have to weigh things in order to choose what is best for my family and me. I believe that I have control over what happens to me.

Muna: I believe I have control over the things that happen to me. It all depends and has to do with someone's personality. Whatever concerns me is under my control. But if something urgent happened in my family while I was still working on my Ph.D. I would have stopped and attended to that situation. In that case I might not have a complete control over the things that happened. This question takes us back to what I have said earlier . . . that everything has to do with our priorities.

Researchers also pointed out that locus of control together with self-concept contribute important information that help one understand both low and high

achievers. Muller, Chambliss & Ward (1977) supported such connection as they discovered that individuals with high academic self-concepts were high achievers than those with low academic self-concepts. It was not surprising that the women in this study have high academic self-concepts.

#### IV. 2. 3. Spirituality and the role it played in the lives of the participants:

Other areas delineated as important for investigation were personal self-concepts and spiritual strength as a source of faith and fortitude. Embedded in the women's interviews were acts of will and determination which undoubtedly shaped their lives and allowed them to move on despite difficulties. It is useful to discuss personal commitment to pursue education in the Yemeni context that shaped the understanding of these women in their determination to seek an education. This personal commitment is determined, in part, by the motivational environment of the family and by the values and beliefs held by the parents. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the nature of context of the Yemeni society which derives its principles from attachment to the Qur'an and the Islamic law. The Qur'an was intended as a guidance for humankind for proper action. For example, the Qur'an provides a complete code of life as a means to know and distinguish between the paths of righteousness and the path of evil. The Qur'an demands that all the faithful must seek knowledge (Qur'an 30:22, 36:36, 39:9, 58:11). The participants persistence, for instance, stems from their belief that God has enabled individuals to set out to achieve their objectives and bestowed on people the talents and

abilities necessary for this role. Among them the ability to learn, the ability to know and the ability to choose and pursue objectives. As Muslims, it is our duty to search and seek that knowledge and to make a difference in life. The prophet frequently emphasized the importance of acquiring knowledge: "A person who goes out of his/her house in search of knowledge, he /she is on Allah's way till the person returns." Again, the prophet repeated: "A person who follows the path of acquiring knowledge, Allah will make easy for him/her the passage to paradise" (Rahman, 1994, p. 518). Such an orientation portrays a religion that calls and rewards individuals who "seek" knowledge, who "search" and who work hard to accomplish the best in life. Islam is a religion of science and knowledge, for the opening of the message with the word "read" (al-alq/iqra, "the clot/read," 96:1-4) emphasizes the strong relationship between religion and science. As Arwa indicated, "Allah created us for a purpose, to live life to the fullest." This remark stimulated other interests and realms of investigation. The role that religion played in both the respondents and their families' lives seemed important to address. The content of the participants' responses demonstrated a strong faith in God. As Muslims, the participants adhere to the belief that Islam is a way of life with guidelines to be followed in their personal lives as well as in their reactions and dealings with other people. As they seek to follow these guidelines, they will at the same time be able to handle the problems they face in their respective situations. The following responses reflected some of the principles that are derived from the Islamic heritage and the Qur'an.

Arwa: As far as I am concerned, religion is the most important factor in my life. Since I was little, my parents instilled in me certain values and beliefs that as individuals we must make a difference around us. Based on our religious beliefs, one must leave an impact in life, a positive one. There is no meaning for life if one comes and goes without doing anything. Each one of us must carry a message. My father would always make sure that we all heard such a message. To be more correct, we have values that need to be heard and conveyed.

Huda: Religion played an important role in my family especially in the way they react to life tragic events such as death, for example. When my family encounters troubles or faces tragic events, they handle them with patience and strength. Their strength is derived from their faith in God.

Najwa: Religion for my family as it is to all Yemeni families is basic. But even though my family is considered conservative; it is open about other ideas and discussions. All the members in my family encourage and foster discussions that are pertinent to Islam as well as to other religions. That's what I like about my family.

Samia: My parents have played a major role in my life. My religion was incorporated with everything in my family. Nothing was forced or imposed on us and that made me accept things more readily. No one told me that I should pray or fast. I watched my mother and my aunts pray everyday and fast during the month of Ramadan and so I learned and enjoyed doing the same things.

Muna: My parents are very religious people but not very strict. I remember when we were little, my father would call us after the sunset prayer, between seven and eight, to come and join him while he reads the Qur'an. I remember it was a joyous time for us all. But the one thing about my father was that he was open-minded.

My father would rather take us to places whenever we asked him to and he would never mind or care about what other members in the family think.

If we want to go to the movies, for instance, he would not mind taking us. He did not encourage or allow attending parties most of the time unless necessary. He was very protective of us. We used to have a big shelf full of religious books. My father would reach one every night and discuss different topics with us.

Lamia: Religion plays a very essential role in my family. We learned everything from religion. We learned the ethics and norms of proper Islamic behavior, good conduct, moral strength, and the obligatory duties towards God, family, and society. Also, we learned how to preserve customs and traditions that are derived from our Islamic heritage.

Religion did play a major role in the participants' lives and it had also played a role in the formation of their educational goals and careers. Again, listening to the women voices articulating their attitudes and experiences was enlightening.

Najwa: Believe it or not, I was considered to be the most religious member in my family since I was very young. To me, religion actually gives me guidance and answers to most of my questions. It gives me a clear sense of what is going on and provides a basic meaning for my life. When I puzzle sometimes on some issues, questions about life and death, or about our purpose in life, I return to religion. I always find explanations to my questions.

Huda: In my life, religion has been important and has played a role in sustaining my inner peace and equilibrium. When I got my divorce after twelve years of marriage, I was full of despair. Furthermore, I was separated from my children and that blew me away, and I was extremely desperate and vulnerable. It was religion, my faith in God, that saved me from this state of mind and it helped me tremendously to overcome this difficult stage in my life.

Also, just recently, when my youngest brother died in such a horrific accident, I was once again facing a

big ordeal especially while I am alone here in this country finishing my degree. You can say that my faith played a comforting role in my life. In regard to religion's role in the formation of my educational goals and career, I do not think that religion had played a role in the choice of my field of study. But, continuing my graduate studies was stimulated and promoted as a result of my conviction of women's right to get an education.

Samia: There is no doubt about it. Religion has and still plays a role in my life. It gives me a sense of direction. My decision to go to school is based on my faith, which tells me to constantly make changes and improvement in my life. I wanted to get a high educational degree in order to help other Yemeni women realize their potentials. I faced many constraints but learned to handle them with patience and hope and that as long as I am not doing anything wrong, things will be better.

Religion gives me hope. When all the doors are shut in my face, I turn to God. When I wake up at dawn to perform my first prayer of the day, I feel peace and contentment and all my worries are dissolved. When my beloved sister passed away, I thought life should stop there. I was angry that the world still goes on. That people are still arguing, complaining about trivial things and worrying about food, shopping, and the weather. I wanted the whole world to know that she was gone and that I was hurt. But soon, I realized that life will go on no matter who comes or goes, and that I was wrong. My faith in God taught me that lesson--we come for a reason and leave for a reason.

Lamia: Religion has a strong impact on my life. I am a strong believer in God (SWT)<sup>3</sup>, His messenger (pbuh)<sup>4</sup>, and the Islamic teachings. I have always been a strong believer. I am constantly conscious that what I do does not contradict the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. When it comes to education, I am only following what Islam asks me to do---to continue learning and seeking knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> SWT: Abbreviation of Subhanhu wa ta'ala translated to "exalted is He (Allah)."

<sup>4</sup> PBUH: Abbreviation of "Peace be upon him," said whenever a prophet is mentioned.



Muna: Religion played a role in my life. I think the values that were instilled in me long ago are getting stronger and stronger. I do everything within my value system: the values that are based on my faith. My priorities stem from my faith. My children and my husband are my ultimate priority. It is true that I was persistent and determined to get an education but when duty calls I am ready.

Getting a Ph.D. came in second after my family. I never left my house for school before finishing my daily duties towards my family. I used to clean, cook, feed, organize and do everything before I leave for my classes. When I am home I belong to my family. I did not want them to suffer on my account. It was very tough but that is how it was supposed to be. If I want to pursue education, I have to make these sacrifices.

Arwa: Before I went to college, I planned to major in Islamic studies. This choice was based on my conviction that one must make a difference and leave a strong impact in life. It was my father who suggested something else. Islamic studies, as he said, was a fine choice. But, such a major in college, he said, would not give me the freedom to express myself or to state my beliefs especially if I chose to teach in a university setting. And therefore my impact on society will not be felt. As a teacher of Islamic studies, I will have a curriculum to follow very carefully regardless of what my beliefs are and that will put me under extreme scrutiny and restrictions.

Choosing medicine, for instance, was something else to consider. By becoming a doctor, one would still make that impact. That made me rethink my decision. When I thought about what my father said, I started thinking about the benefits that a woman doctor might bring to other women who are less fortunate. At that time, having a woman doctor of Gynecology and Obstetrics was the best thing that a person could offer to Yemen.

Women back home would rather die than to be examined by a male doctor. As a Muslim woman who was about to make a decision, I believed that by choosing to be a doctor, I had just completed my duty and my obligation towards my society. At least part of society

must do something to help these women. One of us must do something or else we would be punished for it in front of God. And so I choose medicine.

She also related:

Religion, you can say, has mediated my whole life inward and outward. For instance, entering college was based on religion, choosing a husband was also based on my religion because when I chose my husband I made it clear that he should be someone who loves God and who serves God. That was the only condition that I put when choosing a husband. . . . What I meant was that I was not looking for a husband who is just religious for the sake of religion or who would spend his life worshipping God and doing nothing . . . no, that was not something that God wants in the first place. Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) said, "The superiority of a learned person over an ignorant worshiper is like that of the full moon over all stars." I have always wanted a learned person, a person who would have a role, a humanitarian one. I did succeed in establishing, with his help of course, a center here to serve the community, to offer help and advice to the community.

A quick question seemed relevant and essential to add here and so I asked,

"Did your religious beliefs have an impact on your academic success? If so, how?"

Arwa: Definitely. When I read or study I do it with an open mind. I am a doctor but this does not mean it is enough or that I cannot learn anything else. I am a religious person first and I want to be knowledgeable enough to master what I know and what I believe. I want to prove to people that a religious person is not only familiar with religious matters, is not narrow minded, but is also capable of learning other things and able to succeed in them too.

The more I read and investigate in religious matters, the more I want to learn about medicine and genealogy. There are some examples from the Hadiths that say, "those who embark on any kind of work must do their best," and also "strong Muslims are better than weak Muslims." I want to be a good doctor because my

religion tells me so. Religion gives me an incentive to work hard. That's why I ask myself before I embark on doing something. I ask myself if what I will do will not go against God's will. I'm always conscious about what I do and what I don't do.

Huda: Islam encourages us to work hard and to do our best. I always work hard when I do or start something. I always seek nothing but the best.

Lamia: I believe that my educational success is a gift and a blessing from Allah (SWT). It is my strong faith and belief in God that helped me continue and succeed. I do not think that I could have made it without my strong faith and belief in God.

Najwa: I can not remember a direct impact. But, as a whole, religion gives me hope and a sense of optimism and desire to continue what I have started already.

Samia: To some extent, yes. My religious beliefs had an impact on my academic success in the way I handle things. I learned to be tolerant and resilient in the face of adversity. I believe in myself and in my capability to achieve successfully. My religion itself encourages and fosters the principles of total quality management of individual functioning. Therefore, when I start something, I do my best to accomplish it otherwise, I would never feel that I fulfilled my duty properly.

Muna: Of course my religious belief impacted my academic success. I believe that God made things easy for me and helped me accomplish and reach my potential.

Such a discussion prompted other relevant questions in an effort to clarify cultural and familial values. So, I asked, "Have you ever had to reject familial/cultural values to survive academically?" Arwa discussed interesting details regarding this question.

No, I never felt that I had to reject cultural values in order to succeed academically. Do you know why? Because I feel that my family is very religious and that our values stem from our religion. Religion is not against education, success, academic achievement or travel to obtain that education. That's what I believe and what my family believes. Hence, my family judges my deeds and behavior according to religious laws and not according to cultural norms.

In Yemen, for instance, it is a crime if a woman goes to another country alone. My family does not look at it this way. As long as Islam allows women to seek education and knowledge, then it is okay to travel to seek such an honorable end. Islam, in our opinion, stated that the acquisition of education is compulsory for all the believers. Islam addressed and spoke to both women and men as equals. People do get shocked when a woman does something that is wrong in their standards but with time they begin to understand.

You see we need to handle such things with patience and understanding. We should stand up for what we believe is right for us and yet we should not necessarily disregard or reject what others are against. We should respect others opinions in order to gain their respect too. . . . We should not behave as the experts and regard others as ignorant simply because they are not educated. If we just function within what was given and granted to us as women by our religion, everything would be fine. Time will prove to people that what we fought for was never against our values or beliefs.

She elaborated:

Sometimes you reject cultural values but not religious values. There is a big difference between the two. If you go against cultural values you might regain people's trust after a while but rejecting religious values is something different, something that is not forgiven. Let me give an example. If a woman decided not to cover her face she would encounter some resentment depending on her family background and social status. But this resentment would soon dissolve when she explains to them the issue of veiling the face and how it is not mandatory and how it is not an ingredient of a woman's dress code ordained

by Allah. People do understand that there are other interpretations of this issue and it is okay to uncover the face.

Here you can argue against those who disagree with you. But if you suddenly decided to take off your scarf and exposed your hair then you would be an object of ridicule. By doing so, you would be rejecting your religious values and therefore, you cannot expect people to respect you especially in Yemen. So it is better to function within our boundaries.

The other participants had similar views.

Huda: I have never rejected any familial values but may be some cultural values. What I meant is sometimes I have to reject cultural values that, for instance, insist on keeping women confined within their homes and deny them some of the privileges that are granted to them in Islam. In fact I faced many obstacles when I decided to finish my graduate program especially from my husband and the social norms that support people like him. Even now people call me "the rebel" simply because I wanted to finish my education--a right that was given to me by my parents and by my religion.

Najwa: Well, as a working woman, a wife, and a mother who lives in a society that is used to leave all the pressures, all the house chores, and bringing up children, I have to dismiss or may be sometimes compromise some of the general values and duties that are considered to be part of the ideal wife and mother. When I started my graduate program, I already had three children. It was tough to try to be the ideal or the super woman when you are in a graduate program. I tried my best but it was never enough in society's eyes. Now, I am working instead of staying at home. My responsibilities are big and my job is very demanding; it is difficult to be everything.

Muna: I would never reject either familial or cultural values to succeed academically. If my success depended on doing something that contradicts my beliefs and values, I would never have pursued it. My answers might be different from the answers of the other women

participants in your study. I am a little more conservative than other women but I feel very comfortable with this. I know that other Yemeni women would think of me as backward but this is the way I am and am happy with what I have.

If, for instance, I have to attend a conference somewhere in Europe or in the USA, I would not feel comfortable staying in a hotel by myself during the conference. I would rather be with someone I know, my husband or my son. It just does not feel right. I would do things but not at the expense of my religion and my values. Even when I was living at the dorm in Yemen, I did not participate in any event or party. I believe that Yemeni women have freedom in many aspects of life, better than other women in the Arab world. As long as I can finish my education, work and control my surroundings, I feel happy and satisfied.

Samia: This is a tough question. One thing that I know for sure is that I have never rejected familial values in order to survive academically. I cherish and respect the values taught to me by my family. My love for learning is originally implemented in me since I was little. In fact I was encouraged and motivated to seek learning and knowledge despite many obstacles.

But when you start to have a family of your own, your role changes. You struggle to keep up with your traditional family roles. Society's expectations of you, as a married woman, are great now. Now you have a responsibility towards your own family, extended family, in-laws and your neighborhood. People expect you to entertain them, visit them, and offer help any time they want you to. Even if you are busy with school, for instance, you have to attend to their needs. If you fail to do so, then all the blames fall on you and your husband who allowed you to go to school and work in the first place.

Because I was busy most of the time, I did not socialize or attend most of the occasions and events. As a result, people reacted negatively to such way of life. In that case, I was in a way rejecting some of the values they believe to be important.

Lamia: I follow and cherish the Islamic values. I continue to depend on God and always seek His guidance. Islam encourages Muslims to value work especially hard work that leads to success. According to Islam, work is a form of “ibadah,” (worship). I derive these lessons from my religion. The pursuit of knowledge demands consciousness and perseverance in order to reach our potential successfully.

#### IV. 2. 4. Resilience:

As reported earlier, the participants in this study exhibited a high sense of persistence to complete their higher educational degrees. Elements of resilience, however, had also emerged from the data, and had indicated that the respondents’ academic achievement was acquired despite negative cultural factors and financial constraints. Hence, the participants’ resilience was a process by which academic achievement was maintained despite the presence of various obstacles.

The literature on resilience offers various definitions yet the general meaning of resilience revolves around those who have the ability to demonstrate positive adaptive behavior despite a broad band of risk factors (Garmzy, 1994).

Butler (1997) seemed to offer the best definition of resilience:

What we call resilience is turning out to be an interactive and systematic phenomenon, the product of a complex relationship of inner strength and outer help throughout a person’s life span. Resilience is not only an individual matter. It is the outward and visible sign of a web of relationships and experiences that teach people mastery, doggedness, love, moral courage and hope. (p. 26)

Such a definition reflects a holistic outlook with its emphasis on the individual not as a collection of separate parts but as a unified entity. Resilience, in

this study, was associated with educational attainment and success. The women participants demonstrated resilient characteristics in the sense that they managed to academically succeed despite various obstacles. The barriers and the pressures faced by these women required keen personal effort to cope and handle complex situations. The respondents had a clear understanding of their situations. They were aware of their constraints, yet they were able to act efficaciously in their pursuit of education. Also, their ability to accommodate their families' needs and expectations was something worth considering. Later, when they married and shouldered other responsibilities, they also were able to continue and successfully finish their education. As adults, almost all of these women had undergone critical events that affected their life's experiences. For instance, all participants faced multiple life's stresses, experienced civil wars or violent political strife within their country, and reported migrant lifestyles. Each one reported the death of loved ones. Two of the respondents experienced divorce, and emotional problems. Although these critical events may have impeded these women's progress during the educational process, they perceived these experiences as challenges not as problems noting that such events were instrumental learning experiences that contributed to their personal growth, and helped them reach their full potential. The secret lies in their ability to adapt and move on with a positive attitude. There was no room to dwell on negativity.

Low socioeconomic status is a major barrier to higher education for Yemeni women. Lack of resources in Yemen is a decisive hindrance to women's education.



The lack of educational degrees beyond the Masters makes it difficult for many women to seek higher degrees in their homeland. Therefore, women with a passion for higher education programs have no choice but to seek that passion elsewhere. Financial support offered by the government and the universities is also limited. This lack of financial support is a possible explanation as to why so few Yemeni women pursue higher education outside Yemen. When women do succeed in securing a scholarship from the government or the university, they must rely on their families for both financial and emotional support. Yemeni women students are challenged further as they attempt to adjust to changes and complex life situations. Hence, those women who made a choice to leave their country for the sake of education must exhibit a high sense of efficacy not to mention strength and persistence to deal with the obstacles that would be put in their path. Their decision to seek education outside their country will meet with varying degrees of resistance. Since most of the women who complete their college degrees, for instance, are usually married and have families and therefore have more responsibilities, it becomes very difficult for most of them to even consider leaving home to pursue their education. Women also have to deal with other internal struggles that have to do with their fear of the uncertainties of what would happen while outside their homeland. Adjustment to a new environment, different educational systems, and quite often to a new culture and values, are sufficient factors to discourage even those who have confidence in their capabilities to

succeed. All these factors add to the pressures that bear on these women when they decide to embark on their educational journeys.

The participants in this study came from families that relatively enjoy a moderate economic status. The parents, here, did not only provide verbal support and encouragement but also made other sacrifices to help their daughters continue their education. For instance, all of the participants received scholarships during their graduate programs, yet they depended on financial assistance from their fathers. Both Huda and Lamia, who were in the final stages of their programs, indicated that the scholarships' money was not enough to cover other expenses during their program of study. It was only with the financial support received from their fathers that they were able to survive. When asked, "Did you have any financial assistance and whether or not their families provide any financial resources," the respondents related the following.

Huda: Yes, I do receive financial support from the government but it is never enough. I still receive money from my father to help me go on.

Lamia: Yes, I have an assistantship now. But my father still sends me money until now. Even though I am married, I still depend on my dad as I used to.

Samia: Financial aid was my major concern. I was granted a scholarship from my university yet I did not get it. I felt betrayed and angry because I couldn't do anything about it as I was already at the beginning of the program. I mean what could you do when you are away from home? What can anyone do under these circumstances? Just quit and leave and submit to defeat?

After all these long years of struggle and sacrifices hoping to secure a scholarship to fulfill a dream, I couldn't give up. Whatever decisions I make

would affect my entire family too. I had a bundle of official letters and signatures that for a long time I kept as a treasure not knowing that they were worthless. I kept calling and calling these officials to remind them of their promise and of my right to get what is mine but it did not strike a cord. The agony and the energy spent over securing a meager scholarship were wasted so easily. I had no choice but to turn to my family for financial support. I survived because I never lost hope that things would be better. That's what kept me going.

Two of the participants were divorced during their educational journey.

Huda summed up her experience with divorce in the following way:

Living alone is difficult. Divorce too was difficult. On top of that ordeal, was leaving my children behind. I spent all my savings when my children lived with me for two years here. But I was not able to meet the financial demands anymore. It was too expensive to live on what I earned from the scholarship money and on what I had from my father. To be on your own, in a foreign country where no family member is around is not easy.

Huda did not give up her dream to get an education. Despite her struggle and painful memories she was determined to go on. She even emerged more mature:

Women should take their problems as an opportunity for self-transformation. If a woman was brought up knowing her worth, her value in society, and her rights, she will not give up on herself because she is well informed . . . not ignorant. I used to know that a woman should accept things for the sake of her husband no matter what . . . no matter how hurt she was. Even if the husband mistreats his wife, she should accept that. I thought that a wife should not complain because it is her duty not to.

I was wrong. My views are different now. There is no way that I can accept that. A woman must have an opinion of her own and she must stand up for her rights, for everything that matters to her or relates to her. A woman must voice her concern and opinion. I feel much

better now and I do not regret the decisions I made in my life.

Arwa too struggled through a divorce. At first she indicated that getting married was a turning point in her life because she learned about herself as a person:

Divorce is not easy. You struggle . . . you feel the pain and it take a lot of energy. When I am talking to you right now it may sound easy but it is not. To build a relationship and then terminate it is surely a hard thing to do. . . . It was not healthy to continue that relationship.

Arwa's growth was reflected in the following statement:

My relationship with my husband had created me because I learned a lot from it. It was different from the lives portrayed in the books that I read. I learned more about life in these five years of marriage more than I did in the last thirty years. Going through divorce has taught me a lot about myself as a person.

Some of the participants explained how they tried hard to meet the needs of their families and the demands of school during their educational journey outside their home country. The participants managed to balance between their education and their full time responsibilities towards their families. Having children and having to attend to other personal and daily demands is inhibiting. Yet, these women were committed to parenting as they were to their studies and work. Their own resilience and determination helped them move on.

Muna: When I started my program in the USA, I already had two kids, one was four and the other was two. Everything was new to me and to my family. I had to go to the laboratory on a daily basis and at different times. Sometimes it was difficult to stop an experiment and go

home so I had to stay for seven to eight hours in the lab. I put my children in a daycare center in the morning. But once I pick them up, I give them all the attention they need. I play with them, I cook dinner, and I bathe them, read to them and put them in bed. I never let my problems affect my relationship with my family. They are my top priority in life

Later she also commented:

I did succeed but it required tremendous strength. It was not easy at all. Having small children without help, and at the same time going to school was difficult. Even when children grow up, their needs are more too. For instance, my husband and I devoted a lot of time teaching them Arabic. We managed to get textbooks from Yemen and were home schooling in Arabic so when they go back they won't encounter difficulties catching up. It was hard on them at the beginning but eventually they realized the benefits of studying in a different language. We wanted to expose them to the two different school systems; American and Arabic.

Other participants related the following.

Najwa: Sometimes I feel guilty for doing many things at the same time and maybe it's unfair for my kids. I feel I have to postpone my studies because my family needs me more and that they are entitled to more attention and time. So, I had to leave for some time to meet their demands. I am also responsible for their education and their homework. Actually my husband does help me in that but he is very busy because life in Yemen became difficult with all these expenses. Money is a problem now and we both need it for the sake of our children and family.

Samia: My children are my best gift in this life. I did not go to school for a while because I did not want my first child to go to daycare centers. I felt I should be a full time mom. Even now I do not do anything unless I made sure that my children are well taken care of. I gave up many opportunities, such as attending conferences and participating in seminars because I did not want to

neglect my children. I am not complaining or anything, on the contrary, I am just saying that my children are my ultimate priority.

Lamia: Having a child was a turning point in my life. I was very active as many people said. Now, I am still ambitious and determined but with certain limitations. When there is a conference or meetings, I have to think twice where I should put my child. Sometimes I do not attend meetings. I do that without feeling sorry for myself. There are priorities in our lives and I act according to these priorities. I cannot complain now because I have a child, no. But naturally children need more time, energy and attention. Therefore, I just slowed down a little bit because it is only natural that all mothers would do so and would go through this transition period of taking care of their children. I am devoting most of my time to my child now because he needs me more than anything else.

#### **IV. 3. Auxiliary Emotional Support:**

Over the last three years, I have been fortunate to develop few genuine friendships that helped me grow personally and professionally. I came to realize that human relationships are significant to our lives. Since all the participants in this study were pursuing their education outside their homeland, I found it very appropriate to address questions pertinent to relationships. When I asked them what relationships have been important to them, all the respondents, with the exception of two, reported emotionally supportive marriages. These women chose to integrate multiple tasks in their lives and found husbands who encouraged those decisions. As wives they were dedicated in their relationships as they did in their studies. The husbands were credited for their wives' success and achievement.

Samia: My husband is the one who supported me and stood behind me in everything. I always ask myself what would I have done without my husband support? He made many sacrifices just to make my dreams come true. I went through rough times but he never stopped caring or supporting me. We both work as a team and never let daily problems ruin our marriage. My husband is one of a kind.

Lamia: I have a very supportive and understanding husband. He is finishing his degree in Europe while I am here finishing my doctoral program. We both agreed to continue our education and to our long distance marriage. He is my companion and source of support. It is very rare to find a husband like him.

Muna: My husband encouraged me all the way through. Without his support I would not have done it. He helped me a lot with the kids and the house. Because it was hard to survive on one scholarship money, he had to work long hours to provide for the family while I go to school. We both understand each other and have a very strong relationship.

Najwa: My husband is very understanding and supportive. He was always there for me when I needed him. When I have a problem he will always help me handle it. He faced many pressures from society blaming him for giving me the freedom to travel to finish my doctoral program; yet, he never complained but managed to ignore what people said.

Only two of the participants reported that they developed real friendships with other females. Huda and Arwa, for instance, indicated that during their study abroad they received support and genuine concern from female friends who were not necessarily students themselves. Huda mentioned that her friends played an important role during her divorce. "Without the advice and support of my friends, I would have had a tough time during my study," said Huda. She mentioned that she

drew strength from her female friends who tried to assuage her ordeal and helped her cope with her surroundings. Arwa too referred to a female friend who helped her tremendously during the early stages of her study.

#### **IV. 4. Language Barriers:**

In spite of the fact that they were such successful students, however, these women mentioned other struggles during their educational journeys. Language barriers, for instance, were cited by three of the participants. Muna, Samia and Arwa who received their education in the U.S encountered language difficulties at the beginning of their Masters program but they did not let it get into their way.

Muna: I remember several incidents that had to do with language at the beginning of my program. Graduate students are expected to give presentations as part of their program of study. It was required that I present a seminar. I had never given a talk in my life prior to that requirement and definitely not in a different language . . .

In Yemen, as you know, we are never trained to do so. Our voices are never heard in the classrooms in Yemen. I practiced for the seminar day and night. I presented it to my husband and asked for his opinion. I went to the seminar prepared but when the moment came, the words did not come out. I could not imagine that the room would be full of these people, all staring at me. I was afraid to speak in their language, mispronounce words, and make a fool of myself. I immediately controlled the situation. I said to myself that I must do it. I can do it either now or never. There is no escape. I was glad that I did it. I learned that if you have the will you can do anything no matter what.

She continued:

I would also like to relate to you something else. When I just arrived and started working in the lab, I encountered



other sorts of difficulties from my interaction with other students.

A female student, unfortunately, started to look down at me. To her I was only a woman from a third world country who knows nothing. She underestimated my abilities simply because I did not speak fluently like her. How can students from that part of the world know anything if they do not speak excellent English? She tried to control me thinking that she had a right to do so. I did not give her the chance to step on me. I made it loud and clear that I was as strong as she was.

When I think back, I often say what if I gave up and let someone like her control my life? What if I really believed that I was not good enough to be in that lab in the first place? I am glad that I stood up against her humiliation and never allowed her to destroy my self-esteem.

Samia shared some of her thoughts regarding language barriers:

I think language is one of the main factors that impede international students' educational advancement. First you have to achieve a certain TOFEL score in order to get into a school in the USA. This is difficult for many students coming from Yemen especially the listening section.

Students, for instance, are unable to understand the content of the conversation and that makes it difficult to answer the questions afterwards. Even though that wasn't the case for me, I did encounter some language difficulties during my program of study. Writing up to the professors' expectation was a problem. No matter how hard you work, it's never good enough or satisfying. It was always difficult to reflect the subtlety of the language. Then your ability to speak in public puts you in another dilemma. For me it was a nightmare. To present and defend an issue in front of an audience using their own language that is not yours was an agonizing experience especially in the liberal arts where what you say, tells a lot about you. Your choice of words, your style, and your tone make a big difference in your presentation.

This wasn't something that we were trained in or used to in our educational system in Yemen. Students

here are used to disclosure and speaking in class prior to their entering college. We in Yemen do not have that privilege and that kind of training. Our role is only to listen and who cares what a student think. I just wished that the instructors, here in the USA, would understand how hard that was on students who come from other cultures and who are raised in different educational systems that do not allow disclosure and open expressions.

As a medical student in the USA, Arwa encountered language difficulties too. She explained that her previous schooling was in Arabic but later she had to be fluent in English. She felt nervous because she did not feel that she was in control of what she wanted to say or do. The following excerpt expresses how Arwa dealt with her language problems when she was asked to list some of the barriers she faced in the USA:

I encountered language difficulties. I had this problem here, in medical school. I am a person who always asks questions if I do not understand something. I do not pretend that I know everything. I do not care what others would say about me. . . . Sometimes, here, I feel that people are not comfortable with my questions or my discussions, or with the way I express myself and that makes me nervous. But still, that did not stop me from stating my opinions . . . even when people laugh at me sometimes. I did not let that discourage me at all. If it was someone else in my situation, he or she might lose confidence in their abilities.

## **V. EPISTEMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE, CONCLUSION, DELIMITATION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **V.1. Epistemological Perspective:**

Education is a form of social intervention defined as “any act, planned or unplanned, that alters the characteristics of another individual or the pattern of relationships between individuals” (Kelman & Warwick, 1978, p. 3). Education reflects its social system, and therefore, cannot be elucidated apart from the comprehensive social aspects. Being a Muslim who has been exposed to different Western paradigms, I believe that constructing a methodology for dealing with Western thought is essential. Islam is a comprehensive system of life and a system of laws in which the sacred is not separated from the secular and where religion and state are blended together. Growing up as a Muslim does not suggest rejection of western education, but it entails examining knowledge in the light of Islamic values, and taking into account the realities of the contemporary world. My epistemological stance will always dictate my methodology and will promote the link between values and knowledge. Ijtihad<sup>5</sup>, (al’Alwani, 1993) is “a liberating force” in which Muslims are urged and encouraged to think for themselves and not to accept uncritical thinking.

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<sup>5</sup> Ijtihad: Literally, striving and self-exertion; independent reasoning; analytical thought. Ijtihad may involve the interpretation of the source materials, inference of rules from them, or giving a legal verdict or decision on any issue on which there is no specific guidance in the Qur’an and the Sunnah.”

I am constantly aware of what I intend to do upon my return to my home country, Yemen. What is it that I could do, as a teacher in a university setting, in order to help other women strive for change? I clearly understand that the role of a teacher is a dynamic one and it is directly linked to changes in students. Bruner (1996) refers to education as " . . . a complex pursuit of fitting a culture to the needs of its members and the fitting of its members and their ways of knowing to the need of the culture" (p. 43). It is stated that education is not simply applying "learning theories" to the classroom or using the results of subject-centered "achievement testing" (p. 43). Therefore, teaching is not merely passing on conventional ideas and theories. It is about directing and leading people out of ignorance into knowledge, and moving learners from weakness to strength. For Muslims, teaching is considered as a constant process of improving oneself as well as others to reach their potentials. Thus, responsibility for disseminating knowledge is a huge prospect. It is very important to any educator willing to bring change to be aware of the need to understand her or his own culture on its own terms particularly when it comes to addressing various issues that pertain to women's education, progress, and participation in public life.

Islam stresses greatly education. It also teaches Muslims that education of men and women is of equal importance. Hadith, which is the sayings of the prophet, says: "It is the duty of every Muslim man and women to seek knowledge." The key to knowledge is education. The first revelation of the Qur'an sent to prophet Muhammad (pbuh) begins with the word " Iqra" (Read!). Mernissi (1987)

indicated that, "Islam began with an order to read, to inform oneself. That was in the year 610 AD" (p. 28).

There are references in the Qur'an describing the value of a knowledgeable person as opposed to an ignorant person. Therefore, those who do not have knowledge cannot be equal to those who acquire it. "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" asks the Qur'an (39:9). The very asking of the question implies that they are not equal.

There are women who seek to work from within the Islamic system and who genuinely believe that their ability to achieve public participation is attributed to their Islamic identity. Religion, for some women, is a source of empowerment. As many women gain access to education and to legal materials that inform them of their roles and rights in Islam, they are becoming more actively involved in devising their own definitions of their rights and responsibilities in their societies. In fact, some contemporary Arab countries have recognized the importance of women's participation in the development process and therefore are attempting to increase opportunities for women in education and in the work place. The goal is to bring women back into full participation in Islamic society, which is understood to have been their original right.

Yemeni women lack role model figures of educated females and professional women with valued outcomes. Yemeni women in particular are becoming highly motivated to adopt the behavior of a model that is similar to them and has status. Yemeni people in general would be encouraged to send their

daughters to schools when they realize for themselves that education does not encourage delinquent behavior. To the contrary, it does just the opposite. Emphasis on education, hard work, and individual efforts would not only serve the purpose, but would also help produce a desirable change. Obtaining a Ph.D. grants its holder a prestigious position in Yemen and enables the individual to become a role model who 'made it' against all odds and yet still preserves Islamic values and operates within the doctrine of Islam. It must be indicated that educated women should not use their privileges as tool for resistance because it will only cause resentment and will aggravate the conservative elements in society against them. It is important to keep in mind that Yemen is a conservative society that is deeply affected by values supported by the religious establishment. Therefore, a balance between stability and change should be sustained. The word *change* is highly resisted and considered a threat to all values and traditions. People need to *see* for themselves that high educational degrees obtained by individuals improved those individuals' intellect, but did not tamper with their values and traditions. Educators can be more influential if they shared common interests with their students and cherished similar sense of values.

## **V.2. Conclusion:**

The data collected portrayed six remarkable Yemeni women who shared common characteristics. All participants had potential for high academic achievement and had accomplished their dreams by their strong wills, persistence,

and resilience. The participants' determination, resilience, and internal locus of control helped them move forward. These women were able to assert themselves toward the goals they set for themselves with the help of their parents. Each participant in this study has a supportive family. All the participants' parents had placed a high priority on education. In all six interviews, the father was considered the main source of encouragement and support.

However, it should be noted that this study focused on Yemeni women academic achievers who belong to a certain cohort group and who had the opportunity to finish their education. Financial aid has become less available and recruitment efforts to send woman to get an education outside Yemen have tremendously declined. Resources from international agencies are also limited. The last decade was marked by dramatic changes in the history of Yemen. The South and North are now united. Following the unification of Yemen in 1990, a civil war broke out. Almost one million migrants and dependents returned home from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States as a result of the Gulf war in 1990 adding to economic crisis in Yemen. Increased attention has been paid to the importance of women being involved in future educational and developmental processes. All these circumstances have raised many questions. How might a recent cohort of educationally successful women differ from the participants in this study? Given the historical, political, and economical changes, I believe it would be appropriate to inquire how each new generation receives and comes to embody its cultural heritage. We should speculate about other subtler influences on other groups of

Yemeni women who come from different background. What of a younger generation of women who live under the current system? Do they have higher levels of educational aspiration? Are there any changes in attitudes towards their roles? Do they believe that they can control and affect their own academic fate? Parents' attitudes of these young women should also be addressed. Do they have high parental expectations for the female's educational attainment and success? Also important to investigate is younger women who come from low-income status? Can lower economic status and low levels of parental education adversely influence females' academic competencies? Also relevant is girls coming from homes with many children in the family. Do they receive equal opportunities and treatment? Also of interest is to investigate the findings of this study on a similar cohort in any other part of the Arab world.

Educational opportunities for girls and women still lag far behind those for men. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory as a framework revealed relationships and possibilities that can guide future investigation. Thus, additional qualitative and quantitative research is needed to provide a more definitive analysis for cultural, societal, political, and economical influences on the educational attainment of women. Early supportive and persistent influence of the family is critical. However, everyone should be held responsible for education. Governments, teachers, students, educational systems, and parents should be involved in bettering education and in making it accessible.



### **V.3. Delimitation:**

The group selected for this study was not meant to be in any way representative of all women in Yemen. The study only focused on this small group of women and the roles that may have contributed to their educational achievement. Generalization to other Yemeni women with similar credentials was not one of the immediate concerns of this study. It is important to keep in mind that the conservative nature of the Yemeni society makes it difficult for some women to come forward and share their life experiences and put them in print. The respondents in this study are to be admired and respected.

### **V.4. Recommendations:**

Education can take a major role in helping women and girls realize their potentials. The participants in this study are fully acquainted with the Islamic system. They reported that acquiring a high academic degree does not entail abandoning their faith or religious values. These women's perceptions of their roles are not in contradiction with the Islamic teachings. Islam, according to these participants is seen as a force for empowerment as it granted women the right and obligation to learn. Unfortunately, many women are not aware of the rights given to them in Islam.

The findings of this study showed that the family can create a positive environment for their children, and that family support and encouragement had contributed to the academic success of their daughters. Therefore, parents and

teachers as well, can enhance religious education by separating true Islamic teachings from the influences of traditions.

Educational researchers, governmental offices, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) must play an active role in improving the situation of Yemeni women by raising awareness of women's issues, and needs. The Women National Committee, founded in 1996, and the Yemeni Women's Union, established in 1990, are two useful organizations concerned with women's programs and activities. These women's organizations can play effective roles in promoting women's needs and concerns into government policies and programs. However, these organizations are in dire need of adequate financial support. Improved networking skills among all women's organizations is critical in order to build women's leadership skills and to strengthen their capabilities as disseminators of information. Here are some of the recommendations:

- Early intervention programs to raise people's awareness of the importance and benefits of education are essential.
- Educational intervention efforts that further enhance women's educational attainment are necessary. However, such interventions must take into account the historical and cultural context of the Yemeni society.
- More educational opportunities need to be available for girls and women. The high cost of higher education abroad mandates financial assistance. Therefore, financial aid and equal opportunities for Yemeni

women are needed to advance and continue their higher studies outside Yemen.

- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need to communicate and establish networking among all organizations to emphasize the inclusion of women at all levels of the development and planning process.  
Women must be involved in decision making.
- Women educators can act as role models for other young women. They can convey expectations that female students can overcome barriers in order to achieve their goals.
- Further research is needed to study the lives of fathers and their perceptions of the roles they played in their children's education and academic success.
- Family support emerged as a key to the women's academic achievement. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how the family can demonstrate resilience and convey religious values.
- Women's situations can be enhanced by emphasizing their roles and rights as stipulated in the Qur'an, and during the time of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). It is important to make a clear distinction between Islamic teachings and traditions.

## CODA

*A terrifying incident took place at the University of Sana'a, Yemen in May, 2000. News resounded in Yemen and throughout the Middle East regarding a mass murder of 16 female students at the College of Medicine at Sana'a University. The implications this incident will have for other Yemeni women and the future of university education are rather grave.*

*Various sources revealed chilling and gruesome details concerning a morgue assistant of Sudanese nationality who had been raping, killing, and mutilating innocent female students in a room on campus at the College of Medicine. The bodies were brutally cut and body organs were kept and used for trading. The killer was arrested following several complaints of an Iraqi mother who reported that her daughter, Zainab, who was a student at the College of Medicine had disappeared since last year. The mother confidently insisted that her daughter did not leave the campus ground and that the morgue assistant was her prime suspect. Despite her complaints and constant pleas, the mother was ignored and mistreated by the authorities. The Criminal Investigation Office gave her a deaf ear and laid the blame on Zainab, the missing victim, accusing her of running away and disgracing her family. When finally arrested, the accused confessed to all 16 crimes that he committed. The mystery began to unravel and more shocking details were revealed. Such a horrific crime outraged and perplexed the Yemeni public. Public opinion blamed the university board, the dean, and the college of Medicine security officers. Students' Rights and Freedoms Committee voiced their*

*anger and concern over such crimes committed against female students. Male and female students demonstrated against these crimes and accused the security men of neglect and irresponsible actions.*

*Such a crime committed at a university makes me wonder about the future of university education in Yemen. This incident will definitely leave an impact on women's education in particular. The cultural and social constraints that I discussed in my thesis will even become tighter for Yemeni women. Who is to blame for such an incident? Would parents ever trust sending their daughters to a university to get an education? What kind of measures will Sana'a University and the government of Yemen take to ensure that such a thing will never happen again?*

*The ambiguity surrounding this crime created a sense of fear in the Yemeni public. The investigation is still continuing until this moment and the murderer is giving contradicting information. Following this crime, several articles were written concerning girls and women's education in Yemen. It was reported that many parents forced their daughters to quit school out of fear of a new murderer. The following article written by Al-Qadhi (2000) is only one example of numerous reports written about the shocking crime committed against female students at the University of Sana'a. This article was chosen not only because it confirms and addresses similar concerns discussed in my thesis but also to draw attention to the importance of this issue to women's education in Yemen. Hossn, one of the victims, was a student of medicine who was about to become the first female doctor in her tribe. Her father gave her all the support and encouragement to make her dream*

*come true. But then, Hossn disappeared mysteriously without leaving a trace.*

*People suspected the worst and began to question Hossn's integrity and honor.*

*Heartbroken and humiliated, Hossn's father died not knowing of his daughter's fate and that she was stripped of her dignity and was savagely raped and brutally mutilated on her own university campus.*

### **Yemeni Women and the College of Medicine Aftermath**

**By: Mohammed Hatem Al-Qadhi,  
Managing Editor, Yemen Times**

Yemen is a conservative country in which women are trying very hard to locate themselves in society. Before the revolution women were among the most suppressed and marginalized groups in society. And in post-revolution Yemen, they have not gained a lot for most of them are still illiterate and suffer due to social and health problems. However, they were encouraged in some areas to join school and university as they can help lead the drive of development in society. In post unification Yemen, they were, though it is not enough, given a room to show their merits and voice their interests. The Empirical Research and Women Study Center (ERWSC) meant a lot for Yemeni women as it gave them scope to discuss their problems. In other words, the center was a good institution that was doing fine for the interests of Yemeni women. However, the jerks mobilized to demolish it and nip it in the bud and they succeeded. Why? Because the key Yemeni women did not group together to defend their rights. Their fault is that they personalize their differences and this results in the loss of their rights which, of course, affects the question of Yemeni women at large.

Of course, this is one aspect of the backsliding of the Yemeni women's movement in post- unification Yemen. The other one which is of greater impact is the murder crime of the college of medicine. I believe the crime incorporates a setback for educated Yemeni women. How? Let me tell you. As I said earlier Yemeni society is very conservative. It has begun slowly to accept values which they considered, and of course, some still behold this belief, odd and alien to the society's social fabric. Among such values is the education of women. This applies more to the tribal part of the society. Hossn's father of Hamdan's tribe has rebelled against the norms of the tribe and allowed his daughter to go to university. And Hossn was to be the first female doctor in Hamdan. Her father paid the price of his decision twice. First, he was laughed at by the tribesmen as he broke the social barriers and sent his daughter to university. However, he could tolerate that.

When Hossn disappeared, the tribesmen made fun of him and told him that

education had perverted his daughter as they thought she eloped with somebody. That was very painful for Hossn's father and because of that sorrow he passed away. Now, Hossn is proved to have been raped and killed inside the lofty institution. This incident forms a staggering experience not only for the tribesmen but for the society as well. It is a nightmarish experience that shocked the Yemeni consciousness very strongly. Now people even the educated reconsider the education of women. Who could now convince the tribesmen of Hamdan to send their daughters to university?

The conservative social structure and tradition which fences the Yemeni mind with a lot of taboos is also responsible for this crime. The tribesman of Hamdan felt ashamed to report the missing of his daughter. If the Iraqi lady had not worked hard to get Adam arrested, he would have killed a lot more Yemeni women. Therefore, we have paid the price of our conservativeness and it is time we considered some outdated aspects of our social structure. Finally, the college of medicine crime and its aftermath impact on education of women is a real setback for Yemeni women. It really needs our full concern and attention. Otherwise, it would drive Yemeni women back into history and demolish the achievements which they have made. All key women and educated people in general should join hands to study the problem and try to get a way out, will they?

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## APPENDICES

## RESEARCH OFFICE



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April 19, 2000

## Principal Investigator:

The following project has been approved for exemption under the guidelines of Oregon State University's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Principal Investigator(s): Joanne B. Engel

Student's Name (if any): Faiza A. Al-Saaidi

Department: Education

## Source of Funding:

Project Title: Academic Self-Efficacy and Resilience: Case  
Studies of a Group of Yemeni Women  
(continuation)

## Comments:

**This approval is valid for one year from the date of this letter. A copy of this information will be provided to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. If questions arise, you may be contacted further.**

Sincerely,

Laura K. Lincoln  
IRB Coordinator

cc: CPHS Chair



## APPENDIX B.

### Copy of the Informed Consent Form

Dear participant,

I am a student at Oregon State University working on my doctoral degree in Adult Education. My dissertation will focus on a small group of Yemeni women who are academically successful. I am particularly interested in exploring factors that have influenced the educational process of this group.

I am seeking volunteers for my study and I am hoping that you will consider being one of (6) those volunteers.

If you decide to participate, here what would happen:

1. I will call you to schedule for a tape-recorded phone interview. Each interview will last for 2-3 hours.
2. Transcripts will be made from each interview. Dialogue quotes will be coded and listed as evidence, and demographic information will be presented too.
3. You will be under no obligation to answer questions that you feel uncomfortable disclosing and you have the right to withdraw any time.
4. Your identity would be kept confidential. Fictional names will be used to ensure this confidentiality.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without any obligation.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. If you have questions regarding your right as a research subject, contact the Research office (IRB), 312 Kerr Administration, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331, (541) 737-0670. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the information above. Once again, you have the right to withdraw even after signing this form

Signature of Participant ----- Date Signed. -----

Signature of Investigator ----- Date Signed. -----

Signature of Principal Investigator ----- Date Signed. -----

Please return this form to Faiza Al-Saaidi by using the attached self-address stamped envelope.

APPENDIX C.  
A Copy of Questionnaire

**Section A-Background:**

- A1. Tell me about your life when you were a child:
- a. When and where were you born?
  - b. Where did you grow up?
  - c. Do you have brothers and sisters?
  - d. Are you the oldest/youngest?
  - e. Can you tell me about your experiences in school as a child?

**Section B-Family:**

- B1. What is the educational status of your father?
- B2. What is the educational status of your mother?
- B3. What is your parents' attitude towards education?
- B4. What is their attitude towards their daughters' education?
- B5. Did your family provide information about education?
- B6. Was your family supportive of your education?
- B7. How were they supportive of men?
- B8. How were they supportive of women?
- B9. Did your family provide any financial resources?
- B10. Was there anyone in your family more influential?

**Section C-Self-Description:**

- C1. How would you describe yourself to yourself?
- C2. Is the way you see yourself now different from the way you saw yourself in the past?
- C3. If yes, what led to these changes?
- C4. Have there been any turning points in your life?
- C5. Have you encountered barriers during your educational journey? If so, what are they?
- C6. How did you handle them?
- C7. How did you get to such level of education where most Yemeni women have not? What makes you different?
- C8. Do you see yourself changing in the future?

**Section D-Relationships:**

- D1. What relationships have been really important to you? Why?
- D2. How would you describe those relationships?

- D3. Have you had a relationship with someone who helped you shape the person you have become?
- D4. Have you had a really important relationship where you were responsible for taking care of another person?
- D5. How important was that in your life?

#### **Section F-Education:**

- F1. What do you think will stay with you about your experience in education?
- F2. Has being in graduate program changed the way you think about yourself or the world?
- F3. Did you feel comfortable stating opinions in class?

High school  
College (as an undergraduate)  
Graduate school

- F4. Do you believe a standardized achievement test is a good method to evaluate students' abilities?

High school  
College (as an undergraduate)  
Graduate school

- F5. Do you believe that you have been evaluated fairly in?

High school  
College (as an undergraduate)  
Graduate school

#### **Section G-Support:**

- G1. Did a professional at your school serve as an academic mentor?
- G2. Did you feel supported by teachers?
- G3. Do you feel that you made the right choice of majors?
- G4. Did you receive any financial assistance when you were at school?

#### **Section H-Gender:**

- H1. What does being a woman mean to you?
- H2. How has your sense of yourself as a woman been changing?

## **Follow up Questionnaires**

### **Religion:**

1. What is the role that religion played in your family?
2. What about the role that religion has played in your life and the role it may have played in the formation of your career and educational goals?
3. Did your religious beliefs have an impact on your academic success? If so, how?
4. Have you ever had to reject familial/cultural values to survive academically? If so, what kind of values?
5. Do you always feel that you have little influence over the things that happen to you? Or do you think you can have control over what happens to you?

### **School and peer relations**

1. Were your parents involved in your school?
2. Did your parents visit schools that you or your siblings attended for any purpose (meetings, conferences, social functions, etc.)?
3. Quality of elementary school education?
4. Quality of high school education?
5. Quality of college education?

APPENDIX D  
Stress List.

Have you ever yourself directly, or indirectly (with family or significant others) experienced these stressful life events? (Check all that apply)

	<b>You</b>	<b>Your Family</b>
War or violent political strife within your country.		
Migrant lifestyle or constant moving.		
Discrimination.		
Poverty.		
Serious illness.		
Disability.		
One-parent household.		
Divorce.		
Death of a parent.		
Death of both parents.		
Death of sibling.		
Death of a significant other.		
Emotional problems.		