

**Educational Experiences of Immigrant Women of Racial  
Minority Groups in the Nova Scotian Post-Secondary Contexts**

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A thesis

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## **DEDICATION**

This body of work is dedicated to my lovely family, especially to my baby who was yet unborn when I was doing my research and writing this thesis.

## **ABSTRACT**

My research study is an inquiry about a group of immigrant women's experiences within the Nova Scotian education system. I interviewed immigrant women from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The data collection stages of the research involved conducting semi-structured interviews with five immigrant women from racial minority groups. My thesis research is concerned with highlighting the experiences and challenges facing immigrant women of racial minority groups within the Nova Scotian academic system as they progress through their postsecondary educational journey. The women I interviewed do not have English as their first language; they all immigrated to Canada within the past five years, and they all currently enrolled in university.

My research begins by focusing on the literature that discusses the state of gender equity, particularly in the education system. I discuss the literature that highlights the barriers that are specific to women in general, and I relate this exploration to the experiences of women from racial minority groups. I also concentrate on the problems confronting immigrant women from racial minority groups who are enrolled in a post-secondary educational institution. Where I was able, I drew connections between my participants' experiences in education and the similar problems facing women from various other minority groups which I found in the literature. In addition to the interviews with the research participants, I also drew on my personal experiences as an immigrant woman to discuss related issues.

The critical backdrop of my thesis is feminist theory "[f]eminism is a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women and men,

with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies” (Freedman, 2002, p.7). My study also examines life events and the difficulties faced by women of racial minority groups who immigrated to Canada. For many immigrants attempting to resettle in a foreign country often involve certain challenges such as language acquisition, learning a foreign curriculum and educational strategies, resettlement processes, and culture shock. (Leslau, Krausz & Nussbaum, 1995). At the same time, adult education is concerned with social change and empowerment of learners and is therefore critical for immigrant adult learners. Part of empowering immigrants means encouraging their involvement in educational programs, since some of the formal and non formal educational programs and sites are often act as places for immigrant students to learn not only the theoretical frameworks of a subject, but also to gain valuable information about many aspects concerning their new country. It is highly important to research some of these immigrants’ feelings and needs. My findings reinforce the importance that adult educators deal with minorities in the classrooms in a way that includes them in the teaching and learning environment.

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Also I would I like to thank the women participants in this research, their interactions with me helped me to shape this work. Their voices helped to contribute to a better understanding of immigrant women's education in Canada in general and in Nova Scotia in particular.

I want to thank my parents for their support. My father for his encouragement, his belief in me, and his support for all the way through my educational journey. My lovely mother, thank you for your support and for your time taking care of my sweetheart daughter Aya while I was working on this thesis. Also I want to thank my brother Moath for his support during this work.

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## **Chapter One: the Study Background**

### **Introduction**

I arrived in Halifax with my family on a beautiful summer day on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1999. At the airport, I went through the typical procedure that all immigrants experience when they arrive in a new country. When the immigration officer had finished questioning me, she said, “Welcome home, ma’am.” Shocked, I thought to myself, “I’m home!” Even though I was happy to be in Canada, something inside of me continued to tell me that this was not my home since I had no friends here. I did not even know what this “home” looked like outside of the airport. The officer’s words forced me to confront my denial about how much this move meant to me. Since the decision to immigrate to Canada was my father’s, I had not yet fully grasped the implications of moving from the place I had always called “home” to a place that was entirely foreign to me, but that I was supposed to call “home” from then on.

A few months after my arrival, I would discover that my new home was not what I had expected. I had hoped for a welcoming environment full of opportunities and a relaxing atmosphere, all of which had been promised to my family back in our original home. The lawyer who helped us with our immigration papers promised us that we would be able to work as soon as we arrived in Canada. I arrived with a Bachelor’s degree in English literature so I expected to find work. However, the task of finding employment was not only difficult for me, but also for my father, who had 30 years of experience as a telecommunications engineer. I knocked on all the doors available with the hope of getting my degree recognized in order to obtain work in my field, but I soon realized that I would have to equalize my foreign certificate with Canadian credentials



and/or study for a Canadian degree in order to be recognized as a productive person within the Canadian community. So, I decided to continue my studies by applying to graduate school at one of Halifax's universities.

At my university I met many immigrant women students enrolled in different majors and departments. It was encouraging to interact with other women with my immigrant status who were also struggling to get their postsecondary education. Through talking with these women I developed a broad awareness about the various hardships and triumphs experienced by minority women in a foreign country. It was my personal immigration experience and my interactions with these women that gave me the idea for this thesis project. Learning as adults in an unfamiliar country with different norms and cultural values is a challenging experience for any human being. I hope that this research study generates awareness not only about the difficulties faced by minority women in the Nova Scotian postsecondary education system, but also about the achievements that many of these women attain.

## **Immigration to Nova Scotia**

The nature of immigration in Nova Scotia has changed dramatically in the last 25 years. More immigrants face greater challenges in terms of education, employment, second language acquisition, integration and cultural adjustment. Nova Scotia has lower levels of immigration than many of the other provinces in central and western Canada, but as in other provinces, there has been a shift in immigration patterns over the years. Most immigrants to Nova Scotia now come from Asia and the Middle East (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000). As Martin Papillion noted in a paper for the Canadian

policy research network (CPRN), immigration is important for the future of Canada and is one of our greatest assets in terms of both human resources and what he calls “cultural capital,” the cultural mix which is a source of creativity and innovation (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000). At the same time, the increasing diversity of the immigrant population presents new challenges for native Canadians and for the immigrants themselves. This is especially true in relation to the provision of immigrant settlement services in general, but in particular in relation to serving the needs of immigrant women.

Immigrant women face many common challenges when they arrive to Canada such as the effects of racism, difficulties in language acquisition, and lack of recognition of their foreign credentials (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000). Immigrant women, however, are not a homogeneous group, and conditions and adjustment challenges vary depending on the circumstances of the immigrant herself, her family, socio economic status, cultural background, language skills and her educational skills. From my personal observation I believe women who immigrate as individuals or as dependent family members face different difficulties and challenges in terms of education, employment or language acquisition in different ways than women who arrive in Canada as sponsored refugees since refugees are usually financially dependent on others. Therefore, I did not include refugees in my sample.

In this thesis, I focus on the literature that discusses the state of gender equity, particularly in the education system. I will then present the findings from my semi-structured interviews with five immigrant women from racial minority groups. The women participants are originally from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Finally, I will draw connections among the challenges faced by my participants and similar issues faced

by women from other minority groups as presented in the literature on the subject. I will also draw from my personal experiences as an immigrant woman, a lifelong learner, adult educator and a researcher in order to add insight into some of the problems I discuss.

My interest in race and gender inequalities is informed by my anti-racist and feminist perspective. As a woman, I look for equality with both men and other women from different races, classes, religions, and sexual orientations. I also identified strands of critical social theory relevant to adult education (now referred to as studies in lifelong learning in my university) as a potential site for social change. My interests have motivated me to explore concepts of equitable opportunities for immigrants, anti-racist education, anti-sexist education, and the process of immigration as they pertain to immigrant women learners in post-secondary education institutions in Atlantic Canada.

### **The purpose of the study**

My study will examine some of the common life experiences and difficulties faced by immigrant women of racial minority groups in universities in Canada in order to provide suggestions and possible solutions to improve the current practices and policies of universities. I will examine some of the factors that negatively affect the lifelong learning of immigrant women of racial minority groups. Lifelong learning means having the chance to pursue education at any stage of life and being able to learn wherever you live. It “includes learning in educational institutions, in the workplace, in the home, and in community and voluntary organizations” (Jackson, 2003, p. 366). Recognizing that it is not solely the universities that create and exacerbate problems with lifelong learning, I

will also look in depth at other factors, such as the cultural and language variables that affect immigrant women of racial minority groups' experiences in lifelong learning.

Minority groups – usually defined by race, ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation – not only want to cultivate a specific identity within the larger culture, but they also desire social justice in relation to this identity. This means that each person within a minority group wants to address herself or himself as a member of the whole society, including in the education system. Recognizing the identities of different minority groups in society is the first step towards addressing issues of common concern, for identity helps to shape beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Using such terms as “women of color,” “minorities,” and “immigrant women” can be problematic because they are not neutral, and they may carry negative connotations. Clearly, our education system needs to change to include all students across cultures, and we need to remove the word “minority” from any education setting and from the dictionary itself. Tastsoglou & Miedema (2003) note that “[t]he term ‘Immigrant women’ is socially constructed and rooted in the economic and legal processes of our society, which in turn reflects sexist, racist and class biases” (Tastsoglou & Miedema, 2003, pp. 207-208). Nevertheless, I am choosing to employ these terms in this research study, although I recognize these terms are problematic as they are attached to the negative realms of sexism, racism, and class-based assumptions.

The central purpose of my research is to explore the primary factors which impact immigrant women of racial minority groups' ability to succeed in the post-secondary Nova Scotian education system and to examine how the major roles they play in their domestic lives impact on their educational journey. To this end, my research looks at

three different issues in relation to my participants' identities: gender, race, and immigration status. First, I will explore the sexist practices in the Nova Scotian education system in order to show that gender discrimination is still knocking on classroom doors; secondly, I will discuss the racial and cultural issues that confine immigrant women of racial minority groups inside their homes and communities; and finally, I will look at how these women suffer from the triple burden of discrimination based on not only their sex and race, but also their immigration status.

## **Chapter Two: Review of related literature**

My interviewees' experiences in the academy and their views of learning have been affected by their learning processes as adults in a foreign country with different norms and values. Although studies about "adult learning have often focused on the individual learners, without giving much attention to the contexts of learning" (Alfred, 2003, p. 244), my study does not attempt to separate other contexts such as personal experiences, culture, and surrounding environment from the learning processes. I agree with Alfred's (2003) statement that "[t]o fully understand learning...we must give attention to the culture and the discourse communities within which individuals interact and learn" (p. 245). Therefore, it is highly important to view how individual learners understand and interpret the cultural world around them, and how their own cultural biases affect their view of learning.

Because my study focuses on immigrant women of racial minority groups, it is necessary to discuss how their identities as women, immigrants, and racial minorities affect their lifelong learning processes. I also explore the role played by their educational institutions in supporting their educational odyssey. I am using the term "lifelong learning" because it "reflects the growing awareness of many educators of the increasing importance of lifelong learning. While schools, colleges, and universities remain crucial sites of learning, today's rapidly changing world requires a far broader and more comprehensive understanding of the way we learn in our daily lives" (Plumb, 2006, p. 17). Another example of the recognition of the importance of lifelong learning is that at my university, the name of the Masters' degree I am doing has been changed from "Adult Education" to the name "Graduate Studies in Lifelong Learning".

My research participants chose to start a new life in Canada, and their lifelong learning processes have been affected by their backgrounds, such as the cultural gaps between their home country and their new home in Canada and their struggle to acquire proficiency with the English language. Their roles in their homeplaces also affect their lifelong learning and social integration processes.

This literature review discusses my topic according to the three major categories which relate to these women's status in Canada: gender, race, and immigration.

## **Gender**

hooks (1984) considered sexism and racism to be problematic issues that arise not only in the education system, but in all life arenas. Young girls of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are frequently treated differently from their male siblings and this prejudicial behavior usually extends from the familial realm into the social arena once the girl reaches adulthood. Moreover, the cultural values that begin at childhood in the home often play a major role in women's learning experiences, especially in instances where girls are treated as inferior to boys. Ross-Gordon (1999, p. 31) notes that "numerous studies have concluded that adults perceive and react to infants in gender stereotypic ways. Infants boys, for example receive more physical stimulation, while girls are held, talked to, and touched more, and fathers tend to differentiate more between boy and girl infants when involved in play and caretaking." Receiving different developmental opportunities creates imbalance between females and males at a young age. Being treated as intellectually or physically inferior to boys can cause girls to feel oppressed by their society throughout their lives and to be unsure of their own abilities. One such

movement to recognize the equal rights of women in Canadian society occurred with the Sex Discrimination Act (1944), which was “a milestone in the history of women’s education. The Education Act of 1944 may have put ‘equal opportunities’ on the agenda, but the Sex Discrimination Act took the theory and transformed it into a mode of practice” (Robinson & Richardson, 1997, p. 307).

Women face challenges posed not only by gender, racial, and cultural barriers in society, but also by the many different domestic obligations that can affect their lifelong learning journey. Because women frequently play multiple vital roles in society, they must juggle their duties as daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, and students. Many women students are forced to leave or stop their education early due to family pressures and responsibilities, especially when their partners are opposed to them furthering their education. For example, Gouthro and Grace (2001) explained how some Jamaican women’s achievements in their graduate studies were enhanced after they got divorced. Female students often make many sacrifices in order to go to school, and “[t]heir new learning has the potential to challenge the role of a dominant male partner, to alter previously held beliefs about the gendered division of labour, and to disrupt existing family and community relationships” (Gouthro & Grace, 2001, p. 11). Fulfilling these social and familial commitments successfully is especially daunting for women who must also confront prejudice based on their skin color on a daily basis. This discrimination makes women’s participation and success in their education a difficult goal for most women students in minority groups to achieve. Gouthro (2000) discusses hooks’ (1990) description of an African-American woman’s experience within the homeplace and society as a kind of battle, saying, “the homeplace can be seen as a site of resistance



where women within the black community have forged together to create a safe haven against the discrimination and repression that they and their families face in the larger white society” (Gouthro, 2000, p. 67). Gouthro also explores the importance of the homeplace as the first site for gender and racial equality in society. If the homeplace is an anti-racist and safe environment, minority people might consider other places in society, such as schools and job places, as equally safe learning environments. Of course, the erasure of discrimination from society should begin in the homeplaces of not only minority groups, but also majority groups.

Other than the homeplace awareness, there is the school awareness. Students from minority and majority groups must be aware of the formal curriculum they are studying and also the hidden curriculum; they must learn to question everything around them. For example, one must be aware of the ways in which the “hidden curriculum” affects women students’ perceptions of gendered power relations in education. Since the educational practices considered part of the hidden curriculum, as Vallanc (1991) notes that

Educational practices treated as part of the hidden curriculum include ability grouping, teacher-pupil relationships, classroom rules and procedures, implicit textbook content, sex-role differentiation of pupils, and classroom reward structures. Outcomes typically considered to be products of a hidden curriculum include political socialization, obedience, docility, the learning of values and cultural mores, the development of attitudes toward authority, and the reinforcement of class distinctions (Vallance, 1991, p. 40).

Bierema (2003), who chose eight women (including herself) to study the role of gender consciousness in challenging patriarchy, found that identity development occurs through the hidden curriculum that teaches women to remain subordinate to the dominant patriarchal system of power. The women’s consciousness of gendered power relations

manifested itself in feminist activism, which is connected with taking strategic action to promote change for women and to make the invisible visible. Bierema's research project provides insight into the process of developing gender consciousness in a patriarchal environment. Gender awareness is central to fostering change, as developing an anti-sexist education system requires the participation of both men and women.

Many critics support the idea of having an anti-sexist and an anti-racist education system, hooks (1984) writes that women often experience oppression because of their gender, but there is also a different kind of oppression that results from discrimination based on skin color. Not only would the creation of an anti-racist education system help to solve major problematic issues in society, but also the "feminist movement can end the war between the sexes. It can transform relationships so that the alienation, competition, and dehumanization that characterize human interaction can be replaced with feeling of intimacy, and camaraderie" (hooks, 1984, p.34). Therefore, the double discrimination that often inhibits the lifelong learning of women of racial minority groups can be overcome through radical changes to the education system. The next section will discuss some of the problems and literature surrounding the subject of racial discrimination, particularly as it relates to women's lifelong learning processes.

## **Race**

Although Bissoondath (1994) notes the necessity of removing the racial and cultural barriers from minority groups in society, I do not agree with his statement that "[r]ace simply is, like the shape of one's ears or the texture of one's hair" (p. 187). Rather, I would argue that when we look at someone's shape, we do observe the physical

features like the hair or the ears, but we should not always scrutinize a person's race as a mere physical feature. In other words, race is not just a physical characteristic; it is a major part of a person's identity. Singham (1995) notes that "[r]ace is best understood as a social construct. We identify ourselves and other people by the family and community that produces us" (p. 75). I agree with this, as I believe family and community are the most powerful factors that affect our beliefs and understanding towards lots of things in life.

A crucial part of my background research comes from literature written by members of minority groups, since it is vital to listen to the various voices arising from these under-represented groups. One such critic is Yuk Chu (1996), who studied the opportunities offered to Chinese women in Britain to learn the English language. Yuk Chu looked at the availability of institutions that cater to Chinese women's need to learn English as a second language, and she found that there were many obstacles that face these women, such as the women's immigration status and the culture gaps between their home country and their new home land. Yuk Chu found that the lack of educational opportunities for Chinese women works to keep them invisible, even though Chinese people comprise the third largest ethnic minority in Britain. Yuk Chu's article demonstrates that one of the major challenges that must be overcome in the education system is its lack of accessibility to minority groups, a point to which I will return throughout my thesis.

Beryl (1995) discusses the reasons for women's return to education later in life, a pattern that is often prevalent with women in minority racial groups who are divorced and/or are single mothers. According Beryl (1995), some minority women who have had

children decide to go back to school to improve their lives through education so as to liberate themselves from the racial oppression they have faced throughout their lives.

Social bias that favors white women has been a fact with which women of racial minorities have had to live for centuries. Even some educators in the education system such as universities and colleges have been shown to have caused some women of color to lose their confidence and feeling of security in the classroom. These feelings of exclusion have been perpetuated by educational studies and research that focus on women who are white and middle-class. Often such studies ignore minority groups because they want to concentrate on the majority of women in the classrooms, who are considered to represent the perfect sample of all women in education and life. Another explanation might be found in the idea that “[w]here racism is a living reality; differences within groups seem dangerous and suspect” (Lourde, et.al, 2001, p.5). In Lourde et al, (2001) the marginalized women who are from different ethnic backgrounds and races addressed such ignorance to their identity as a kind of discrimination and humiliation.

One study that focused on adult educators’ attitudes to minority students was done by Aiken, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey (2001). They found that educators can provide negative examples for equal education and anti-racist classrooms. In Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey (2001), one of the black women in a nursing program (RN) reported that her white teacher was reluctant to touch her during a nursing class where touch was an important aspect of the exercise. Black women did not feel comfortable in the RN program because of their feelings of being the “other” in the classroom and the culture of racism that defined their educational experience. Being the “other” means being treated differently than white colleagues because one is from a minority group. “The Black

Women live in two worlds: the Black world as full of citizens and the White world as a servant, employees, and friends” (Collins, 1990, cited in Aiken, et al, 2001, p. 318). Although those two worlds did not completely prevent Black women from participating in the RN completion program, they did work to discourage their equal participation in the program, as Black women were constantly treated differently from their white colleagues. As a result of this discrimination, the black women who felt that they were not like their white women colleagues often used language codes to separate themselves from the majority. For example, words like “me”, “our,” and “our own” were used to refer to the black women, and other words such as “them,” “their,” and “their own” were employed to refer to their white colleagues. The black women experienced psychological distress as a result of their feelings of denial, injustice, and humiliation. Therefore, difference in treatment remains the main structural limitation for women from racial minorities’ participation and/or longevity in educational programs.

Such prejudicial treatment often results in women of racial minority groups finding the struggle to gain opportunities for lifelong learning overwhelming. If lifelong learning is having the chance to learn wherever you are, “includ[ing] learning in educational institutions, in the workplace, in the home, and in community and voluntary organizations” (Jackson, 2003, p. 366), yet society continues to ignore minority students’ feelings of being excluded from their curriculum, these women’s lifelong learning processes will suffer.

## **Immigrant women**

It is important to know about the immigration struggle, and to recognize that even within the category of “immigrant” there are several subcategories. Different classifications of immigrants to Canada include: refugees, asylum-seekers, dependents, business and professionals. “Refugee is a person who is outside of their country of nationality or habitual residence and who are unable or unwilling to return to that country because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, political opinion, nationality or membership in particular social group” (CIC, 2006, p. 1). Asylum-seekers are “persons making refugee protection claims from within Canada” (CIC, 2006, p. 1) for the same reasons above. For example, refugees often come to Canada in order to escape from a war or environmental disasters in their homeland. This is why dealing with refugees requires a high level of care and sensitivity to meet their needs. Another subcategory is the dependant persons (family class immigration) those who has been sponsored by “Canadian citizens and permanent residents living in Canada, 18 years of age or older, may sponsor close relative or family members who want to become permanent residents of Canada. Sponsors must promise to support the relative or family members for period of three to ten years to help them settle in Canada” (CIC, 2006, p. 1). Professionals (skilled worker class immigration) are people who have foreign skills and work experience which qualifies them and immigrate to Canada (CIC, 2006). Business class immigrants are people who have experience running or investing in businesses (CIC, 2006).

Driedger and Halli’s book, *Race and Racism* (2000), takes a case of a refugee resettlement as a model of the racial challenges in the world. They argue that there are

many conflicts faced by visible minorities such as Asians, South Asians, and Blacks who represent a large portion of recent immigrants. Rezai-Rashti (1995) explains that specifically the educators' images of students from developing nations are often ethnocentric. This stereotypical image is represented in an example that Rezai-Rashti describes about a Muslim student who was facing a learning difficulty. The teacher assumed the problem was related to the student's cultural conflict between her background and adjusting to the mainstream, yet it was later discovered the student's problem had nothing to do with this student's cultural background and/or religious beliefs, but was actually due to the student's learning disorder. This is why educators must try to avoid making any assumptions about their students, especially those from minority groups. As Ng notes, "while classroom process is important, it is equally important for the critical teacher to assume the responsibility of directing students to an examination of how systems of inequality have emerged and developed historically and to point out the way in which different forms of inequality have become part of our collective consciousness" (Ng, 1995, p. 150). Therefore, educators should deal with the problem of prejudice in the classroom openly rather than trying to hide it, since the latter action frequently results in negative outcomes for the students.

When Cumming (1992) researched the barriers confronting immigrant women in Canada and compared them to men, he found problems of large dimensions. The study showed that the number of women who speak no English at all is double that of men, even though an equal percentage of men and women who do not speak English arrive in the country each year as immigrants. Cumming (1992), summarizes both Bell (1990) and Weinstein (1984) in the following way,

for minority cultural groups such as recent immigrants, some or all of these obstacles may combine with additional factors like limited proficiency in the majority language: unfamiliarity with or exclusion from local practices and institutions; and insecure economic, housing, family, or employment situations hinder participation in educational programs as well as integration into the society at large (p. 1).

One of the most important steps to overcoming some of these barriers is to learn the official language of the country into which the person has immigrated, such as English or French in Canada. Jackson (1997) refers to Freire's discussion of how immigrant women can achieve a sense of identity through language. Freire's work demonstrates the various barriers that face immigrant women when they seek to learn language, such as the unfamiliar location of classes in which the educational programs are held. Such institutions are often outside the immigrant women's local neighborhoods, which increases the woman's economic difficulties, since she must incur the expense of obtaining transportation to these areas. In addition, some of these classes' schedules conflict with women's familial responsibilities as mothers and wives. All these challenges and boundaries for immigrant women limit both their effective participation in education and their ability to deal with the outside community.

Since immigrant women frequently take on the duties of the household, their husbands have more time to learn new languages; therefore, they are often considered to be more successful and able to adapt better to a new culture than their female counterparts. This problem lies behind the fact that "women and men have very different experiences of their 'presence in the world' which for women, for instance, may well be located in the private, and for men in the public arena" (Jackson, 1997, p.6). Therefore, although men and women from minority groups might experience similar racial or ethnic



discrimination in society, it is important to recognize that women must also contend with the added barriers associated with their status as women.

Another useful resource is Isserlis' "Trauma and the Adult English language learner" (2000), in which she describes trauma and abuse in the life of immigrants. This topic is especially relevant to refugees, since these refugees may have experienced intense oppression, violence and possibly war in their home country before arriving in Canada. Isserlis discusses the effects of trauma on learning, and she suggests ways in which educators can modify their practice to facilitate learning among victims of trauma and violence by including these marginalized groups in the curriculum. Therefore, educators must be aware that individuals from particular groups might have emotional issues that can impact the lifelong learning of minority groups as a whole.

### **Further Thoughts**

Although my literature review has focused on the areas of gender, race, and immigrant women, from my point of view, class discrimination overlaps with issues of gender, race, and immigration status. My research, however, is concerned with race, gender and immigration issues. Only on a few occasions, my participants discussed class issues in the interviews. For example, one of my participants, Luna, mentioned that everyone in the community thinks that she is on social assistance because she is an immigrant. Also from my personal experience, one of my classmates asked me "are you on welfare, since you are an immigrant?" These assumptions about immigrants' low social economic status appear to be attributed to certain immigrant groups.

The lack of educational opportunities for immigrant women from minority groups means that they do not have the qualifications necessary to obtain jobs that would offer financial security and social advancement. Therefore, immigrant women are often marginalized due to their perceived “lower class” status, and their very real financial difficulties.

Reading the literature on this topic has forced me to consider the different sides of the argument about minority students that must be linked together to have a better understanding of the challenges facing minority groups. Most of the literature looked at either the failure of the educational system to meet the minority students’ needs or the specific challenges that face minority people. However, what is missing from the literature is a full understanding of the obstacles that affect access to education for immigrant women from racial minorities, and first-hand knowledge about these women’s specific experiences in the university setting. My research will attempt to shed light on the reasons for a lack of access to quality education in the university for minority immigrant women in order to highlight the current gaps in our university education system and to suggest ways to fix them. However, I do not lay all the responsibility for the challenges and barriers facing minority groups on the education system. There are many obstacles that exist for minorities even before they enroll in any educational program, including ethnic issues, sexist practices, culture shock, economic disadvantages, and language proficiency. I will consider these and other problems as they are relevant to my discussion. Performing this literature review has convinced me that more research into this vital area of society must be done for positive changes to occur in the Canadian education system.

### **Chapter Three: Research Method**

This study is an inquiry into developing an understanding and awareness of immigrant women's experiences within the Canadian postsecondary education system. The information-gathering stage of my research involved performing semi-structured interviews with five immigrant women from racial minority groups. The semi-structured interviews are "neither fully fixed nor fully free, and are perhaps best seen as flexible. These interviewers generally start with some defined questioning plan, but pursue a more conversational style of interview that may see questions answered in an order more natural to the flow of conversation. They may also start with a few defined questions but be ready to pursue any interesting tangents that may develop" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 164). My research participants were immigrants between the ages of 25 and 40, whose first language was not English. Having all immigrated to Nova Scotia within the past five years, they were from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. All the participants were interviewed once at either their home or their educational institution for between one and two hours each.

The educational experiences of these women and their integration into a new culture were considered in relation to the learning which took place in both their formal educational settings (such as a university) and in their informal settings (such as their home and their interactions with the Nova Scotian community). Learning about these women's personal experiences in their educational career was the primary focus of my research. I wanted to shed light on the dilemma of how to include minority students in both the classroom and the curriculum of our universities; for this reason, it was highly important to gather primary data from the students themselves in order to understand

their problems and their needs. In these semi-structured interviews I, as the interviewer was eliciting and receiving valuable information from the subject. Because of the nature of the interviews (which was semi-structured), and also because of my position as an immigrant woman interviewing other immigrant women, I found it very hard to be objective. Undoubtedly, my own experiences affected the questions I asked as well as the way I interpreted the data. This is why when the researcher is doing qualitative research his/her own insights and reflection are important assets to the research. Creswell (2005) states that the researcher must be reflexive. He explains, “reflexivity means that the researchers reflect on their own biases, values, and assumptions and actively write them into their research. This may involve discussing personal experiences and identifying how [researchers] collaborated with participants during phases of the project” (Creswell, 2005, p. 50).

My status as an immigrant female student was an asset for my interviews, as is evidenced by various critics’ emphasis on the value of women interviewing other women in feminist studies. Oakley (1981), for example, asserts that when the interviewer shares common experiences with the people being interviewed, the interviewees may feel more comfortable with revealing their personal experiences than they would with an interviewer who comes from a different gender and/or ethnic background. For instance, if the study concerns a group of people of colour, “[r]esearch by Black feminist scholars and activists has provided important insights” (Caldwell, 2001. p. 7). Moreover, an interviewer who possesses similar socio-demographic characteristics as the interviewees may be better equipped to understand the behavior of the interviewed people. It was important to me as a researcher to validate the interviewed women’s personal experiences

as women and as people (Caldwell, 2001). On the other hand, I have tried to remain aware of some of the incongruities between theory and practice. Even though I was dealing with people from the same gender and status (immigrants), I recognized that I did not necessarily share the same cultural, ethnic, or class experiences as these women, and my personal educational experiences often differed from their life-long learning processes. One of my major methodological decisions was to perform my interviews on an individual basis, rather than gathering focus groups together to obtain communal answers to my questions. As Oakley (1981) notes, “[i]nterviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets” (p. 30). Therefore, I feel that performing individual interviews gave me the best opportunity to get to the heart of the issues I wanted to explore in my research.

As with all forms of research, my research has involved methodological challenges that I had to resolve. One potential challenge facing my research was the difficulty of gaining access to minority groups for interviews. This can become especially problematic with groups that are studied repeatedly and resent the fact that they never receive any beneficial results from the studies performed (Romanow, 2005). In order to combat this problem, I gave my participants a clear explanation of the multiple purposes of the interview, and I ensured that they were aware there were no promises for positive changes or huge shifts in their lives as a direct result of the interview. Furthermore, cross-cultural studies such as mine must also recognize potential conflicts between the cultures being studied, relating to disagreements about the cultural norms and epistemologies of one another (Ahia, 1984).

Furthermore, power is a key aspect of the researcher-subject relationship, which is evidenced by the fact that “[m]ore recent analyses have exposed the power-based dynamic inherent in any and all research and have suggested that power is something to not only be aware of, but to negotiate in the research process” (Merriam, Lee, Kee, Ntseanr & Muhamed, 2001, p. 413). Researchers should try to use their power to provide a forum for minority groups from various cultural backgrounds to be heard, so that these minorities can feel that the research process is giving them an opportunity to gain power for themselves. This is one of the ways that the researcher can negotiate the power issues with the researched group throughout the research process. For example, it is important to keep reminding the research participants that the main purpose of the research is to give voice to the researched group, they are the main element of the research, and they are the people who will decide the success or the failure of the research. As Sparks notes, “[a]t the least, researchers have a responsibility to use their power to uncover the voices of difference, subjected knowledge, won at the frontlines through experience, and present those voices, perceptions and everyday realities that rub against the grain or challenge the pattern of knowability” (2002, p. 123). As well as understanding the interviewee’s feelings about being interviewed, I was also aware of the quality of the interactions between myself and the women whom I interviewed. “If the interviewee doesn’t believe he/she is being kindly and sympathetically treated by the interviewer, then he/she will not consent to be studied and will not come up with the desired information” (Oakley, 1981, p. 31).

My interview questions were clearly stated and were semi-structured according to a prepared protocol, in order to make the process of hearing, digesting, and linking ideas

together based on the answers given easier. I asked my participants to add to or clarify what they just said, when necessary. I was also aware of the length of the interview, so that it was not too long or too short, but fit somewhere between one and two hours. During my interviews, I took some written notes and used tape recordings for the purpose of data collection, since writing down everything that the interviewee says would be difficult, and it might also cause me to miss the nuances of emotion in the interviewee's voice. Finally, I decided to refer to the participants by their chosen pseudonyms to protect their anonymity throughout the research process.

I used interpretive analysis to analyze the data I collected from my interviews. I analyzed the data according to its relevance, significance, and meaning in relation to the questions I posed for my research. Using interpretive analysis means that I had to focus on my findings and description, including the search for contexts, underlying implications, patterns, and procedures. Rather than comparing quantity or statistical relationships between two or more categories, interpretive analysis offered more in-depth qualitative conclusions by focusing on concerns, words, and ideas, and testing and relating these concerns and issues to the notes I made during the interviews (Romanow, 2005).

In addition to the interpretive analysis, I also used the established literature on the topic to support my arguments and findings. I have used cross cultural research as a method by asking my interviewees, who are from different culture, about their own cultures and compare it with other cultures and with the main stream culture (the Canadian culture). As Park and Lahman note, “[r]espect for other people’s experiences and their interpretation of those experiences is fundamental in multicultural perspectives”

(2003, p. 376). This is why it was highly important while doing my analysis to respect the experiences of the interviewees and to make my interpretation of the data as accurate as possible. My research did not include any attempts to perform a cultural comparison with myself because “the evaluations are made in comparison with the known value system and patterns of behavior, derived from one’s own cultural background, causing doubts regarding the validity of interpretation and conclusions” (Shah, 2003, p. 564). However, I used Padilla’s (1994) theory that employing a comparative cross-cultural group study can give researchers knowledge about every group, and that it also allows researchers to utilize various methodologies, instruments, and procedures to collect data. For example, when each one of my participants talked about her own culture and how gender issues are constructed in her culture, that gave me knowledge about the culture of my participants which allowed me to make some comparisons between these cultures.

Since I was dealing with human beings in my research, I submitted an ethical review application to Mount Saint Vincent University that included a description of the sample of participants I had planned to interview and how I would collect data from them. My application was accepted by the university ethics review board.



## **Chapter Four: Cultural-construction of gender, racial and religious issues**

### **Gender**

Throughout history, the issues surrounding gender inequality have been developed, learned, and influenced by the way people think and behave. In most parts of the world, women experience social marginalization from the moment they are born. “The gendered nature of habits is a consequence of the different possibilities that women and men perceive are available to them. Habits are developed during childhood as a person grows to understand her or his place in the social structure” (Mickelson, 2003, p. 375). Female inequality has occurred throughout history, with one of the most extreme examples of this gender bias being the practice of burying female infants alive by the Quraish people in the period before Islam. This female infanticide was performed as an expression of anger for having a baby girl because the Quraish favored boys who could carry on the family name. Subsequently, when the holy Qura’n came, it contained an explicit message forbidding such action:

When the female (infant), Buried alive, is questioned for what crime she was killed (The Holy Qura’n, surt Al-Takwir, p. 81).

The fact that there was a need for such a message specifically forbidding female infanticide demonstrates that there were many attempts to erase the female gender from history, and even from life itself. Another recent example of such discrimination is happening with me right now as I am pregnant with my second child. My first child is a girl and I recently found out that I am pregnant with another girl. Whenever I tell a friend and/or family member male or female that I am having a girl they immediately

start saying what bad luck that is and how disappointing it is to have two girls one after each other.

These culturally-constructed perceptions of gender infiltrate the classroom, as was demonstrated in my interviews. One of my participants, Amal, told me:

I think I can not compete with the males in my class because they are males...maybe because I am a woman I can not have good marks as male classmates.

This statement indicates that Amal underestimates her achievements in the classroom merely because she is a woman. When I asked her whether she knew the marks for the male students in her class, she answered:

No, I do not know, but I think of course they have the highest marks in the class because they keep talking all the time and they seem to know everything more than any other women in the class.

As this quote demonstrates, some women still feel inferior to males in their educational institutions. The traditional gender stereotype sees men as dominant and intelligent, and women as weak and lacking in mental capacity. From personal experience, I once had a class in university in which there were 13 women and 2 men, and in one of the three hour classes I observed that those two men controlled the class discussion for one hour and thirty minutes. At the same time, it is important to recognize that what Amal felt was happening in the class might not reflect the reality of the situation. However, merely the fact that she feels this lack of confidence demonstrates that her belief in gender inequalities in the classroom is culturally constructed and/or influenced by the way she has been raised. This is especially relevant in light of the fact that “[t]oday researchers agree that gender is a socially constructed category that varies across communities and cultures” (Vitanova, 2004, p. 275).

Zena, another participant from Asia, told me about her feelings of inferiority in a male-dominated classroom:

Look, gender issues about men and women have been there all the time....even in history you can go and see how women were treated so there is no way to change that now...male are more clever than women.

This statement from Zena challenged my own beliefs, as I was trying to suggest that some gender discrimination has been eliminated from our contemporary education system. At the same time Zena's statement shows that "[d]iscrimination and oppression of women have become such a part of our culture we often do not see it" (Bierema, 2003, p. 7). When I look back on my interview with Zena, I realize that just talking about the problem of gender issues in our classrooms might be considered part of the solution. I feel that Zena discussed some issues about gender inequality that I was trying to deny still exist in our contemporary life. I thought that gender inequality exists just in history. Sometimes I feel that there is gender discrimination, but I thought it was just me who feels this way. For this reason, it was a highly useful and informative interview for my research. Also it is highly important to become aware of gender inequalities, and at the same time to try to question how these power relations are maintained, in order to critique and eventually reject them, especially since "[m]any women and men never experience this level of awareness, instead functioning in a state of gender unconsciousness where they neither question the status quo nor work to change it" (Bierema, 2003, p. 5).

Even the word "gender" is usually used to point to the female gender and not the male, although the two terms "feminine" and "masculine" are often described as specific gendered social constructions. Therefore, if women want to exist in a male-dominated world, they must be always different, or they must enter that world from a more difficult

door than that of the men. Such masculine supremacy continues to have a major impact on women's education today. Luna, another one of my participants, explained her experience of gender inequality in one of her classes:

I am really good in my major (mathematics). I was really confident of myself, with my ten years experience teaching math in my home country, but as I came to Canada I have to take a Canadian degree so I joined the university to take a Canadian certification.....a male in my class said to me one day that math was created only for men. This shocked me and made me feel bad and feel that I do not want to come to the university.

The question raised from Luna's experience with her male classmate is: what made this male student say what he said to Luna? And where did he get the assumption that math was for men only? Also Luna added,

I noticed that males always continue their study and they do masters and PhDs in math, but women usually don't continue their graduate study.

When I asked her why she thinks this occurs, she replied,

I think because women have to give birth and have the house work and their responsibilities at their houses prevent them from pursuing their education. Men usually more flexible by time and this stuff because all the responsibility on the women in her house and her children rely on their mothers mainly not their fathers.

Habits and culture have a major impact on students' actions and achievements in school. As Bierema explains, "[g]irls and boys, and women and men learn and reinforce these gendered power relations throughout their lives. The rules and roles accompanying gendered power relations are so ingrained in the culture that they are practically invisible, neither questioned nor challenged by most people" (Bierema, 2003, p. 5). This was evidenced in Zena's statement that gender discrimination is more obvious in China than in Canada:

In China, women are more dominated by the men, and in the classroom the teacher will give all the attention to the male. But, in Canada, educators are trying to give the attention to both of us, men and women... so educators are really good in Canada, as they give attention to both genders, not like China. Maybe gender inequalities are still there, but I can tell you in Canada is better than China...in China, it is obvious that people treat women different than men, even in the classrooms.

This positive account of Canadian classrooms might be contrasted against a much different experience related by Nazia, another one of my participants:

I feel that my efforts in any work I do is not really appreciated because I am a woman, especially when I was in the community college.

When I asked Nazia if she had experienced different treatment because of her gender at the university level, she replied:

I feel the higher level of education you get, the better our position as women will be. I am now more aware that I have to discuss gender issues in class and to feel free to say what I think.

Developing gender awareness is one of the main issues that most of the women I interviewed talked about, and they all agreed that gender inequality practices are taking different forms in the Canadian education system. In their home countries, they have been learning about and challenging the gender discrimination practices that are occurring in most of the educational forums. In Canada, the women share the positive opinion that they can talk openly about gender inequality, and they know they will have the support of their facilitators. At the university level, students work independently from the teachers, often in groups with their peers. This is considered a crucial aspect of developing the female students' awareness of gender inequality, since "[t]o become gender conscious begins with learning. A variety of learning experiences can result in

gender awareness, including formal, informal and experiential learning, critical reflection and connected knowing” (Bierema, 2003, p. 5).

Nora told me that participating in a research project for and about immigrant women at her university made her feel encouraged, as she saw other women who shared the same experiences with her, such as being a foreign student, acquiring the English language, and being a female. Nora explained that

Such group of women gathering helped me to understand and address some issues I faced, but I could not find an explanation to it. This helped me to see things differently, since I feel that I have some people who face what I faced in life and in education.

“Knowledge about gendered power relations is not enough and must be accompanied by action if change is to occur. Gender consciousness was most powerful in the stories told when it was linked with action” (Bierema, 2003, p. 6).

In my research, I noticed that women often develop their identities through educational experiences. Despite the numerous obstacles they face during their educational journey, the participants considered education as a safe practice that could guarantee a successful future. “Education is often a space which enables women, both individually and collectively, to take stock of their lives and reflect upon their identity/ies- a biographical reflection- developing and creating a transformatory life project” (Merrill, 2005, p. 48). Luna’s experiences reflect these statements:

The best thing I did since I arrived in Canada is my education at the university now. I think after finishing my degree I will have a good future to me and my kids.

Also, Amal fully believed in the education she was pursuing and said:

Since I came to Canada I was confused what I have to do, and my husband is not working. I have a Bachelor of Science from back home, but here in Canada they

did not accept it and I have to do my credential, so I told myself I better go do a higher education and get a Canadian degree to help me find a good job.

However, Amal also added that one problem she faces is that her teachers often underestimate her achievements. She got this sense from her first day at university; as she explained, “I do not know if they think that I can not do really well because I am a woman or because this is my second language biased.”

After talking with these women from different cultures and different geographic locations, I realized that each one of them has a different perspective regarding gender issues, which confirmed my belief that gender issues are culturally constructed. I am also aware that some issues of womanhood cross racial and ethnic boundaries, such as motherhood; however, each of my interviewees based her understanding of gender inequality in academia on her own cultural values and experiences.

Nora brought up an interesting point which both agrees and clashes with Zena’s comment about Canada being a more inclusive environment for both women and men.

Nora explains:

In Africa, you can see that women are more oppressed than men in academy and in the workplace, but that does not mean that in Canada it is much better because gender discrimination is there, but people do not like to admit it and say it.

Nora’s point made me question myself by asking: are Canadians so ignorant to sexist oppression occurring daily that Canadians cannot see it and label it? This idea is suggested by Bierema’s statement that “[d]iscrimination and oppression of women has become such a part of our culture we often do not see it” (Bierema, 2003, p. 7). Thus, education is the key factor to make sexism visible to all people. “Education will only empower people if it enables them to act collectively on their own reality in order to change it; and women’s education will only be relevant and useful in this process if it

derives its legitimacy, has its roots and exists in relation to groups and movements of women in ways that make a difference to their lives” (Thompson, 2000, p. 103). The educational settings are normally spaces where students can express themselves both independently and communally; therefore, they are places to discuss discrimination of all forms openly.

Gender bias is a serious issue in the educational system, and from my experience at the university, teachers are motivated to use equitable teaching philosophies, which play a major role in the classrooms and which affect students’ interactions and emotions. Mickelson (2003) explains that “[t]o be sure, gender gaps have been narrowed considerably since the 1970s. But in the past two decades, gender patterns of achievement have changed remarkably little” (p.373). It is also important to recognize that the bias that continues to favor male students may in fact make some men feel uncomfortable, especially those who do not like to be the centre of attention; this is what one of my male class colleagues mentioned to me in one of our classes. As well, for some females the lack of attention given to them may be unnoticed or even preferred because some women do not like to be the centre of attention in the class, as some of my participants mentioned.

One of the most insidious problems with gender discrimination in educational institutions is that it often exists even before students participate in the classroom. As Sadker (2001) mentions, women are still admitted to courses of study and careers that are gender-segregated; women often prefer majors in English, French, and drama, while men frequently occupy disciplines like computer science and engineering. Furthermore, even



though half the medical and law students are females, women still remain in a lower pay bracket than their male colleagues (Sadker, 2001).

Another problem is that some women do not know how to empower themselves because this is different than what they have been learning their whole lives, and this uncertainty contributes to some of the conflicts between the homeplace and life in society. Whether consciously or subconsciously, many women are trained by society and the homeplace to believe that males are dominant. At the same time, other women have been “raising the consciousness of women to their social condition, and then changing the barriers that limited them to a gender stratified system” (Lourde, Jordan, Patai, Smith, Frye, Phelan, Rupp, Carby, & Rich, 2001, p. 57). However, as my interviews demonstrated, females often underestimate themselves because of their belief that they cannot be successful in the field of education because of their sex and therefore that they cannot compete in the male world. For example, Nazia, Luna, and Amal explained their feelings of inferiority to men. As they said, men are more intelligent, make better contribution to class discussions, and they are more capable at certain subjects. “Gender-biased attitudes become a self-fulfilling prophecy, strengthened by the fact that many girls attribute their success as due to luck, which is fickle, while many boys attribute theirs to ability, which is reliable, this helps to explain the lower self-confidence, despite higher performance of many girls in school” (Sanders, 1997, p. 1). Confirming this point, Amal told me that

I think the males in most of my class are excellent. They made an interesting point to the class discussions, and they always have a lot of experiences and information that add to the group’s activities. I think men seem to have a lot of good knowledge and more experiences than my female classmates.

Since Amal's beliefs about the superiority of her male colleagues in the classrooms might be affected by her cultural and social upbringing, these beliefs have largely defined Amal's learning processes. However, it is not only the cultural background that may affect a student's learning processes, but also the "race and gender of learners might influence the learning environment" (Brown, 2000, p. 276). Gender, race, and cultural backgrounds form the backdrop of all our life experiences; this is why it is crucial for the educators to know the student's background to try to interact with him or her in a way that eases the often-frictional social interactions between people and groups.

### **Homeplace and Education**

As mentioned earlier, any discussion of the struggles faced by minority women in their lifelong learning processes should include discussion about the impact of the domestic realm. Gouthro (2000) mentions that "[t]he homeplace is the first learning site that can serve to empower or silence women, having long-lasting effect and profound effect on their later learning experiences" (p. 66). Also the multiple interactions in the women's life have a enormous effect on the women's education. As Johnson-Bailey (2004) states "[v]ariables such as marriage, children, past successful school participation and family backgrounds are reported in the literature on women in higher and continuing education as strong indicators of future school participation" (p.338). From my own experience, I can strongly agree that the homeplace often has the most powerful impact on women's educational achievements. This is especially true for women in minority groups, who must face the gap, both in a physical and a psychological sense, between their homes, the educational sites, and the whole society. The impact of the homeplace

was a key aspect of my participants' educational journeys, as all of them are married and have children. Most of the participants said that their families were supportive of their education, but at the same time, their domestic responsibilities, finding time and energy for their family, and school responsibilities were a constant challenge for women while they were studying. Nazia mentioned that her family was helpful, but that does not mean that she did not struggle to fulfill all her duties for her children. As she said,

My husband and my parents really like the idea that I am studying here in Canada; they are proud of me, but as I have two children I am really busy with them and I cannot always study when I want to. Also, if my husband came and did not find me preparing his meal he will not like it.

Furthermore, Amal who has two children, said that

My family is supportive only by talk, but actually when it comes to action; for example, if I need some help from my husband with the house work he will not really help me. Also, I have to do all my school work when my children are sleeping, which means I have a lot of disturbance when I want to study.

Amal also mentioned that she must do all her school reading at night when her husband sleeps to avoid problems. She added that her husband pushed her to do this degree and when she began her degree, he kept asking her to do more housework and cooking. I realized that immigrant women were encouraged by their families to have a better education in the new country, but they often did not receive the long-term support they were expecting and required from their families, especially from their spouses. Luna said this about her husband

He supported me all the way when I applied and when I registered but when I wanted full load courses he refused, and he pushed me to take only part time.

Sometimes the homeplace can be considered as a site of major struggles for immigrant women, since sometimes husbands can push their wives to do things against their will. In

Luna's case, her husband was supportive, but when she planned to take courses full-time, her husband thought of himself, because he realized that her schooling would limit her commitment to him and to her domestic duties. "Female students are more likely than male students to perceive disconnection and alienation from university" (Gouthro & Grace, 2000, p. 11). Therefore, women's complex social interactions in their homeplace often mean that they must make a choice between their male partners or their studies, which thereby limits their effective participation in the educational system.

Amal said that although the application steps were too long, the process was not quite as difficult for her. Her main problem was that she was overwhelmed about how committed she had to be while in school:

Maybe the application steps were long and it seemed too difficult because of the idea of making this big commitment to the school, with having children and all the house commitments.

Luna who has four children said she was challenged to give both attention to her children and her study. She explains

It is hard to study while you have kids; my children go to school but even when they are at school they need me. While they are at school I need to do the house work and to prepare meal for them. And when they are back from school I need to stay with them to help them with their homework and to talk with them and solve their problems. So I do not know how I will do this or continue this, between my study and my home.

Most of the women in this study mentioned that at certain points in their educational career, they were unsure about whether they wanted to, or could continue with their chosen program. Also, this termination may happen in cases where English is their second language, and when they do not find the required encouragement they were looking for from their school. Conversely, "the retention themes again are influenced by

the structural barriers associated with race - the particular location of these women in the larger society” (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 339).

The complex inter-relationship between gender, race and religion has positioned some of the immigrant women of colour in a place where they must make certain choices according to social norms. What I mean by making certain choices is when the immigrant women of racial minority groups have to; for example, choose the degree they want to pursue, the area they must live in to feel secure, and the way they have to look in front of other people in order to be accepted. My participants provide examples of how their “choices” are impacted by certain cultural expectations. For instance, Luna said,

When I chose the degree I am doing, I thought about religious factors when I want to work in the future. As I do not want to work with men, so I said to myself I will study something [that] will qualify me to be a teacher; then, I can teach in all-girl schools.

Nora explains,

When I choose my classes, I try to avoid them to be at night, as in my culture it is not really preferable for a woman to stay out of her house at night, so I try to be done maximum at 7 pm.

Nora’s comment is supported by Skilton-Sylverster’s (2002) study on Cambodian women’s participation in the ESL programs. She found that “the fact that the class meet from 7 to 9 p.m. made it much more difficult for those who were mothers to attend” (p. 20). In addition, many educational programs assume that their female students are flexible, ignoring that many of them are mothers who have many family commitments and responsibilities.

## **The Role of Feminism**

Mojab and Gorman (2001) note that “the stunning diversity of feminism is superficial,” since at the root of all varieties of feminism is “the question of patriarchy and how to get rid of it” (p. 287). This idea allowed me to start thinking critically about feminism and to identify the many complex social interactions that work along side the sexism that exists in both the educational system and society generally. By accepting this responsibility as adult educators, we are working towards social change and social justice. Understanding the various dimensions of power and how it operates allows us to deal with problematic issues in a way that will eventually help people to overcome the issue of gender equalities. In order to combat this problem, feminist pedagogy should begin with critical reflection on the struggles faced by women in minority groups throughout their lifelong learning process.

In addition, women today are trying to challenge the practices of gender inequality by taking on more roles in life and in education. Women are trying to take lessons from other women who have been oppressed. To support this point from the literature, Chambers-Gordon (2001) provides an example about a Jamaican woman who became more aware of her need to change things from the inside by taking on a different role than the traditional female role. She said, “[g]rowing up and watching these women, among them my mother and grandmother, overcome obstacles in their daily lives has helped me be a better woman. For me, the ability to persevere comes from learning that it does not matter what society throws at me, there are ways to ‘free’” (Chambers-Gordon, 2001, p.56). For example, from my personal experience growing in the Middle East watching how some women are oppressed, and how they do not have any voice in

their own homes and community helped me to fight to have a better position in my community. Some women in the Middle East cannot continue their education. Simply because they are women, they have to stay home and get married. I know that due to female initiative, women's voices and their participation in education and in the workplace have been increasing much more than a few decades ago. This is because people have become more aware of this problem which is considered as a major step to overcome gender barriers. "In sum, diversity is a central value that mandates that the feminist commitment to social action be pursued on multiple fronts; gender is a complex multilayered construct; differences are not deficiencies; and feminists strive for empowerment while at the same time valuing connection and relationships" (Russo & Vaz, 2001, p. 285). Through working together in our community, we can enhance our way of thinking, and increase our acceptance of each other.

### **Racial and Religious Factors**

Brand and Sri Bhaggiyaddattaof (1985) defined racism as a "system of ideas, laws, practices that regulate the presence, aspiration, actions, and livelihood of non-white people in Canada" (p. 3). Women in minority groups; especially minority women of color often share a consciousness of oppression and racism because of the challenges they face in the existing educational structures in their community.

It is not easy for women from different cultures and/or different ethnic backgrounds to cross barriers and to develop new ways of living that conform to the demands of the majority community in which they live. "Racial disparities and discrimination continue to pose barriers to equal opportunities in key social and economic

areas including education” (Dabady, 2003, p. 1048). In spite of the common issues that women share, the female community is still dominated by majorities in the classrooms (i.e. white middle-class), and racial discrimination continues to exist in the classroom. “Consciously or subconsciously, race has been frequently been used as a variable to support, condone, or justify racist attitudes” (Ward, 2003, p. 3). Nora, a graduate student in Education told me about the issue of racism in the classroom as she sees it:

In my degree, all of us are studying about how to deal with race and racism, but unfortunately we still have it, and I feel that I am not really accepted in my institute because I am an immigrant from a non-white race.

Women from minority groups must deal with difficult questions on a daily basis, including: from whom are they different and how they are the same? Do people *need* to be the same? Even if everyone had the same race, same culture, same religion, and same sexual practice, would we all then be treated equally? “Why can’t we all just be human? Make different reality disappear” (Lourde, et al, 2001, p.5). As Amal expressed in my interview with her,

I know that I am from a different country...and different religion. But I hope that Canadian people will give me the chance to know me better and not to judge me because of my skin or my Hija’ab (Veil).

The Veil is a key symbol of religious belief, and “refers to the clothing which covers and conceals the body from head to ankles, with the exception of the face, hands and feet” (Hoodfar, 1993, p. 3). There is currently much controversy surrounding the right to wear the Veil, as was evidenced by a recent ruling at Imperial College, University of London, UK, that banned the wearing of “hoodies” or Hija’abs on campus for security reasons, which led to protests by students about religious rights. Luna explained that,

My classmates give me looks because of my Hija’ab, they keep ignoring me and I can tell from the look in their eyes that they are not really comfortable of



what I am wearing on my head. But my professors are different they are so acceptable and treating me good, you know they are educated people.

People have to learn how to accept each other the way they are; every human has the right to practice the religion he or she chooses, and to dress the way he or she likes. At the same time, the general perception regarding Muslim women who wear the Hija'ab have to shift in order to erase discrimination; people should not look at what is on these women's heads, but rather they have to look at what is inside these women's minds and try to understand them.

Both Amal and Nora mentioned how hard was it for them to obtain university acceptance to pursue a graduate education. Amal referred to all the challenges to her Hija'ab and the color of her skin, while Nora referred specifically to the language issues she faced. As Amal explained,

When I applied to the university at the beginning they did not approve my application to continue my graduate studies. Because I could not find work with my Bachelor degree in science, they told me I had to do my credential and that needs a lot of time and money to do, and I have children I cannot spend a long time doing my credential without working. So, I applied to the university I am in now, but they said I have to go and do a course in English so they can guarantee that my English is good. So, I went and took a course in English for academic purposes at the community college, but when I come back they asked me to do another course or I have to prove for them that I did all my studies in English and it was very hard to bring that from the Middle East. Eventually, I did that but also at the administration office, they were not treating me good; even after I gave them all the papers, I had to write a letter to the Dean explaining to him the situation. Then I had the acceptance and I think they gave me this trouble not because of the normal procedures; it is because I am a foreigner, non-white, and I wear a veil.

Nora had a similar experience as Amal, as she told me:

I applied to the university and they gave me hard time to accept my application they asked me to do an English course although I already have a Master's from my home country in science. And I did my Master's in Science using English language, because the university I graduated from in Sudan is related to Michigan

University in the USA, and I am sure the problem was not my English; it was me [being] an African student.

Two other participants had the same experience with the administration office in their university, and both of them walked out of this experience with the same certainty that they had not been accepted because of their race and/or their religion. Furthermore, all of my participants assured me that they had to go back to school to educate themselves more so they could fit with the mainstream. They needed a Canadian credential so that their skills could be recognized in the job market in order to work in Canadian institutions and organizations.

Three of my participants are in graduate school, and they found that acceptance into the school was a major obstacle, which they believe was partly due to the color of their skin. Conversely, for “white women or the ‘generic women’ in graduate school, problems of access are not presented as a major theme” (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 336). Nora, one of the students in graduate school, told me that her acceptance was not easy to achieve:

I had many problems with the admission office; before I got the acceptance they kept asking me for papers and papers, and every time I give the paper they asked for they ask me for something else. Until all their excuses finished and they gave me the acceptance.

Many Black women feel that not only have they been excluded from the curriculum, but that their successes have also been largely ignored (Aiken, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2001). Such prejudicial treatment often means that women from racial minorities may develop sensitivity to education; for example, they will quit the educational program, while others will struggle for the opportunities for lifelong learning. However, if Black women are included in the learning process, and have had their success and achievement

recognized, entirely different results often occur. For example, “women frequently acquire a sense of themselves when studying a book such as *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, since they recognize how, historically, Black Women have come through adversity and drawn on inner strength which they possess” (Beryl, 1995, p. 159). Providing curriculum that reflects the experiences of the minority women in education will encourage their effective involvement and in turn boost their educational achievements. This was suggested by some of my participants, who also mentioned that having professors and classmates who look like them and/or share the same status and similar experiences as them can help them to feel a sense of belonging in their school. In few cases participants noted that they were encouraged when given opportunity to share their experiences associated with their race, gender, and immigration status. Nazia told me that,

We have a professor in the university who is from [another country] but she has an accent and she has black hair and I really like her. Also, [by seeing her teach] I feel that some day there is chance for me to be a professor here in Canada.

Similarly, when I taught ESL at the Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre last year, all the students told me that they felt comfortable about finding an immigrant teacher who has shared their experiences and feelings. One of the students who had a literacy problem showed an improvement in her English that everybody at the Centre noticed, simply because she was felt relaxed and secure having me, an immigrant, as her teacher. Overall, I am certain that I, as an immigrant ESL teacher had a great influence on these immigrant students as I was able to draw on my own personal experiences, and to understand a methodology that best suited each of these immigrants. Furthermore, the students themselves expressed this as their feeling to me. Alanis (2000) notes that

“[e]ffective teachers know how to capture the potential of the positive factors and diminish the impact of the negative factors that affect students’ performance” (p. 216).

## **Chapter Five: What does it mean to be an immigrant woman student?**

My interviewees were concerned about the gender inequality and racial and religious discrimination that they faced in their educational environments. However, their main concern was an issue connected to, yet also separate from, these other problems: namely, their status as immigrants. Amal told me that although she was proud of her accomplishments in Canada,

When I was back home, I used to be the first student in all the subjects, and all my male colleagues were jealous that a female did better than they did. Even all my teachers were proud of me, and they kept telling all the other girls how they should follow my steps, but in Canada, because this is a new country, even when I do well I still feel inferior to other students.

Over the centuries, many families and individuals have immigrated to Canada from all over the globe. Coming from different cultures and religions, they often speak a variety of languages. Their reasons for immigrating vary; some have come to escape war or political oppression, while others come to join family members and to get work in a better environment. Their challenge is to immerse themselves into an already richly diverse population. Regardless of their reasons for immigration, most newcomers strive to succeed in their new home, but their resettlement odyssey is full of challenges and barriers. In the following section I will discuss English proficiency concerns, experiences in the classrooms, discrimination, family and community support, concerns about children, and perceptions of others.

### **English Proficiency Concerns**

Through my interviews with immigrant women, I was able to examine the painful challenges and dilemmas faced by immigrant women of racial minority groups in the

Nova Scotia post-secondary context, as they go through the process of adapting to the new culture and the “language shock” caused by having to learn English. Learning English is considered to be a vital element of immigrants’ successful transition to a new land, since “[t]he goal of becoming fluent English speakers is embraced by most newcomers who recognize that learning English is fundamental requirement for acceptance in an English dominant world” (Olsen, 2000, p. 2). Non-English-speaking immigrants face more challenges than those who speak English, and their resettlement experiences are often difficult. As Olsen (2000) notes, “[i]mmigrants are surprised and often discouraged by the contradictory pressures to become English speaking and the many roadblocks and barriers they discover to developing that proficiency”(p. 2). Therefore, understanding the language of a new country can give power to immigrants and make their experiences more positive, while having no knowledge of English can prove to be a major blockade for immigrants to successfully integrate themselves into their new environment.

Many of my participants agreed that the opportunities for their children to access the Canadian community are much greater than for themselves. Of her children’s chances of success in Canada, Luna said:

The opportunity for our children to learn the English language is better than us the adults. Our children will be admitted to schools quickly, so they will be in the middle of the stream right away. They can learn the English immediately and they can take the right accent too from their Canadian colleagues and teachers. But, for us as adults, we do not have any chance from that. We have to have some English before we are allowed to communicate with people in the community. But, if they took us like what they did with our children and accept us for example in the university we will learn quickly and easier than the way it is now.

This statement seems to be supported by the fact that there are some educated immigrant women who barely know academic English, even though their education was based in English. However, using English in Canada is different than using it in their home countries. Sometimes the immigrant women manage to learn the English language quickly, while others face many obstacles. I believe it is hard for some well-educated women to learn the second language because of their age and the other obstacles that they often face in their educational journeys. When I was teaching in The Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre, most women mentioned this point to me.

It is often challenging for many immigrant women to cope with the Canadian mainstream, especially if they are students and struggling with English as a second language. People from different cultures are usually confused by other people's reactions toward them; for example, Nora told me:

Sometimes I think Canadian people do not understand what I want to say, as I have to keep repeating what I am saying more than one time, maybe because of my language or maybe they are busy thinking of the veil that I am wearing.

Nora provoked my thinking and made me think about some of the incidents that have happened to me personally, which I often find difficult to understand. For example, when I am at the bank or in the university, and I am talking with one of the people there about my account or my status in the institution, they will suddenly stop talking and ask me where I am from. That question is often followed by them saying, "since you came in, I have been wondering where you could be from...and what language you speak." Such responses from people in my community shock me because I am a Canadian citizen now. As a matter of fact, "[p]eople of colour are not included in Canada's self-image.

Canadians perceive their country as one of white settlers, and quite often look on people of colour as strangers and outsiders” (Dhruvarajan, 2002, p. 99).

One of the most important aspects of overcoming some of the barriers that confront immigrant women is learning the official language of the country to which they move, such as English or French in Canada. As Paulo Freire says in Jackson’s (1997) article, immigrant women can achieve a sense of identity through language. Among Halifax women who immigrated to Canada between 1991 and 1996, 90% could speak English and/or French. On the other hand, among men the figure was 60%. The research indicated that about 70% of those women who immigrated between 1981 and 1990 used English in their home country (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000). Despite the fact that many immigrants speak English; the vast majorities of those who do not speak English do not have access to English language programs that teach English as a Second Language (ESL). This is why Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has established and continues to develop learning sites where immigrants and refugees can enroll to learn the English language and/or to enhance the language skills of those who already know the basics of the English language (Citizenship and immigration Canada, 2000).

Although achieving a sense of identity can help immigrant and refugee women to seek out opportunities to learn the English language, they still face many barriers to achieving their goals. Amal mentioned that when she first came to Canada, she faced problems such as unfamiliar location of classes where the educational programs are held. Many institutions are located outside of the immigrant women’s local neighborhoods, and they can be difficult to reach due to both financial and time constraints. In addition, some of the schedules of these classes conflict with the women’s family responsibilities as



mothers and wives. All of my interview subjects told me that they struggled to find a balance between responsibilities to their children and their classes. Amal said:

Most of my classes were at night and I did not know what I am going to do with my children as nobody could baby-sit for me. So, with some neighbors and my husband's help, I managed to attend my classes, but it was really hard.

All the previous challenges and boundaries for immigrant women limit not only their effective participation in education, but also their social mobility. Boyd (1990) explains that "this problem has large dimensions. In Canada, for instance, census figures for the past two decades have shown the population of women who speak no English at all double that of men, even though almost equal proportions of men and women who do not speak English enter the country each year as immigrants"(Boyd, 1990, cited in Cumming, 1992, p. 2). The problem is that even when immigrant women register for an English course, there is no guarantee that this course will be valued equally by all institutions as a pre-requisite for admission. For example, when Amal and Nora applied for their graduate study, the university asked them for proof of their English language achievement; both of them had taken a course called "English for Academic Purposes" at the local community college. However, the university did not approve this course, as Amal told me:

The administration office gave me a hard time. They did not approve the course English for Academic Purposes as an English certificate, although I got A+ on that course, and they put the language as the main reason of rejecting my application the first time.

Immigrant and refugee women who have access to meaningful education may end up with employment, since most ESL classes such as English for Academic Purposes aim to make immigrant women independent by giving them proper credentials to obtain a job and/or to further their education. However, on some occasions, learning the language and

the cultural values through these courses has actually disempowered immigrant women in certain educational settings, as the cultural values for these women are excluded from the curriculum. Alfred (2003) suggests that, in order to combat this problem, “[a]nalyzing women’s experiences must take into account how cultural values are reinforced within the context of the learning or discourse community” (Alfred, 2003, p. 246). Some ESL programs plan to “decrease depending upon public monies by getting refugees and immigrants employed as quickly as possible” (McSpadden, 1998, p. 158). Unfortunately, the education that immigrants receive in such settings is often limited. The problem with this approach is that immigrants and refugee women should not only be taught how to be economically independent as if there are no future training or education possibilities for them beyond the course in which they are enrolled. If immigrant and refugee women are not encouraged to pursue their education and occupational goals, they will inevitably fail in their resettlement in the long run because they will be unable to obtain the education they need to achieve social mobility.

ESL teachers must also be able to deal properly with women who have literacy problems, as they often cannot read and write in their native language in the first place. Mezirow (1996) defines literacy as “that aspect of the learning process by which the learner develops his or her ability to use printed word to make meaning. By this definition, literacy becomes an integral element of lifelong learning” (p. 3). Some immigrant and refugee women have no educational experience at all, while others may have had a negative previous experience in education due to discrimination because of their skin color and/or their gender. Each of these experiences can discourage their participation in education and in learning the English language. At the same time, some

immigrants and refugee women are conscious of their need to learn English in a classroom, as it is a good opportunity for them to practice the English language. “Although there is a significant agreement that language learners develop communicative competence primarily outside of the classroom by using language in authentic communication, there is also good reason to look inside the classroom, particularly when adult immigrant learners’ primary opportunity to use English in the classroom” (Sylvester, 2002, p. 13).

Nazia told me about her English language experiences, and that she is aware that she needs to learn more and more:

I know that my English may not satisfy my professors and many people in the community, but I am working on it and I want to develop it more and more but I need some time, I think.

Nazia’s comment highlights one of the most important elements of successful resettlement into English-speaking countries for immigrant women; they must realize that they need to keep working on their English in order to constantly improve it. One of the ESL teachers in my community told me that some immigrant women will reach a level with their English which satisfies them, and they will not work on it anymore to improve it. As a result, their English level will remain the same for a while, and they will not continue to improve their vocabulary and their accent. Therefore, immigrant women must be aware of the need to constantly work on their English, even while they are at school doing a professional degree.

Most of the participants said that one of the main causes for the barriers they face is not only their language problems, but their accent. This verbal cue tells all the people around them immediately that they are strangers from other countries. “As foreigners

move across geographic and linguistic boundaries, they cross emotional borders as well. When the participants arrived in their host country, they found that they were not able to participate fully in the dominant language of the new environment” (Vitanova, 2004, p. 267). Nora and Luna told me that every time they speak in the class, everybody asks them to repeat themselves. This particularly upset these two participants and made them feel uncomfortable during the class lessons, which has resulted in them being more silent during discussions. Amal also said that

I feel really embarrassed with my accent, although I will give myself 80% clear accent, but still there are people who do not understand me, so I do not know if I will do well or not in my school. And I do not know if they really do not understand me or they are showing me that to let me feel embarrassed.

Amal’s feeling that other people remain ignorant to her suffering and the struggles she faces in her new home, added to her language difficulties, contributed to her challenges and placed new barriers in front of her in her educational environment.

Immigrant women often feel bound by their traditional roles, which prevent them from more extensive socialization and cultural adaptation. Over and above the immigrant women’s fears of facing the outside world, which prevents them from engaging with the new culture, they also occasionally fear the people they live with, which hinder their communication with others. This is what most of my participants mentioned, as they feel that they are not welcome and native people look at them as they are outsiders. Due to immigrant women’s fears, they tend to socialize with people from the same culture and/or those who speak the same language. Nora and Luna mentioned that their kids are doing better than them with regards to the language issues, as their children socialize more with native Canadians, and they do not have the fear their mothers have when they speak the English language.

## **Experiences in the Classroom**

Barriers face immigrant women in all life arenas, as they face problems not only within the general community, but also within the education system itself. A major problem facing immigrant women is the lack of the inclusive language in the curriculum, which I think again it is a language problem. Normally, immigrants are not familiar with the language that is used by educators in the classroom, and this can be a major obstacle for immigrants to reach their full learning potential. Zena said that

Most of the time I listen, especially at the beginning of my degree, because I want to know how the class is going on here in Canada and I want to know what the professor wants exactly from us, so I will not do something wrong.

In a related discussion, Amal mentioned how the classroom structure in Canada is different than the classes she was used to in her home country:

At the beginning, I was not sure what I have to do. Here all the classes almost depend on the group discussion, which is something I am not used to. But after a while, I got used to that and I really like it. There is something I do not really feel comfortable with is that my teachers usually forget that I am not familiar with everything in the Canadian culture so I have to keep asking them about some issues that arise in class.

My personal experience supports Amal's statement about feeling out of place in the classroom. In graduate school, I took a course called, "Reading and Teaching Popular Culture." The course challenged me throughout the whole semester as it was all about popular culture and soap operas with which I was totally unfamiliar. To seek new ways of learning is helpful and important for the immigrant women; at the same time, the immigrant women's experiences should be recognized and dealt with by educators in a fashion that makes learning adaptable to one's lifestyle. One way to adapt learning to immigrant culture is suggested by Warrine's (2004) study which was about the challenges of the refugee women in the classrooms where English is the second language.

The two refugee women claim that educators must address issues and questions for immigrant and refugee women who do not speak the national language. Moreover, the design of the methods for teaching immigrants and refugees has to connect the minority students' own experiences with the teaching strategy. Increasing the sensitivity and sensibility of educators who deal with minorities may help to create a safe environment for minority students, which will in turn empower them in their lives.

Fear about the new culture is considered to be the main element that immigrant women struggle to overcome. Immigrant women need a professional help from the whole community to conquer their fears. Nazia told me that a positive social environment in the classroom has helped her to overcome her own anxieties about not belonging:

I learn from group work in the class, as my classmates share with me their experiences. Also, the support I get from my professors helps me a lot.

Similarly, Luna told me:

I am so happy to be back in the university; I love math and all the time when I see immigrant women from my culture studying with me I feel really happy, especially when the teachers say we have some students from outside Canada welcome them, that make feel happy.

Women from any minority group can become engaged in community progress through taking part in a culturally diverse learning group, as such groups can help and encourage women to participate in a more equal society (Dickinson, 2003).

Creating safe and secure environments for minority women will help develop the women's mutual learning network and allow them to become fully productive members of their society who possess unique identities. "Geary (1998) noted three components to successful collaborative learning. These include a positive learning

environment to reduce fear and increase students' willingness to take risks, evidence of developed social skills among participants, and some type of structure provided to the group" (Alfred, 2003, p. 256). The previous numerous challenges in the lives of immigrant women tend to be discouraging to the women's achievement of a particular identity in their new home. This makes it even harder for adult educators to provide help and encourage minority women to achieve a unique identity in the middle of the mainstream culture. Moreover, "[i]dentity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside representation" (James & Shadd, 2001, p. 2).

## **Discrimination**

Recently, while I was writing this thesis in the university library, my immigrant friend who was sitting beside me in front of the library computers came to ask me a question regarding an article. A lady who was sitting beside us looked at us and said "Speak English; we are not in a private place here." Surprised, I looked at her and said, "Excuse me; she is talking to me." The woman replied, "Yes, I know and I am saying both of you have to speak English." I was shocked by her statement, but even more so as she got up to leave and began saying words which I did not understand, but which were obviously curses directed at me and my friend. Then, she gave us the "finger" before she left. So, I said to myself that I have to tell her something so I said, "Remember that we are in the university library," but she turned back only to give me the

“finger” for the second time. My friend and I were so frustrated that we reported the incident to the librarian, but by then the woman was gone. She had managed to get away with what she did to us. The librarian told us there was no reason for her to perform such an action, and that she thought it was discrimination, since the student had demanded that we speak English. From this incident, I fully realized that “[r]acism and discrimination in Canada can be found in all areas of life” (Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991, p. 175). In addition, my friend thinks that what happened was a racist action in response to her wearing the hijab (veil). This occurrence made me feel unsafe and discriminated against within the walls of my own university. It made me wonder if the student would have treated me the same way if I was white and blond like her, or whether her treatment arose merely from the fact that I am an immigrant. This incident affected me so much that it made me not want to come to the library again. It also made me wonder: if I do not feel safe and secure in a place like the library, where on campus am I going to find safety?

As my own experience demonstrates, discrimination can happen anywhere. Even Tim Horton’s coffee shop is a place where some immigrants can find themselves not being accepted, as I discovered last year when I was teaching at the Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre. One of my students mentioned that she loves coffee and always passed by Tim Horton’s, but that she never went inside, even though she has been in Canada for three years. So, I decided to have one of our classes at a local Tim Horton’s, where it would be a good chance to overcome some of the students’ fears of facing the outside community. I assumed that going to Tim Horton’s would have a positive effect on the students and that they would be very happy having their ESL class while drinking coffee. I did not anticipate any challenges from this experience; however, one of my students



who was from Somalia asked me to give her order. After she had returned to her seat, one of the other customers asked me, “I am wondering where this lady is from?” I told him that she is from Somalia. He then gave a sharp remark by saying that, “she must be glad that she is in Canada now drinking coffee in Tim Horton’s. I do not know why there are a lot of *those* people in Nova Scotia these days.” I felt hurt by such discrimination on behalf of my student. At the same time, this incident allowed me to further develop my understanding about the discrimination that students face in their everyday life which discourages their participation in education. This incident challenged me, as it made me wonder what would have happened if my student had heard what the customer said, and how that would have affected her learning process. If she had heard what he said, then she might have stayed home, and may not have showed up again to learn English. However, I felt it was my responsibility to encourage students to keep learning and interacting with the community in spite of the existence of such discrimination. From being in a position that forced me to come face to face with such racism, and from my own experiences as an immigrant, I can say that the discrimination that minority students face on a daily basis is the most important barrier to their participation in the education system.

Moreover, to be from a different culture and different race makes the access to learning and to the community even more challenging. That is also what Luna indicated when she said,

You know here I noticed that if you are an immigrant but you’re white, people will respect you more, and if you do not wear a veil they will respect you more, too. I noticed that [with] my friend who is not wearing a veil, people treat her different than me, although both of us are immigrants.

I can concur with the above statement from Luna because of a recent experience I had when I went with one of my friends in Antigonish, Nova Scotia where we had a conference at St. Francis Xavier University. My friend wears the veil and as soon as we entered one of the shops there, all the people started to stare at her, and they stepped back when she came near them. Also, when we were at the cash point, she was trying to talk with the lady at the cash machine, but the lady ignored her, and kept talking with me as there was no one else around. My friend was treated like an invisible person in front of me merely because she wore a veil as a symbol of her religious faith. Brah (1994), in writing about the representation of immigrant women says, “whether she is exoticized, represented as ruthlessly oppressed and in need of liberation, or read as a victim/enigmatic emblem of religious fundamentalism, she is often perceived as a bearer of ‘races’ and cultures that are constructed as inherently threatening to the presumed superiority of Western civilizations (Brah, 1994, p. 158). Therefore, both the Tim Horton’s incident and this incident made me think that to be an immigrant is one thing, but to be an immigrant from a racial minority who wears the veil (Hija’ab for Muslim women) is to face constant questions about one’s identity.

The immigrant women’s problem of accessing education involves not only the discrimination they face because of their race and religion, but also “[t]he immigration processes itself adversely affects immigrants’ subsequent educational achievement” (Leslau, Krausz, & Nussbaum, 1995, p. 178). The immigrant women’s suffering in their new land should not be ignored, as they struggle to settle into a new home without family, friends and sometimes even without money. Amal suffered not only because she

had to settle in a new land, but also because her children were suffering with her for a decision she had made for them. As she explained to me:

My study and my integration into the new culture were affected by my children because I saw how my children were suffering with the English and they miss their family and friends. I was feeling guilty because I took the decision to come here to Canada and they have nothing to do with this.

Although for centuries women in general and minority women in particular have experienced numerous barriers to their education. My interviewees indicate that they are always developing a consciousness of the value for education, economic stability, and social mobility. Cultural, racial, and school socialization influence many women's experiences and their view of learning.

Immigrant and refugee women navigate within their new society by bringing in their own view of the world that has been shaped by their personal experiences and oppressions. The social bias towards white and non-white women privileges white women over the non-white, and that has formed the power relations that allows power to be in the hands of the former group and that has challenged the latter group's perception of life in Canada. Such social biases disempower minority women in any society, as they make these women feel invisible, ignored and considered to be "Others". For example, "Asian American women are aware that nonwhite women can not easily blend into mainstream America in the way that European American immigrants have been able to do so successfully" (Harris-Hastick, 1996, p. 3). Differing in appearance from whites and being the minority within a minority, such as being the only immigrant of colour between groups of white immigrants, can also contribute to feeling of separation, alienation, and racism.

## **The Role of the Educator**

Educators must become more reflective about themselves and their own practices, so that they can see how their personal beliefs and histories influence their way of teaching and dealing with different students from different backgrounds, especially oppressed women. “Reflecting on self and practice can also help instructors see how the values they place on certain ways of knowing empower some and alienate others in academic discourse communities” (Alfred, 2003, p. 258). Educators should be conscious of the immigrant women’s fears which come from their lack of cultural connection, and which can lead to their failure to integrate with the dominant community. “The challenge for literacy educators of minority populations is to create unique, participatory educational programs that address and capitalize on the culture values, interests and aspirations of local minority communities” (Cumming, 1992, p. 3).

The cultural distress faced by immigrant and refugee women also works to challenge their educators by forcing them to figure out the best way to facilitate the learning of culturally diverse learners. The purpose of such facilitation is to allow immigrant students to have a voice and to become active and feel comfortable in the ESL programs and/or any educational program. Therefore, “to fully understand learning from a sociocultural perspective, we must give attention to the culture and the discourse communities within which individuals interact and learn” (Alfred, 2003, p. 245). In addition to the support from family and friends all my participants agreed that having the encouragement from their educators and instructors was the key to their success. Amal said,

The really big encouragement I get is from my teachers, when she or he say “good job” or “excellent work.” Especially when I feel that my

English is not good, and other students are doing better than me.

Including women in the learning process and in the curriculum by using language that includes the women and their experiences and/or their culture in the class discussion allows educators to be more understanding about the motivations and barriers that affect any educational program.

### **Family and Community Support**

It is also important for immigrant women to have the support of their families while they are studying in their new home. Zena mentioned that having her parents around her here in Canada helped her greatly, not only to care for her toddler, but also to offer emotional support. She told me that:

I will try to extend my parents' visa so they can stay more here with me before they go back to China, because I need them here, at least until I finish my school and I will be done next year.

Zena's comments give credence to Wittebrood & Robertson (1991)'s article, in which they quote Woon (1986) as describing "the advantages for Chinese immigrants of having close relatives living nearby. When a high degree of cooperation exists among relatives, both mutual aid and emotional support can be found" (p. 177). During my research and according to some participants such as Amal and Luna, I have realized that it is often helpful for immigrant women's participation and longevity in education to be able to interact with people from the same racial group and/or the same immigration status, especially since "[m]any immigrants arrive in the new country without family or friends, and depend on their ethnic community for support" (Wittebrood & Robertson, 1991, p.

177). Amal told me that she was encouraged by one of her friends who is enrolling in the graduate school to register for her Master's degree:

My friend who is in the graduate school encouraged me to register in the program, and to be honest if she is not with me at the same school I would never come to school. Because I will be afraid to fail or not to be welcome and accepted as I am an immigrant.

Amal's comment made me remember my first day at the graduate school in Halifax, when I searched all the floors to see if I had someone who shared any category with me, such as immigrant, nonwhite, and/or female. I could not find an explanation for my behavior until I did this study, when I discovered that all of my interview subjects felt the same way and/or did the same things that I did on my first day at school. This might be a kind of expression of the culture shock, isolation, and fear experienced by most immigrants, especially women from racial minorities.

Also, it is hard for immigrant women in the Canadian classrooms when they encounter a variety of other cultures, since there are often immigrants from all over the globe sitting in the same classroom. It can be challenging to adapt to such an atmosphere. Amal told me:

Also, you know, it is hard to me to express what I want to say that everyone in the class will understand, not only the Canadian students because we have students from all over the place, so I found that challenging to me, too.

Therefore, learning with other immigrant or international students seemed to add one more challenge for my interview participants to face in the classroom. I noticed that three out of five of my participants were aware of the other students' cultures and languages, which made them feel more concerned about making themselves understood by all the people from various parts of the world. For example, I was once in class where there was a student from Jamaica, and I started to talk about my country, Jordan.

Suddenly, this student interrupted me and said, “you know that no Jamaican women are allowed to go to Jordan anymore” and when I asked why she answered, “a domestic worker from Jamaica got raped in Jordan, and Jordan and Jamaica had to go into a lot of political issues to control what happened in Jordan.” I was shocked from the story and from this student raising this in the class discussion, and I apologized but that conversation made me reduce many things I wanted to say in class, as I was afraid that I would offend others. My point here is that challenges can come from not only the other Canadian students in the classroom, but also from other immigrant or international students, further complicating immigrant women’s educational journeys.

### **Concerns about Children**

All the women I interviewed kept repeating the issues about their children, and how they are always taking priority in their lives. Furthermore, most of the participants are afraid that their children would lose their original traditions and culture as they integrate into the Canadian community. At the same time, most of the women mentioned that they wanted their children to adapt to the Canadian culture and to be Canadian. However, none of the women wanted their children to lose their identity or their heritage. After talking to these women about their fears for their children, I realized that identity concerns are a major issue for the immigrant population. Most immigrants claim that they want to keep their identity, but in reality since they decided to leave their home countries and come to a new land, they have entered into a process that demands some sort of shift in identity. They left their land and their family and friends seeking a different geographical place to be their new home with new friends.

As mentioned earlier, immigrant children usually adapt quickly to their new home because of their age and because of their environment. They go to schools and meet many Canadian people, from whom they can learn the new language and the new cultural norms. Luna mentioned her children's integration process into the Canadian system, telling me that

My children now are like Canadian children – the language and everything – but they are losing their traditions and culture. Like my daughter – she came to me the other day. I was emotional that day; she told me ‘Mom, you are like typical Arabic women: always depressed and always sad.’ I was shocked she was talking to me like she does not belong to this category [Arabic women] anymore.

Luna also told me that if she did not let her children participate in all the birthday parties – even those which are gender-mixed, which she does not approve of for her teenaged girl – then her children will eventually be isolated from their community. This situation can result in tension and trauma to both the children and the parents, which can be detrimental to the family unit, since “[t]ension and stress can impact on the family's ability to function and can impact on the institution and structure of family life, which is expected to provide the framework for mutual interdependence, mutual support, and growth” (Harris-Hastick, 1996, p. 6). Amal mentioned a similar fear about her children as that of Luna when she told me that

My 13 year old son used to have Canadian friends who used to visit him and go out with him, but I noticed that he does not speak with them anymore and they do not come for a visit as they used too. When I asked him about that he said that they stopped talking with me because I do not do things that they do so they said we cannot be your friend anymore.

Both Luna and Amal's stories reflect one of the main challenges facing all immigrants; if they do not conform to the Canadian mainstream, they will not be accepted as full



Canadians. Yet, if they do conform to the Canadian way of life, many immigrants fear that they lose their own traditions and norms.

### **Perceptions of Others**

As immigrant women students become more adjusted to their new life in Canada, they face additional challenges in how they are perceived by other people in the community. Most of the participants said that they felt like the people around them look at them as strangers, not only as immigrants, but also as people who are not welcome in Canada. Some white Canadians may never accept immigrants as Canadian citizen because even after they obtain the Canadian citizenship, to them, people from different race will be always labeled as “immigrant.” Zena confirmed to me that

I am sure that I will be considered Asian-immigrant all my life, although my husband is white-Canadian and my daughter is white-Canadian, as she looks like her dad. But me, I will be carrying the immigrant label all my life here in Canada.

Almost all of my participants agreed that they will never be considered fully Canadian, regardless of their endeavors to have full access to Canadian society. In 2000, the Canadian Federal Government declared that the Canadian identity is shaped by multiculturalism: “Canadian identity will not be undermined by multiculturalism. Indeed, we believe that cultural pluralism is the very essence of Canadian identity” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Federal Government statement, 2000). However, the fact that Canada consists of a plethora of cultural groups raises many questions that are not always easy to answer. Basically, despite the fact that Canada is multicultural, there still appears to be assumptions about who is a Canadian. Amal told me about her feelings of not belonging:

At the beginning, I thought my English is the problem, then I said ‘no, the problem is my Hija’ab’, and then I said ‘no, the problem is for sure because I am not white or blond.’ And, you know, I do not know what the problem is exactly, but I think people in the community and my classmates do not want me here in Canada.

People of color have always experienced confrontation from other people in the community. Amal’s feelings of being an outsider continue in our communities despite the many struggles of immigrant women of color to eliminate the inequality of their status in Canada. “People of color have long experienced restrictions when immigrating to Canada; for many decades racism was built into the laws of the land” (Dhruvarajan, 2002, p. 100). According to Calliste (1989, cited in Dhruvarajan, 2002), many researchers have demonstrated that people of color are permitted to immigrate only if there are not already enough candidates from qualified white immigrants. Most of my participants were disappointed even while they are pursuing their education, as they all seemed sure they would not find the career they were hoping for in Canada after they graduate. This is what Zena said on the issue:

I do not know after finishing this Master’s degree if I can find job or not. This is why I am thinking to complete my PhD because after doing my PhD no one can refuse me from working with my profession as a professor.

Such mixed feelings and fears challenge the immigrant women of racial minority groups in their educational odyssey and their life.

Immigrants often play multiple roles when they arrive in a new land; they are newcomers, minorities, strangers and students. Nora discussed this fact when I asked her about how she positions herself in relation to Canadian society and in her educational institution:

I think I am an immigrant and I will be an immigrant even if I have my Canadian citizenship. Even after fifty years, everyone will point at me and say she is an immigrant.

Luna and Amal shared Nora's perspective. Luna said,

Look, do not tell me I am a Canadian citizen, so I will be treated as the white blond Canadians. I am stranger and they will always look at me this way.

When I asked her why she felt that way, and on what she based her facts, she replied by saying,

Based on everything around me; look to all immigrants who came even before us to Canada. They will tell you the same thing; it is not just me who feel and say that it is a fact.

Similarly, Amal told me that she will never be accepted as a full Canadian citizen, and when I asked her what she meant by the term "full Canadian citizen" she said,

I do not have white skin, blue eyes and I am not blond to be considered as Canadian citizen. Yes, all my papers will say I am a Canadian citizen and I feel that from inside me, but Canadian people around me will not think that.

Zena mentioned an incident that happened to her which negatively affected her perception of life in Canada in general and in her educational setting particularly. She told me:

I applied for a job position but they refused me, so I asked the man there: why did you refuse me? He replied 'just like that.' I thought they took somebody else but they kept posting for that position, so I went again and I asked them why they can not take me, and he said, 'look, we need a white and blond girl, not you.' I felt really bad and since then I knew I would never be treated as white Canadian people.

The negative experiences that these immigrant women shared with me made me think of our children. My daughter and most of the participants' children were born here in Canada, and the critical question is whether or not our children will be labeled as immigrants as well. When I registered my daughter at day care two years ago, I asked

the manager there to take it easy on my daughter as she cannot speak English. The day care teachers and the director herself told me that they understood that she is an immigrant, and they will be aware of that. I was surprised to hear them label my daughter as an immigrant based on what I had said, since what I meant was that my daughter's first language is not English, not that her nationality is not Canadian. I believe that not only all immigrants, but also second-generation immigrants are forced to carry the "immigrant" label throughout their lives in Canada. There is an example of a women's story about a class she took while studying for her PhD at OISE in 1981 that illustrates my point; as she explained,

One day in class, the discussion centered on immigrant women. ... The debate had been raging for close to an hour when finally the professor was asked to give her opinion regarding what constituted an 'immigrant women'. The professor smiled, looked in my direction, and said, 'we have an immigrant woman in our midst, why don't we ask her what she thinks?' Following the professor's example, the whole class focused on the space where I was seated, and, likewise, I too, glanced behind me, trying to find the 'immigrant woman' to whom the professor was referring. In my astonishment at being included in this category, I was rendered speechless. It had never occurred to me that I could be perceived as an 'immigrant woman', a category that, to be precise, did include me because I had emigrated from Egypt in 1967, but one that did not fit me anymore than it did our 'immigrant' British professor. (Khayatt, 2001, pp. 74-5).

As this story demonstrates, immigrant women students are often marginalized in the classroom, but when there is a discussion in the classroom or in the university about immigrant people or minorities, suddenly all of the light will be focused on them. This suggests that many people see immigrants as being defined solely by their colour and/or accent. This is a kind of racism because when people around the immigrants keep addressing them as minorities and only talk about them as being immigrants; it contributes to the immigrants' feelings of being "the Other."

“The Other” means being different, different than the whole society around you, different by color and by the language you speak. For example, in most my classes in the university I am “the Other” in the class, also while I am walking with my immigrant friend in the street, she and I are “the Others” in the street.

Luna also mentioned that one of her immigrant friends felt completely separated from her community and workplace; relating the story to me, she said:

My friend, who has been here for 15 years, she is wearing the Hija’ab and she is working on a barber shop. She was claiming that she is not really accepted in her workplace. When I asked her for the reason I was thinking because she wearing the Hija’ab, she said, ‘I do not usually participate with them in their discussion, like they talk about the boyfriends and going and drinking in the bar, and you know because of our culture and religion we can not do that. So eventually they isolated me and now nobody talks with me there, like I am someone who is not visible.’

Luna’s friend’s experience in her workplace is similar to what Nazia experienced with her classmates at her school:

My relationship with other members in the community and in school is not really good. My neighbors try to avoid me and one day when I offered my neighbor some food she refused to take it, and she said she rather to have something she knows from people she knows their origin. Same thing with my classmates at the university – they ignore me and when they talk about something and I want to share they do not even look at me, although sometimes I have some knowledge about what they talk about.

Such incidents make immigrant women feel lonely and separated from the community in which they live. “Isolation, lack of appreciation, institutional disinterest on difference and diversity issues, and pervasive racism and sexism were all cited in questionnaires as barriers to the full participation of minority women” (Mahtani, 2004, p. 97). Moreover, I feel that the isolation felt by immigrants may result from people who constantly ask immigrants various questions about their country of origin even after becoming Canadian citizens. For example, when people in my class keep asking me question about why I

decided to come to Canada, and whether I am thinking of going back to my home country or not, I sometimes feel that I am the “Other” in the community, even if the questions are asked in a friendly way. I have also been asked such questions from my professors, and although I know that they do not mean to hurt my feelings or to be discriminatory, I still feel uncomfortable with such questions and comments. This is why I keep telling myself I should not go anywhere or talk with anyone about myself. To me it seems better not talk about these issues of otherness and let us all live together and accept each other the way we are.

Having to answer constant questions about one’s identity on a daily basis can become frustrating for immigrant women. Nora told me that the people in her class keep asking her about the Hija’ab:

People in my class and in the street keep asking me about my Hija’ab, and I feel happy to explain everything to them. But the problem is even when I explain it to them, they keep giving me some looks, which made me feel that I am not welcome and I am a stranger.

Nora mentioned that

People in my class think that I came from a very different world; they think I came from a third world that does not have anything. Even they think that I am wearing Hija’ab because I have a problem with my head.

However, in a positive light, Nora went on to suggest that

I think people in my class learn from us as immigrant at the end because we come to class and bring our values; also, we teach a lot about our culture. Even [with] the Hija’ab, we introduce them to something new they never saw before. So they are now more aware of what is going on in Canada and that is multicultural[ism].

Many of the participants mentioned that if they want to be visible in the Canadian classrooms, they have to work very hard to prove themselves to be intellectuals. Nevertheless, I noticed that most of my interview participants were not confident in

themselves; most of them do not think of themselves as intelligent students who can compete with the Canadian students. “One of the most widespread myths in the United States is that of overstating the power of individual self-determination and the availability of choices and opportunities: If the individual succeeds it is because of his or her work and talent, and if the individual fails it is because her or she does not try hard enough or is not smart enough” (Torres, 2002, p. 124). With such assumptions, my participants are not sure if their level of English and their accents will let them survive in the Canadian schools; therefore, the idea that they may fail is always in their minds.

Another problem facing immigrant students is that there are some non-immigrant white people who still do not believe in the existence of racial or gender discrimination. In a class I took called “Race, Gender and Class,” a white Canadian colleague noted during a discussion about race and racism against the minority people in the community that he did not believe that there really was any such discrimination. He ended his speech by saying that no one he knows is a racist or tries to discriminate against any minorities. In response, my teacher suggested, “Maybe you cannot see it or feel it because you are white Canadian,” to which he looked up at the ceiling in frustration and then said “Yeah, yeah, maybe.” Since that incident, I realized that there are many people in the community who do not consider the suffering and challenges faced by minority citizens. The same student who made the previous comment used to correct my accent when I spoke in class, or when I had a personal conversation with him. His attitude toward me only shifted after I participated in a conference presentation about the experiences of immigrant women teachers in Canada. This presentation was a readers theatre plenary at the Research in Action. Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE)

Regional Conference in Halifax, NS (Brigham, Walsh and Members of the Women, Diversity, and Teaching Collective, 2006) In this presentation, I and other members of a group of immigrant women shared some of our feelings about the challenges we face in the Canadian schools and community. After that conference, this student apologized to me and told me that it was only after hearing the stories from immigrants themselves that he realized how disrespectful he had been to me. That made me happy because I think people need some kind of awareness to force them to open their eyes to some important issues that touch people from any minority group.

People who are part of a majority population have a completely different experience of life in the community than minorities, and this can place them in a position in which they cannot judge their attitudes towards other minorities properly. Blacks (2002) did a study on the black and white populations and how they view each other, and she found that most white professionals “agree with the statement ‘blacks too often see racism where it does not exist’” (p. 42). Whereas, the black people stated that “[t]he only times the federal government really pays attention to Black problems are when blacks resort to violent demonstration or riots” (Blacks, 2002, p. 42). The problem here lays in the fact that majority people are living in a totally different world than the minority people. “In other words, ... what appears, to the untrained eye, as for discrimination, is actually not what it appears and has to be evaluated by someone with a superior perspective” (Berard, 2005, p. 72). As for some minority people, any interaction with people from the majority groups may appear to have some kind of discrimination while it is not and vice versa. This helps to explain why immigrant women of racial minority



groups find it difficult to be accepted as more than merely strangers in their schools and in their community. Nazia spoke on this issue during my interview with her:

My relationship with my community is good, but I feel that I am stranger. I live between all these people, but I do not think that they know me or even they want to know me. They look at me as someone who does not really count to them and that makes me feel bad because how I am going to continue living like that between them?

Also Zena told me that her relationship is good with her teachers, her classmates, and her neighbors, but

Before I immigrated to Canada I had a good life in Asia, I was working in the university as a teacher. And when I decided to come to Canada I took it as my home, but sometimes, people around me, they are not getting that because when somebody come and ask me are you going home for Christmas, I will think then 'this is not my home'. Then, I will say to myself that is not my home and I will get annoyed. Maybe because of my color they cannot accept me as Canadian or they will assume that I am not Canadian. I can change my hair color and maybe people will start treating me well, but I do not like to be treated according to my hair color.

I noticed that, in many cases, my participants described their relationship with people in their community as a good one; however, often they will then shift the discussion to some actions by those people in the community that could be interpreted as racist actions or comments. This contradictory attitude toward the community might be explained by Burr (1995) cited in Raby (2004), when he suggests that “[t]hese patterns may not only be about distinguishing racist comments from racist beliefs, however, but recognizing that our innermost selves are created within a net of multiple, often contradictory discourses that shape not only how we see or negotiate the world, but who we are” (p. 372). Most importantly, by understanding how people may inhabit multiple subjectivities, we can concur that “people can be racist one moment and not another” (Yon, 2000, cited in Raby, 2004, p. 373).

Amal told me that she feels that another obstacle in the way of her being seen as fully Canadian is her age. Since she immigrated to Canada in her thirties, she feels that she does not have the time to achieve everything she has dreamt of in her life. She said that

I am forty years old now, and I do not think I will be considered Canadian because I cannot have the level of education that will let me have a good job and good life in Canada. Like, for my children, it is easier for them to learn and adapt to the Canadian community because they are young but to me it is too late.

Amal's participation in education is inevitably affected by this belief, especially since "[a]ge at time of immigration is another factor that may affect an immigrant's educational achievement" (Leslau, Krausz, & Nussbaum, 1995, p. 188). The immigrant women of racial minority groups have been challenged in their life and educational journey in Canada. It is obvious that the women's status as immigrant women of racial minorities played a major role in their settlement process in the new land. Gaining access to education was not an easy task for any of them, and their experiences in the educational institutions have been based on a mix of barriers and emotions.

## **Chapter Six: Recommendations and Conclusion**

### **Recommendations to Adult Educators of Minority Students**

Having explored the experiences and challenges facing immigrant women of racial minority groups in the Nova Scotian postsecondary context, I now wish to suggest some potential actions that can help this group to integrate into the mainstream in a less difficult way. In these actions certain factors must always be kept in mind when dealing with students in the classroom, especially since “race, class, sexual differences and many others shape our individual and collective identities, and they enter each educational situation in full force” (Hart, 1998, p. 189). Teaching and learning about human differences that can impact on education in any system (either formal or informal) has been the central focus of adult educators for several decades. Furthermore all of these suggestions for improvement were evident in the interviews with the immigrant women from racial minority groups.

#### **Anti-racist Education**

As I discussed in chapter four and five, one of the most important issues that affect adults’ participation in education is race. Racism can create a wall between learners and between teachers in an educational program. The role of adult educators is to create safe spaces for all students to be able to develop solutions to social problems. Anti-racist education must accord [learners] the right to utilize their own creativity and resourcefulness to respond to pressing contemporary issues” (Dei, 1996, p. 30). Difference in treatment of individual students reflects injustice in the classroom. Dealing with people from different ethnic backgrounds in a positive way remains a difficult issue

for most adult educators. Magner (1996, p. 12) notes that the “majority of professors do not touch on race or gender in their teaching and research” (cited in Jackson & Wasson, 2003, p. 4). As adult educators we must address these issues in our teaching. Dealing with individuals from any minority group requires a full awareness of those individuals’ needs and their intrapersonal motivations. Listening to students and their needs is one way to begin.

Anti-racist programming and curriculum in schools is important to construct a secure and safe environment for minority students. “Diversity is not seen as the problem, but rather as how schools and institutions relate to difference” (Dei, 1996, p. 34). Developing and encouraging communicative learning, which is the learning that involves communication between people, in the education system liberates us from the traditional learning system by allowing us to endorse differing beliefs and to share experiences from a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds in the classroom. Communicative learning gives educators the opportunity to understand the motivations and barriers that affect any educational program; through it, they can try to deal with those barriers in a way that will make learning lifelong. Winkler (1996) states that “teaching as an ally means to approach authority and the creation of classroom community as a condition for the production of knowledge and transformation of consciousness” (p. 48).

As educators we need to develop self-awareness through self-reflection in order to transform our teaching and in turn to make a change in society, for how can we expect any change if we do not change ourselves? Self reflection is an important step towards the promotion of justice. Jackson & Wasson (2003) suggest that adult educators must be

more aware of their own beliefs, attitudes, and methods, and gain an understanding of learners in diverse groups before claiming social change surround racial issues.

Furthermore, it is highly important to look back to the history of adult education, to see if the shifts that happened with regards to teaching strategies when dealing with immigrant students. So when I looked at the historical examples of the purpose of adult education for immigrants, which often involved teaching English, I found that nothing really changed and/or enhanced in these immigrants chances and positions in Canada.

The humanity of African-American was denied in the nineteenth-century America: for example, in the Supreme Court Dred Scott decision of 1857 Blacks were beings of an inferior order [note the language, not people of a race] and altogether unfit to associate with White race...and so far inferior that they have no rights that the white man was bound to respect. (Perkins, 1993, p. 265)

In the twentieth century, adult education for immigrants concentrated on teaching the immigrants about the “true” Canadian way of life. This means teaching what these immigrants need to do to become Canadians, their rights and their responsibilities. In America and in Canada, people were aware of the need to educate immigrants, but the idea was to shift the whole immigrants’ identity to make it more Americanized or Canadianized. For example, in America and Canada, programs were established in the early 1900s to meet immigrants’ educational needs (Carlson, 1970). However, teaching the English language was not the only target for these immigrants; “YMCA assisted in this effort to assimilate or homogenize the immigrant into American society by providing classes in English and citizenship” (Carlson, 1970, p. 447). This demonstrates that the motivation of these programs was not just to teach the English language skills, but also to assimilate immigrants into the mainstream culture. Carlson (1970) mentions Commons’ (1907) misapprehension about educating immigrants early in the twentieth century:

“Commons found it impossible to think that immigrants could understand patriotism without proper Americanization” (Carlson, 1970, p. 447). Therefore, while such educational institutions were constructed to help immigrants to learn the English language and to become Americans or Canadians, they often forgot to incorporate the feelings and experiences of immigrants themselves. Often the focus was on assimilation, not integration of newcomers.

By creating safe and secure learning environments, adult educators can develop the learners’ mutual learning. This is an especially important step today, when the learning environment often does not provide the social assets which are necessary to encourage the learning of immigrants and refugees. Alfred (2003) says that “Geary (1998) noted three components to successful collaborative learning. These include a positive learning environment to reduce fear and increase students’ willingness to take risks, evidence of developed social skills among participants, and some type of structure provided to the group” (p. 256). The curriculum must become more inclusive. One way to achieve this is to allow adult students to have a role in constructing their own curriculum which addresses their own educational needs. For example, adult educators can design projects or workshops for immigrants to talk freely about their challenges and needs. So educators can suggest ways to solve some of these issues which can be added to the curriculum when teaching these immigrants.

Although my main focus in this thesis has been on the obstacles confronting the immigrant women students from racial and ethnic minorities, it is also important to recognize the challenges faced by educators such as myself, who are minority female educators. I feel that often, educators who are themselves from racial or ethnic minorities

will have to confront very different types of problems, or they will have their own specific style of teaching that is informed by their own cultural background, and that differs from the mainstream education practice. For example, “[t]he practices of African American women postsecondary mathematics teachers are significantly affected by their race and gender” (Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000, p. 286). This is an important element to look at when we are discussing the solutions that have to be made to improve the minority students’ achievement in the classrooms.

As both an adult educator and learner, I have been impacted by researching the barriers that negatively affect the effective participation of women in minority groups in any educational program. Educators must find comprehensive solutions in order to address the specific problems faced by their minority students. One such solution could be to organize groups for immigrants to talk about their challenges and experiences, while another potential solution would be to offer extra courses that help immigrant students to enhance their English, such as English for Academic Purposes. Another way to resolve the language problem would be for all educational institutions to standardize their English language programs so that immigrants would only have to gain one certificate in ESL in order to be admitted to all university programs. Most importantly, educators should deal with minorities in the classroom in a way that includes them in the teaching and learning environment. On a personal level, I will use my career to continue to develop sensitivity when interacting with my students, especially those from minority backgrounds. For example, I should be aware of the language I use in the classroom, and I will design projects for minority students which will allow them to talk about their feelings, experiences, and needs.

## **Conclusion**

“Education is often a space which enables women, both individually and collectively, to take stock of their lives and reflect upon their identity/ies- a biographical reflection- developing and creating a transformatory life project” (Merrill, 2005, p. 48). The various social interactions that involve sexism and racism have existed for centuries; therefore, they are not easy problems to resolve. The lifelong learning processes of students from minority backgrounds have been influenced and controlled by different kinds of racism and oppression. Women have always been perceived to be the “weaker” gender in society, and as a result, they have continued to suffer from discrimination in the classroom. The unequal allocation of power between men and women in society has interfered with women’s social mobility and visibility. This is especially true for women of racial or ethnic minorities. Immigrant and refugee women in particular face daunting struggles to have a voice and equal access in the community. The challenges are still there and the solution has not yet been found, but there are some movements and different concepts that may work to generate social justice and liberation for these women.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, an understanding of how gender and race inform lifelong learning is crucial for achieving a balance of power and equal access to education. Adult educators must give equitable attention to all the students in their classroom in order to assist in the liberation from racism and sexism in society. The purpose of anti-racist education is to produce a fair and humane world for the well-being of all individuals. Understanding all the forms of social oppression allows us, as educators, to teach our students about the negative social effects of racism and sexism.



By teaching the students how they can make a connection between themselves and the oppressed group they are learning about, adult educators can help the students to gain some understanding of the sense of being oppressed. Minority students' educators should try to apply and utilize the concept of inclusive educational practice in order to remove some the power issues that often act as barriers between students. The curriculum should be made as wide-ranging as possible to bring together the diverse needs of students. Furthermore, the educator's language should be made inclusive in a way that will allow every student to be part of the learning process.

For many centuries, women in general and minority women in particular have experienced numerous barriers to their education. Throughout my study, I noticed that the women I interviewed are always developing their consciousness of the value of education, economic stability, and social mobility. However, the cultural, racial, and school socialization processes can often have a negative influence on the women's experiences and their view of learning. Gender oppression and the male privilege in society, combined with what the women I interviewed perceived as the lack of meaningful curriculum for women (particularly those of racial and ethnic minorities), have formed the power relations and reproduced an imbalance of power in society. Such that white middle and or upper class men in particular are privileged over others in society. Brigham and Gouthro (2006) state that "some theories of adult education studied in formal adult education programs have emerged from a tradition that primarily reflects western, white middle-class, male culture" (p. 83). As a result, immigrant women face social challenges arising from their gender, race, religion, and resettlement process;

above all else, they are challenged by the whole meaning of their status as immigrants in Canadian society.

The cultural distress experienced by immigrant and refugee women is a major challenge for educators. However, through my study, two important solutions were suggested: first, educators must encourage immigrant women and give them a space in which they can feel comfortable to be active and speak in ESL classes and other educational programs. Secondly, these women must be included in the learning process and in the curriculum, which in turn will allow the educators to be more understanding of the motivations and barriers that affect their lifelong learning processes. Educators must try to deal with these barriers in a way that will make women's education a positive aspect of their lives. As Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey (2000) note, "[t]here are no universal teachers but, rather, there are teachers whose experiences are affected positively or negatively by their positionality in society" (p. 286). And Amal agrees by saying

We as immigrants need Canadian people from the system to understand our needs, and to help us to integrate with the new culture and the new system. I hope this day will come soon if not for us at least for our children's future here in Canada.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

As my research study examined the issues of gender, race and immigration, a future study may be done to look at the class issues in depth. A study may focus on immigrant adult men and women to discuss their socio-economic status and if/how their status shifts after immigrating to Canada and how this is impacted by their educational experiences.

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## **Appendix A: Information letter**

### **Information Letter**

May 4, 2006

Dear Participant:

My name is Nisreen Alkhasawneh, and I am a graduate student in the Masters of Arts Program in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University.

I invite you to participate in a research project which I am conducting for the purpose of writing a thesis to complete my Masters degree. My research thesis title will be: "The Educational Experiences faced by Immigrant Women of Racial Minority Groups in the Nova Scotian Post-Secondary Context".

This research focuses on a group of women from racial minority groups who have immigrated to Halifax within the past five years and now attending university. My goal is to better understand this group of women's life experiences in Halifax during their educational integration journey to further understand their general life conditions and the effect of their background and family on their educational processes.

I will interview each person individually, which will help me better understand people's perceptions, feelings, and knowledge about this issue. During these interviews, I will speak English, and if people wish, we can also use Arabic. The interviews will take approximately one to two hours, and will take place either at the university, or in the person's home.

I will write some notes during the interview, and I will audio tape record the interview so I can transcribe it, and listen to the conversation again, when required. All the notes I write, and the tapes, will be stored on a locked filing cabinet in my home. And the electronic files will be password protected. After two years I will destroy both the notes and the tapes.

Participants will be asked to choose a fake name or "pseudonym" for the purposes of assuring confidentiality in reporting the research. "Pseudonym" will be used for both the participants and any related names to them such as (their children names, schools, etc). I will use these pseudonyms (fake names) in my thesis, in conference presentations, and in any resulting publication.

If people decide not to continue their involvement in the research, at any time, for any reason, they can discontinue without penalty and any contributions can be withdrawn too, if they wish. If interested, I will provide a copy of the summary of thesis. I intend to

## **Appendix B: Informed consent letter**

### **Informed Consent Form**

I have read the information letter about Nisreen Alkhasawneh's research project, "The Educational Experiences faced by Immigrant Women of Racial Minority Groups in the Nova Scotian Post-Secondary Context" dated May 4, 2006. I understand that this research focuses on a group of women from racial minority groups who have immigrated to Halifax within the past five years and now attending university and that the goal is to better understand this group of women's life experiences in Halifax during their educational integration journey to further understand their general life conditions and the effect of their background and family on their educational processes.

I understand that I will be interviewed individually. The interviews will take approximately one to two hours, and will take place either at the university, or in my home. I can use either Arabic and/or English when I am interviewed, if I wish. I understand that some important notes will be written, transcribed and the interview will be tape recorded. I will be assured of anonymity (e.g. my real name will not be used or specific details which allow others to easily figure out who I am) in the writing of the thesis.

I know I can withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason, without penalty. I know that if I have questions about how this research is being conducted, I can contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research Office, who is not directly involved with this study by the telephone number 457-6350. Also, I can raise further questions or concerns with Nisreen Alkhasawneh, whose phone number is 440-0983, and email address is [noawor@yahoo.com](mailto:noawor@yahoo.com) or with Nisreen Alkhasawneh's professor and thesis supervisor Dr. Sue Brigham by the telephone 457-6733 or by email at [susan.brigham@msvu.ca](mailto:susan.brigham@msvu.ca), now or at any point during the research.

In addition, if I am interested, Nisreen Alkhasawneh will provide me with a copy of a summary of her thesis, which she will send to me by mail, and she will lend me a copy of the whole thesis if I am interested. I can also view a copy of her thesis at the MSVU library or curriculum Resource Centre (CRC, 4<sup>th</sup> floor, Seton Academic Centre).

## **Appendix C: Interview Protocol**

The questions discussed some of the following issues. I did not use a pre-list of questions but instead I focused on the four general themes. Because I allowed the interview to focus on particular topics and general areas to be covered, I allowed my interviewees to determine the order of topics, the time spent on each, and the introduction of additional issues. These 4 themes are:

1- **Education:** as how they will describe their access to education here in Halifax, and the role of English as it is their second language?

2- **Community:** I would like to know their relationships with the other members in the community, and how important they see these relations as kind of integration with the society.

3- **Family:** I would like to know their family role regards to their education as well as their integration process.

4- **Position:** where these women position themselves in the educational institution, in the whole community as an immigrants. Even after having their Canadian citizenship do they still see them selves as an immigrants?