Organization of women and empowerment

Regina Poni Jacob

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Organization of Women and Empowerment: Sudanese Women’s Groups in Cairo

A Thesis Submitted to
Department of Sociology/Anthropology
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts

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Under the supervision of

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January 2001
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate the results of this efforts to my family: particularly my mother Susana Kiden, my late father Jacob Boyi who died without tasting the fruits of my education and to late Gladias Ruba. May you both rest in peace. Not forgetting my beloved children Olivia Kabang and Manuella Kiden who missed my tender care and love. I appreciate their patience and tolerance for my protracted absences and long hours away from home while I was pursuing my graduate program. I hope to instill in them the appreciation of learning and hard work.
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ABSTRACT

The American University in Cairo

Organization of women and Empowerment

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This is a study of Sudanese women’s groups in exile in Cairo. It presents the results of interviewing four Sudanese women’s groups in Cairo. The aim of the study is to explore and analyze how Sudanese women groups evolved in exile and how they empower women. In-depth interviews were conducted in addition to observations by the researcher, field notes and review of literature was done. The main finding of the study is that women’s organization promotes solidarity, which recognizes that women gain by supporting each other as they retain the idea of sisterhood phenomenon. Moreover, when women work in groups they gain power through their collective action and popular participation.

The data indicate that Sudanese women’s groups are need-oriented and aimed to improve the material necessities of the women’s well being both economic and psychological. As a result of leading a lonely life inside their apartments women initiated the groups so that they socialize and interact with fellow women with whom they would share and exchange interests, experiences and problems. Through the groups, women managed to gain some skills that enabled them to earn income and gave them greater autonomy in decision-making as they solidly contributed to their families. Data are interpreted in connection both to feminist theories and empowerment theories that tend to give women agency in their environment, stop...
oppression of women and dependency syndrome and promote self-empowerment. It shows that women’s group is a potential tool to empower women and enhance their advancement. The focus on togetherness marks a turning point from individualism to collectivism. The study concludes that when women pool their efforts together, they gain power that strengthens their advancement. The efforts at the end were imparted to the individual families of the women in the groups and later to the whole community.
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CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN REFUGEE CRISIS
AND WOMEN’S GROUPS

1.0 Introduction

This thesis is about social movements. By social movements I mean a form of participation where groups or individuals chained by common goals come together. It discusses four Sudanese women’s groups in Cairo. It focuses on the similarities of the four groups studied and presents some of the variations of one of the groups. Women’s groups refer to a collective action, which brings women together and provides them with free space to form solidarity and collective identity. Moreover, group work will refer to the capability, ability and desire to do something collectively. Feminism refers to a movement for the redistribution and redefinition of power. It is a movement that recognizes the oppression of women and the commitment to end such oppression. In this manuscript, empowerment means gaining power or decreasing the level of poverty. It is a process that enables collective decision-making and popular participation. Moreover, the word refugees will refer to involuntary migrants who are forced to leave their homes because of intolerable. The legal definition as rendered by the 1951 Geneva Convention however, defines a refugee as a person who owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for various reasons is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of his/her country (Loescher and Monahan, 1990:9).

The depiction of refugees as helpless individuals who continue to depend on international charity because they are confined to camps or settlements where they are deprived of opportunities to work does not apply to all refugees (Harrel-Bond,
The case of Sudanese refugees in Cairo exemplifies this. Upon arrival, the Sudanese refugees make their own housing arrangements and begin to work. In most cases they work as domestic servants to make ends meet. Women have resorted to group work not only as means of earning extra income to support their families but as a means of psychological relief from stress and boredom of life in exile.

In an attempt to explain the proliferation of the current wave of African feminism, attention is currently being focused on the collective efforts of women in Africa with particular reference to Sudanese refugee women's groups in Cairo. Gelp et al. (1995) argue that the poverty in which the poor live prevents them from taking advantage of economic opportunities. Similarly, poverty is a self-perpetuating state where it is passed over to the next generation. This suggests that if no efforts are exerted to fighting poverty, it will continue to recur from one generation to another. The collective effort of refugee women in Cairo is an attempt to overcome poverty in exile. I argue that when women work together as a group they are empowered and as a result the entire society benefits from the improvement of their lives. The recent study by Snyder and Tadesse (1995) points out that phenomenon of new emerging organizations coming together to socialize is increasing in developing countries. They argue that the social and economic crises push the conditions of women to deteriorate yet they have to ensure the survival of their households and community.

Novak and Strober (1986 qtd. Gelp et al.) in an attempt to illustrate on this argue that women need to come together because working in numbers makes them strong. They further add that the isolation of women adds to their potential poverty. This has led to what Haynes and Sens term the feminization of poverty (Haynes, 1997:125, Sens and Grown, 1987:2). Gelp and Hartsock (1986:192) also contend that
the women who have experienced poverty think of themselves as coping alone with a problem that is individual rather than one they all share. This means that when women pull together they benefit from each other by sharing common issues affecting their lives. Rianol (1994:236) maintains that if women's conditions are to improve, civil society or grass roots movements act as consensus building agents, where women get together, find commonalities across culture and fight against barriers to their empowerment. Peck (1987 qtd. Riano, 1994:236) notes that empowering is about creating conditions in which the needs of women and their children are met, moving beyond economic self-sufficiency towards political self-reliance. The question is how such groups evolve and with what benefits. The purpose of this study is to explain and analyze how group work empowers women and also the emergency of Sudanese refugee women's groups in exile, why they emerged and with what benefits.

According to Agenda 21\(^1\) (UNCED, 1992), Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are responsible for the process of empowerment because they aid the equality of women and minorities through various projects. The activities performed by the grassroots movement of the Sudanese refugee women fall under this category of NGOs. The women's groups in Cairo are relevant to this discussion because they are self-organized action groups that operate under the umbrella of the church (Sigh and Titi, 1995:20). Until recently, refugees were not considered as objects or subjects of study, despite old literature dating back to the Second World War. Nowadays, Africa, riddled with wars and famine, produces a notorious catalogue of refugees. Shami (1996) notes that refugees have been traditionally localized and are viewed as non-

\(^1\)Agenda 21: is one of the world summits devoted to combat poverty through enabling the poor to achieve sustainable livelihoods
recurring and isolated flows thus until recently, refugee movements have not been documented.

The refugee phenomenon is common in Africa. Conflict has forced massive displacement of people throughout the continent. Loescher confirms that refugee flight is a result of national conflict, injustice and inequality, economic repression and threats to survival force people to evacuate their homes (Loescher, 1990:139). Many studies argue that the African refugee crisis is an indication of political, economic, ecological and social crisis. A view I too share. Today, more than 28 African countries are either recipients or producers of refugees or both. The Sudan hosts more internally displaced persons than any other country, yet it is also a refugee-producing nation (African Women’s report, 1998 and Kibreab, 1997).

The flight of Sudanese refugees cannot be understood without first examining the political, social and economic reasons which have forced them on the road to exile. It is not the purpose of the study but a few realities have to be recalled if we are to understand why so many human beings are forced to the harsh path to exile. Zwi and Macrae writing on the African refugee crisis posit that political, economic and natural catastrophes are all interwoven factors that result in refugee tragedies (Zwi and Macrae, 1994:86). Moreover, during the last few years we have witnessed an increasing number of Sudanese nationals moving to Egypt. Most of the Sudanese refugees in Egypt trace their origin to Southern Sudan, South Kordofan and South Blue Nile regions. A civil war erupted in 1955 and still continues today, although there was peace between 1972 and 1982 and some refugees returned to Sudan. The war is causing many people to escape the country to neighboring countries or stay in the northern region of the Sudan where the fighting is not serious. It is estimated that
African women and children make up between 65% and 85% of refugees and displaced (African women report, 1998).

In the late 1990s, an influx of displacement occurred in Egypt, the trend has witnessed an increasing number of female Sudanese women and children since most of the men may be engaged in the army. While in Egypt, most of these women are in precarious positions, as they do not have any qualifications and skills to obtain white-collar jobs; even the educated do not have legal rights to work as the Egyptian labor law restricts foreigners to work. The majorities work as domestic maids and have resorted to group work as a partial solution to the social economic conditions they face in exile. Hitherto, no consideration is put to identify women refugees who are not accompanied yet have to work hard to make ends meet as single parents. In her study of post conflict in Mozambique, Baden noted “no source was identified to establish overall sex ratios for the refugees and displaced population. Despite their majority, early planning for the displaced did not take women and gender into account” (African Women Report, 1998).

1.1 Statement of the problem

Men and women suffer from various conditions in society but women suffer most because they are disadvantaged with respect to education, employment, training and status. Concerning this condition of women, measures have been taken to relieve their burden and drudgery by improving conditions and providing resources for investment. This is essential if wider female access to decision-making and resources is to be achieved. Women’s projects are the starting point to improve their socio-economic position (Haynes, 1997:120, Motaal,1995:11). Women’s empowerment has been perceived as one of the ways to reach sustainable development because of
women’s response to daily survival tasks. The response of all societies to issues pertaining to women has been influenced by the international community that is why many studies emphasize the empowerment of women especially refugee women (Harcourt, 1994:xiii, Narasimhan, 1995:5). Population movements have become a prominent feature of contemporary society, but there have been few attempts to explain why refugees were made on foot to choose their present status and the efforts accorded by women’s solidarity in exile. This study is distinctively aimed at exploring how women’s groups empower Sudanese women in exile. Although women make up majority of the world’s refugees, until the mid 1980s women were invisible in refugee studies (Mori, 1999). Even, now there are no reliable statistics to provide a gender specific picture of populations in exile (Loescher and Monahan, 1990:141). To date there is no research on Sudanese women’s groups in exile and even back home in Sudan there is little research specifically focusing on women’s groups. Sudanese women are also forgotten in other areas such as women’s organization. Research works on Sudanese refugees in Egypt carried out by (Abu Bakr 1995, Sudan Cultural Digest 1996, Mori 1999, Ladu 1996 and Jefferson, 1999) had seriously neglected the collective efforts of Sudanese women in exile. This study aims to address the gap.

1.2 Purpose and significance of the study

The purpose of the study is to explore the potential and dynamics of women’s organization among Sudanese refugee women in Cairo. It will focus on available women’s groups in Cairo and what the groups do to improve the conditions of Sudanese refugee women in exile. The research also attempts to look at the challenges confronting women’s groups in Cairo.
Various studies have tackled the issue of gender bias in society. Gender discrimination is a major social problem that undermines the conditions of millions of women. It has affected the conditions of women in public sector, finding jobs, educational opportunities, in homes and everywhere (Momsen, 1991:1). This is one of the reasons for under development in third world countries because women are deprived of education, training, health services, childcare facilities and legal status. If women are to be empowered, they must be given agency as equal individuals. Moreover, there is little fight to empower women. One aim of the proposed research is to increase public awareness of this problem and to highlight the need to find solutions. It is also hoped that it will serve as an entry to the Sudanese refugees community in Cairo for further research interests.

Some attempts at addressing gender bias have been made. In recent years faced with the mounting growth of poverty in third world countries development planners have started to shift their interest to women related development. Women are now the focus of the globe, any development project that does not consider the interest of women in society is a failed development project. There is an enormous need to empower women through self-help projects so that they are on the same footing with men. Women’s attempt to mobilize and socialize as a group might lead to a new female consciousness oriented to change their low status. In recent years women have started to organize themselves by coming together to share their burden, experience and interest. By doing this they exchange many commonalities that benefit them in their careers. They also gain solidarity through their collective action. Women’s groups are important because through them women learn new social and occupation skills. Through the women’s groups, women are educated about their rights and learn how to demand them. Women can also acquire training that promotes
services that benefit them. Women learn to cooperate towards a common goal and through discussion acquire knowledge and means to protect their rights and interest. Women's groups can also help to raise the living standards of women and through the group work, women contribute to the economic and social development of their families and community at large. Women's groups not only provide monetary but psychological support as well (Motaal, 1995:12 and Wipper, 1984:69).

1.3 Research question

The main research questions to be explored are:

1. How group work empowers women
2. Why women's groups evolved and
3. How they are expanding and with what benefits or outcomes.
4. What challenges confront women's groups in exile?

1.4 Relevance of the study

The theoretical importance of this study is to contribute to the literature on refugees generally and southern Sudanese women in particular. It will be an important contribution since not a single study has ever given women agency by studying their collective efforts as grass root groups committed to improve their living standards. This is significant because women are often victimized and are undervalued despite the fact that they are active productive members in society. The study is therefore based on the assumption that refugee women's collective efforts have had a positive impact on their families' well being in exile in Cairo. Improving their economic position has been the major driving factor that motivated women to work together, yet contrary to this is the fiction that refugees are helpless individuals in need of endless
free humanitarian assistance (Mori, 1999:1). This is not the case with Sudanese refugees because they are not helpless in their current condition. They make their living by working as domestic maids/servants under harsh working conditions and they cater for their accommodation, as they do not stay in refugee camps. Poor health, lack of education, and human rights abuse are other problems prevalent among Sudanese refugees (Jefferson, 1999, Mori, 1999 and Ladu, 1996).

According to the United Nations 1951 refugee convention, refugees in a host country should be treated fairly and be given adequate assistance to sustain them physically, psychologically and socially. Contrary, the Sudanese refugees in Cairo are neither fairly treated nor fully supported, as the convention requires. This weakness affects refugees in other places. Loescher and Monahan explicitly contend that the international community geared to respond to refugees' problem is proving to be incapable to adequately meet the needs of the growing numbers of the refugees today. They further argue that the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has strongly received criticism from humanitarian agencies dealing with refugees and government representatives, who finance UNHCR programs, for its inability to provide protection for all groups of refugees (Loescher and Monahan, 1990:9). This is not however, to undermine the assistance rendered by these charitable bodies to refugees. Nevertheless, it suggests that refugees are still confronted with difficulties even after crossing borders. It also means that the number of refugees is constantly growing which is evident in the case of the Sudanese refugees in Cairo (Annual Report of the Joint Relief Ministry, 1999-2000).

Given the situation of Sudanese refugees mentioned above, most women have resorted to forming self-help groups in which they launch income-generating projects to sustain their families. Through these groups, women secure more benefits
concerning economic, social, cultural and psychological well-being. Many other studies have also stated that women group participation has positive impact as it empowers them (Motaal, 1995, Haynes, 1997:130). It can also be argued that studying refugee women groups is relevant because through them one can learn about the potential of women’s projects as they improve women’s social economic position. This is significant because women as family providers are confronted with special economic problems during crisis. The sociopolitical importance of women’s empowerment groups is that they empower women in male dominated societies. However, Sudanese women’s groups are geared towards empowerment because of the socio economic conditions that tend to reduce the status of women while in exile.


1.5 Target group and choice of respondent

The target group is the Southern Sudanese women groups available in Cairo. The respondents were chosen from four women groups that were taken for the study. In fact between 1991-1993 most people who entered Egypt were predominantly women and children. Up to date an increasingly large number of Southern Sudanese who are forced to evacuate Sudan either because of the civil war or economic and political pressures continue to come to Egypt. Most of the migrants to Egypt in 1980s entered as students who studied in the Egyptian universities and institutes. Recent migrants are ordinary people, many women and children escaping the war and human rights abuse by the Sudanese government.
1.6 Data collection methodology

Qualitative research methods consisting of in-depth interview, field notes and observations were utilized to gather data. In addition, I have reviewed literature on women experiences in group work. Four Sudanese women groups were identified. The leaders of these groups were met and the purpose of the research explained to them. Some questions were asked to familiarize the researcher with the group activities; later on an interview was conducted with the group leader. The purpose of the study was explained to all the prospective informants, and then if a candidate agreed to be interviewed, an interview commenced. Based on a sample of twenty-four respondents, in depth interviews were conducted with six women in each of the four groups. One of the six women in each group was the group leader. Observations and field notes were also carried out to ensure that information missed during the interview was noted. Before selecting the sample I made contacts with women at various facilities where they conducted their activities. Four sites were visited which made up the field sites of this study. The four sites are

1. Joint Relief Ministry Program (JRP)\(^2\) in Zamalek where the women income-generating project operates.

2. The Sacred Heart Church\(^3\) at Abbassia where the Bakhita women’s group operates.

3. African Hope School\(^4\) where the Maadi women’s fellowship group functions and

4. Marakasi El- Amal Al Nisuwi (MAAN)\(^5\) or Women’s Work center at Tahrir

\(^2\) The program gives assistance to those Sudanese families, which are not recognized by UNHCR. It also assists other refugees from other African countries.

\(^3\) In this church most of the Sudanese gather to socialize. There is a club and most of the economic activities are found here at night and in the morning it operates a youth school program.

\(^4\) It is one of the Sudanese refugees schools operating at Maadi.

\(^5\) It is one of the groups started by northern Sudanese women in Cairo. It is officially recognized and registered as one of the NGOs.
An appointment was made for an interview. In most cases, all interviews were carried out where the group’s activities took place. However, sometimes a respondent was visited in her home and this necessitated a prior arrangement. Interviews were done by randomly choosing among the members who were available and willing to be interviewed. The twenty-four women were interviewed within a period of two months from September–October 2000. The interview questions were based on the organizational theme of the study. The themes were respondents’ social background, structure of the groups and informants opinions about group work. The interviews were run in Juba Arabic\(^6\). I later transcribed what was said into English. This however, is not to deny the fact that those respondents who knew English spoke in English. It was not my choice but once a respondent initiated the talk in English, the interviewer proceeded by asking the questions in English. Being a member of the Sudanese community in Cairo and a frequent visitor of the church the researcher was able to meet some of the respondents through the group leader and sometimes through other members suggesting other women to her.

Nevertheless, it was not easy to do research among women whose time was very limited due to their multiple roles (household duties, children care) coupled with paid domestic work and the group work commitment. As a result it was difficult to catch the women to sit down for the interviews because they wanted to rush home. This was because most of them came to their group meeting centers immediately after leaving work. Few of them however went home and proceeded to the center to do their required duties in the group. Some of the women were not willing to be

\(^6\) A lingua Franca, which is spoken by the various ethnic groups of southern Sudan. It is a combination of some Arabic words and words from the local dialects of the south.
interviewed because they did not want to waste time on an activity that was not rewarding. Some of them asked what benefit they would get from answering my questions and for the amount of time they spent with me. I appreciated their various views and responses because I understand the pressing need women live in and what it means to spend time without any compensation.

1.7 Description of the data

This data was collected among the Sudanese women refugees community in Cairo. The target group of the study was women who identified themselves as belonging to a particular women's group. Among the reasons mentioned for joining the groups were to socialize so that women share common concerns, to build spiritual strength, to learn new skills, to avoid isolation and life indoors and to have a sense of national identification. The objectives for starting the various groups were almost similar. They include building awareness and skill training among women. They give chance for interaction and spiritual strength whereas activities undertaken by the several groups include knitting and sewing, literacy classes, tie and dye screen-printing and card printing. Lectures, seminars and discussions concerning women issues, network with different women groups to further the role of women in development, Christian fellowship among women and counseling sessions with families.

Regarding the opinions about the changes that had taken place in ways of life of the respondents. The following were some of the reflections mentioned: Psychological relief from loneliness, frustration and life indoors was one major remark. Women said that they found a place to go and interact as they shared their common problems with one another. New skills, knowledge and work experience
were gained and women acknowledged boldness as another achievement in addition to gaining spiritual strength. All went as far as comparing their previous lives to life after joining the group by saying that they began to look at things in a positive way and could encourage and strengthen each other. All these various perspectives and opinions reflect the various activities of the four groups.

Success stories such as:

Being able to read and write, earn income which has been used to feed and send children to school, help families of sick people with trained personnel who help to care for the elderly, train the people with important skills, removing the north and south bad attitude towards each other and learning many things in life from fellow women.

These have been mentioned to emphasize the success of the various groups. All members of the four groups stressed the spirit of cooperation and sharing meetings and important celebrations, visiting other groups of interest. Rianol (1994) argues that in times of crisis women's collective efforts were valuable as they give solutions for food provision and other family and community needs. Snyders and Tadasse hold that the increasing dependence of family and household on women's earnings has pushed women into the market-oriented activities of the informal sector. I think that the increasing and changing gender roles of women in exile have added fuel to women's activism in exile with the profound need of fending for their families and community at large. In fact one remarkable transformation of women groups has been the focus on individual change, interpersonal change as well as community and social change.
CHAPTER TWO

GROUPS PROFILE AND RESPONDENTS
BACKGROUND

This chapter gives a brief history of the groups under discussion and the
demographic characteristics of the respondents. The following is a brief history of
each of the four women groups selected for the study:

2.0 Women's income generating project (WIGP)

An Australian woman working for the Joint Relief Ministry at All Saints
Cathedral, Zamalek initiated this group in 1997. The objective was to involve women
in the community of the church and to introduce income- generating projects that
empower them. This was achieved by offering training sessions in tailoring and
sewing. Women were trained to use the sewing machine and to design many fashions
of children's clothes. Other activities undertaken were making beads, knitting or
needlework (table clothes, bed sheets, wool sweaters and socks was made, printing
cards for special occasions such as Christmas and Easter was performed.
The women income generating project supervisor manages petty cash and the entire
work of the project. After the training is finished, each member is given materials to
work on. The products are sold and part of the income generated is used as a rotating
fund or capital and the rest is distributed among the women.
The mothers union is a component of women's activities in the church. The union has
committed church members who meet every Tuesday to share the Bible and discuss issues that affect their lives as women. After the Sunday service prayers, the women go back to the church to interpret the readings into their own languages. The members of the union also run an adult education program and visit sick people in homes and hospitals. The church administration gives the women some capital to make tea and food, which they sell to the church congregation. The women repay the loan for the tea to the church administration and they retain the profit. The members alternate among themselves each week to take the chance to make tea and food. Some of the members of the mothers union also make clothes and handicrafts and market them to gain income. They combine together with the three other women’s group and organize a bazaar where they sell their products. The above activities are important because they bring women together to share experience and promote common interest. Studies have pointed out that groups provide means for increasing meaningful interactions among women who are able to share common concerns while group members and their families benefit from the income generating activities (Horne, 1999).

2.1 Marakasi El Amal Al Nisuwi (M.A.A.N.)

Thirty women from northern Sudan initiated the group in 1996. The founders of the project started having the meetings in their houses as they did not have an office. This group is a legally recognized NGO in Egypt. The group initiators are highly educated women. As a well-informed category of the Sudanese society, they felt concern for the future of the country and formulated long term development objectives that might later impact on the Sudanese economy.

The main objectives are to train women in order to gain skills that empower them so that they can participate in the development and building of new Sudan. It
also contemplates short as well as long development goals. The goals include raising awareness among refugee women in order to create a transformation of Sudan. It organizes pressure groups and mobilizes women against human rights violation, it also monitors and documents violation of women’s rights and collaborating with other groups. They also plan to give courses about environmental issues, health issues and computer skills.

Some of the members were people who had left the Sudan because of political affiliation and because they had lost their jobs, and socio-economic reasons forced them to flee the country. Among them were professionals such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and politicians, finding themselves idle, and typical housewives because of lack of jobs in Cairo they decided that they should get together to socialize and discuss issues of concern. Later they started to conduct training programs for women in health issues (care for the elder people), enlightenment and awareness campaigns. After the training, the group seeks employment opportunities for its trainees. It continues to train and finds employment for women they train. It locates Egyptian families and hospitals that need health care providers. This group’s training programs hope to empower women through provision of useable skills. This means skill acquainting is very essential for women to advance. By coming together women learn new social and interpersonal skills. These are a starting point for networking and providing social relationships that are not only beneficial to women but to society as a whole.
2.2 Bakhita women's group

The Bakhita women's group was started in 1993 by a group of women. The main aims of the group are to train women to have some skills and to bring them to share experience and problems instead of staying lonely or isolated in their apartments. The group wanted to give women a chance to get out of their houses. The group undertakes adult literacy classes, knitting and handicraft, screen-printing and Bible study sessions. They obtain income from the sale of their products. The members are provided with raw materials to make products for sale. Each member is paid some money as incentive depending on the nature of work done. Women have found enormous comfort and support from such activities. Almost all women acknowledge the fact that they have a place to go after the day's tiresome paid work.

2.3 Maadi women's fellowship group

This group has recently been established. It started in February, 2000 with only a few members but it is now growing to the extent that the initial meeting place is not enough for them. Membership is open to any person willing to join the group. The main objective of the group is to build the spiritual strength of women so that they come close to God whose word will help them to persevere and cope with the hard situations in exile in Cairo. Some of the Sudanese families are scattered so by coming together as a group women can share their problems and burdens and comfort each other with the word of God. A group of women initiated the idea of fellowship with other women. The women meet once a week and they conduct home visits and offer counseling services to individuals and families in need. Constant members of Maadi community church who identify themselves as part of the women fellowship
group were offered discipleship training and leadership skills. Although membership is open to all women, training is restricted to close members of the mother church (Maadi community church). There are recent proposals to include some income generating activities that can be of benefit to the women. As a spiritually oriented group, its focus is to see to it that women grow spiritually. This is important and acts as a means of comfort to the women in the hard situations they find themselves in while in exile. It enabled women to be able to leave their homes as they found a place to go and socialize. It has also offered women leadership skills and communication skills that are crucial in people’s lives.

2.4 Respondents Characteristics

The respondents in all four groups were in their late thirties and early forties. This means that they were mature and were of similar age and background. By this I refer to the historical period in which they grew up. This is reflected in their education level. Nearly all women were junior or secondary school leavers reflecting the attitude towards women’s education in the past. However a few had reached the level of high institutions. Those who had reached high education were among those who held high positions in the groups because they could on occasion speak on behalf of the groups. The low level of education explains the reason why many joined the women groups as they stand lower chances of finding white-collar jobs.

As mature women, nearly all were married with average family size of around four. Most of them reported that their husbands were around. This suggests that these women joined groups to improve their families’ welfare. It could also be said that as mature women with grown up children, they had more time and opportunity for extra household activity than younger women. However, the fact that their husbands were
around and women continue to be household heads reflects the difficulty of their husbands finding jobs in Egypt.

As regards the duration of stay in Cairo, most of the women were new arrivals and had stayed for only one year or so. This reflects the report of the Joint Relief Ministry that since 1999, the number of new arrivals has increased and that more new people were expected to come to Cairo. A few however, had stayed for a range between three to six years. These could be among the group of migrants who came to Egypt seeking for educational opportunities. Fearing the socio-economic and political insecurity of the Sudan they decided to remain in Cairo.

Nearly all members were Christians, which reflects more about the religious affiliation of the Southern Sudanese community with the church. Northern Sudanese are Muslims and reluctant to deal with the church. It could also be the reason for the activities to be sheltered under the umbrella of the church. Almost all members work as domestic maids and their incomes were the only source of livelihood for their families. It shows the shifting gender relations in exile where women assumed the role of breadwinners and men took care of small children at home while women were away working. This could also explain women’s involvement in some income generating activities along side paid domestic work. It also exemplifies that one source of income is not enough to meet the growing needs of the family in such cosmopolitan city like Cairo in which the refugees found themselves. It thus explains the proliferation of women groups in exile in Cairo.

The women were found to have other useful skills and work experience although some of them did not make use of them in exile. Among the groups were professional teachers, who were responsible for the adult education classes. Some were teaching at St. Andrews refugees education program, African Hope School and
St. Luanga School. Common skills mentioned were handicraft and embroidery, sewing and tailoring, few other skills were primary health care, computer skills, leadership skills and secretariat skills. It may as well mean that income-generating projects have increased women's opportunities to earn income that has been helpful to their family and thus improves living conditions. It further signals women's endless efforts and desire to improve their status to support their families and community at large.

2.5 Case Studies

In an endeavor to explore the issues that will be discussed more in-depth and to present directly relevant data collected through the course of this study. I'm going to present four cases of the women interviewed. From each group I will submit one case. The case material also includes observation comments and interpretations by the researcher. The four women are Muna, Julia, Margaret and Christine.

The Case of Muna (M.A.A.N. group)

Muna is a member of M.A.A.N. women's group and a Muslim. She is 31 years old and is from the northern part of Sudan but she has lived in Cairo for 20 years. She is a graduate of Ain Shemis University and has a Bachelor degree in Business Administration. Muna is single and stays with her parents in Cairo. They occasionally visit Sudan. Muna enrolled in Dec.1999 for the training session organized by M.A.A.N. group. After finishing her training, she was employed as administrative secretary of M.A.A.N. She has Bookkeeping and secretarial skills.

The respondent said that she joined the group because she wanted to be among her own people. She also had special interest in women issues. Muna was once a
member of a Sudanese woman’s group in Cairo. At the time of the interview she did not recall the name of the group. But it was concerned with improving the position of women. It was offering health care skills, Mother and Child Health and other issues that deal with women's lives. She said that the group did not survive for long due to shortage of funds. This shows the problems some of the women's groups are facing.

Muna mentioned that the objectives of the M.A.A.N. group were to enlighten women and to raise the standard of living of women by giving them training sessions. She stated that one of the activities the group undertakes is Primary Health Care (for the elderly) and first aid course both theory and practical in selected hospitals in Cairo. It is important to note that the training was provided by Care with Love, which is a charitable Egyptian Organization contracted by the M.A.A.N. group to train its members.

Muna says that she has learned many things about personal and public hygiene. She also believes that meeting new friends have enhanced her public relation skills during the course. She said that she has also gained work experience with the elderly. Muna is of the opinion that the group has succeeded because it has enabled people without qualifications and skills to gain knowledge. Moreover, she thinks the elderly have benefited from much needed care and support. She reported that the long distance traveled by most of the trainees affected the performance of the group. She argues that the training begins at 6.30 am so it is difficult for the trainees staying in far destinations to catch up with the time. Her suggestion is that the starting time for the session should be extended. The respondent argues that she is satisfied with her achievement in the group. She also thinks that if women's conditions improve, they will no longer depend on men. She however, said that women couldn't be exactly like
men. She commented that the group has managed to bring together many women from the various parts of Sudan.

The course organized by the group has benefited many as they gained knowledge and skills that may enable access to job opportunities. Muna also thinks that if she had the right, she would work to advance the position of women by starting community development projects like the one executed by M.A.A.N. so that they enlighten more women about health issues.

**Christine (Bakhita women's group)**

Christine is a member of Bakhita women's group and a christian. She is 31 years and has junior school certificate. She is married and has a family size of three people. She recently came to Cairo and is only one year. She works as a maid and has other skills in embroidery and tailoring. The respondent stated that she joined the group because she wanted to learn from other women. She also said that she wanted to have a place to socialize and share her problems with other people instead of staying indoors.

Christine was a member of women's group in Sudan and she reflected that in Sudan they were distributing food to the needy families. This I think this is one of the reasons for arguing that their activities in Sudan were much better than in Cairo. She mentioned that the objectives of the Bakhita group are to train women so as to acquire skills and bring women together so that they share problems instead of staying lonely. The activities the group performs include tie and dye, tailoring and embroidery, screen-printing and literacy classes.

Christine acknowledges that she learned new skills such as screen-printing and combination of colors. She confidently argues that she can now do her own products. She is also of the opinion that the group has done a wonderful job by training many
women and giving them opportunity to gain income. This highlights the general acknowledgement of all the groups that the groups have managed to give women a chance to fully support their families financially. The respondent reflected that the lack of funds hinders their progress in the group. Her suggestion was to avail funds to accelerate women's groups. She also thinks that any group effort is better than doing things individually. Additionally, she mentioned that anyone who has joined the Bakhita group has benefited from the collective effort. If she had the right she lamented, she would love to enlighten women to know their rights. She said that all women should be active and engaged in activities that benefit them both inside and outside the house. The willingness to enlighten women is emphasized because of the illiteracy of the majority Sudanese women. The emphases on making women know their rights shows that Sudanese women are deprived of certain rights.

**Julia (women's income generating project)**

Julia is a young charming girl aged 24 years old. She is a Christian and is single. She has lived in Cairo for one and half years. She was a church youth member back in Sudan. She has skills in needlework, computer and Primary Health Care. It is interesting to mention that Julia was dismissed from the course organized by M.A.A.N. group because of failure to comply with the course regulations. Being eager to learn new skills and perhaps because of the limited chances to find school for her age, she decided to enroll for the training session organized by the women's income generating project.

She said that she joined the group because she felt the skills would help her in future. She said that the activities they undertake in the group were bead making, sewing children's garments and tailoring and card printing. But she stressed that she was interested in tailoring and she hoped to apply the skills learned practically.
The respondent expressed that she has acquired technical skills as well as communal interaction with various people. Before she joined the group she said that she did not know the importance of a woman. But after joining the two women's groups, she realized that women are more important and better than men because they often think about the welfare of the family and community by forming community development projects that are useful to the society.

Julia reflected that she reasoned maturely even if she is still a young girl. She attributed it to her frequent interaction with elder women in the group. Julia is of opinion that the group has been fruitful because many people have benefited from its activities. She mentioned absenteeism of the trainees as a major blockage to the progress of the group. She emphasized that some times the women start the course and they do not finish. Her suggestion was that baby care centers should be made available so that the women who have small children could attend the training sessions organized by the groups. Similarly, the church should try to assist the women financially since that most of them forgo the training to look for better paying jobs. She also thinks that girls should be encouraged to join the course because they have fewer obligations. Julia maintained that she was satisfied with her attainments in the group.

Her comment was that the income-generating project has greatly helped women and children. On one hand women have managed to come together to share time, interest, experience and skills, which has benefited them and their families. On the other hand children have had a chance for their mothers to make for them clothes at home at any time, as they don't cost much money. She maintained that she has learned to ask for her rights as she can overcome some of the traditional beliefs that were a blockage to women's way. Julia's dream is to see it that women join hands
together and work as a group. This is because individualism does not enable women’s progress.

**Margaret (Women fellowship group)**

Margaret is 36 year old. She has an intermediate certificate and is married with a family size of seven. She has lived for three years in Cairo. She works as a maid and has skills in handwork and clerical work. The respondent said that she joined the group so that it keeps her busy with the word of God. This will enable her to overcome various temptations facing refugee women. Margaret was involved at small ways in women’s home visit program in Sudan. She has been a member of the fellowship group in Cairo ever since it started. She recalls the objectives of the group as to bring women together so that they share their spiritual strength. The respondent implied that the activities they undertook in the group were fellowship with women where Bible discussions were held, discipleship and leadership sessions as well. She said that there is a proposal to initiate a handwork program.

Margaret admits that she has changed spiritually and she is able to stand in front of people. Her life has totally changed and she feels that she is a different person. She reflected that in the past she was shy and lived in darkness. She was unable to address many people but now she said that she is bold enough to do so. She emphasizes that she has benefited from the discipleship course and she is able to forgive other people who have done wrong to her.

The respondent accepted that the organization has succeeded to meet its objectives because it has brought light among women and their faith in God has strengthened. The number of women is also increasing compared to the time the project was initiated. She elaborated that they visit women who have special problems and give them counseling. They try to encourage them to be strong, tolerant and to
persevere as true Christians under all circumstances. Margaret said that she is satisfied with her achievement in the group. She is of the opinion that the group through its fellowship session has enabled women to learn, memorizing the verses of the Bible. She laments that this has been a great source of comfort for women in exile. The informant mentioned that if she has the opportunity she wants to bring women together irrespective of their backgrounds and try to encourage them to work as a group so that they obtain success.
CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

3.0 Theoretical Orientation of the Study

The theoretical orientation of this study is summarized in the following thesis statement: The researcher argues throughout this study that woman's empowerment is directly related to opportunities created for their advancement. Thus, when the position of women is improved the entire society benefits from the improvement of their status hence living conditions change and become the better. Given the above as a base for the theoretical adjustment of this study, I find it essential to examine the Sudanese refugee women's groups in their attempt to create situations that are in their favor, such as learning new skills, literacy campaigns, coming together to socialize in the various churches in Cairo. This chapter discusses the feminist and empowerment theories in relation to women's groups. It concentrates on third world countries especially Africa and with particular reference to Sudanese refugee women's groups in exile. It is divided into two parts, the first part is related to feminist theories and gender issues and the second related to empowerment literature in relation to social development.

3.1 Gender focus and feminist literature

According to feminist writers, "human relations between men and women from Stone Age appeared to be more or less equal politically but by the time society emerged from Neolithic mists into full light of recorded
history, most institutions inventions and all power
became the prerogatives of male" (Shelton, 1996:vii)

“There is no single country in the world where men and
women enjoy completely equal opportunities that is
why we must change attitudes and policies so that each
and every human being is given greater freedom to
make decisions about their lives”
(Brundtland at the fourth world conference on women
in Beijing, 1995 in Narasimhan 1999:1)

The above statements suggest that societies are characterized by gender
discrimination and that gender is a socially constructed image of what a man is and
what a woman is. We derive these understandings from our society's way of
organization and from our daily experience in society. To overcome this gender gap
feminists call for a gender-neutral society, where institutions, pattern of behavior,
values and norms are people oriented rather than man shaped (Bazilli, 1991:64).
According to Bryson (1992:264), an ideal society must imply far reaching economic
change. Similarly the economy should be looked at from the perspective of women and
not the other way round. Institutions and structures that tend to stipulate such
manipulations must be challenged. This means that change or societal transformation is
possible from within the society. This could be one of the significance of women
groups as a social movement calling for such change. I think this explains why
Bhagwati former chief of justice of India argued that the poor themselves could best
eliminate poverty. They must organize themselves to be individually and collectively

Feminists therefore call for an end to historic injustices that have created a legal
disadvantage and that will not be overcome without great efforts exerted. This also
exemplifies Marx's argument that generally people are not inclined to political action
but that they become politicians when they are socialized into such action as part of civic responsibility and they become revolutionary when their capacity to improve their lives are blocked by structural impediments (Marx qtd. Johnston, 1986:20). The two arguments of Bhagwati and Marx exemplify that when people are deprived of opportunities to improve their material well being they resort to political action by forming civic groups to fight for their empowerment. It suggests that such obstruction has been caused by structural obstacles in society thus can be objected and change can be achieved through organized effort by the people themselves. Feminists contend that legislation that suppresses discrimination and provides equal opportunities to all citizens should start by empowering those previously disadvantaged. This is possible by equipping them with the necessary skills such as education, training and experience (Bazilli, 1991:70). It is true that the socio-economic position of girls and women is reflected in an array of development disparities between men and women. It is replicated in many countries in literacy, school enrollment, health care payment rates, access to land, availability of credit and employment opportunities (Haynes, 1997: 121, Narasimhan, 1999:23-26).

James Grant the executive director of UNICEF noted that in all countries and cultures, modernization benefits of education, literacy, urbanization, improved economic growth favor men over women. He contends that it is for this reason that member states are working to alleviate poverty and trying to promote the advancement of women. Furthermore, states have been pressed to distribute resources according to where they are needed (Speech of UNICEF director qtd. Haynes, 1997:122). While I do agree with the notion that states have been pressed to distribute resources equally, I do not think that it is equally true in all countries. Some countries claim to have worked to improve the status of women; moreover, they manipulate it for political interest with
no actual improvement in the conditions of women. For example in Sudan, women's social and economic conditions continue to worsen under the dictatorial Islamic regime. It could however, be attributed to the difference between third world and first world countries. Where in the first world there is a political culture that promotes the advancement of women and more space to pursue their goals in democratic governments than in authoritarian political systems in third world where they are curtailed. This however, does not deny that some countries in third world might have reached that level of liberal democracy that promotes civil society participation. It could further be argued that most third world women groups and particularly Sudanese women's groups in exile are oriented to overcome their economic and social malaise.

3.1.1 Kinds of women's empowerment groups

Haynes writing about civil society in the third world distinguishes between two kinds of women's empowerment groups.

a. **Western style feminist groups**: These are made up of the elite and restricted to members of westernized, middle class university educated women. They pursue strategic objectives.

b. **Feminine groups**: They are most common and concerned with many material issues from consumption to social political problems. These groups seek practical goals (Haynes, 1997:129).

Most women's groups in the third world are feminine groups because they focus on material needs that are the basics of survival. This in fact explains the birth of many action groups in the third world. Haynes (1997:141) explains that any kind of movement has a stimulus that motivates the people to take action. The stimulus that
motivates the Sudanese women in exile to form groups is poverty and an isolated life where each woman was staying inside her own apartment and facing the tragedy of refugee life alone. By coming together, the women managed to forge an identity that was recognized and they obtained space and capital that enabled them to start income generating activities. Women were able to support their families with the income they obtained from the group work. In fact, this demonstrates the increasing phenomenon of female-headed households. Vickers (1993:94) notes that one third of the world's families are headed are De facto woman household 7 thus women's access to employment or self-employment is essential to combat the growing impoverishment of female-headed households.

It is worth noting that the four women groups studied were concerned with material needs. However, one of the groups (M.A.A.N.) women's groups seeks strategic objectives as well and they contemplate long term development plans. It focuses on social and political empowerment of women. It does this by organizing pressure groups and mobilizing women to protest against human rights violations. It also monitors and documents violations of women's rights and collaborates and coordinates with other groups in addressing these issues. The significant difference between the groups could be attributed to several factors since the colonization of Sudan up to independence. Nevertheless, this goes beyond the scope of this study. However, for simplicity's sake this variation in objectives and activities reflects the difference in education level, political familiarization, work experience and qualification and above all regional variation and imbalances within the Sudan itself.

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7 This refers to women headed households with no male spouse present or households in which the male spouse is present but his contribution to the economic maintenance of the household is marginal.
Hale (1996: 76) writing about gender politics in Sudan maintains that the Christian Southern groups produce socially emancipated women. For several reasons, they did not participate in national politics, were rarely feminists and were often not taken very seriously. It is possible that the general political conservatism of these elite women was influenced by the patriarchal ideology of the Christian British colonizers. Hale continues that the women who eventually assumed leadership roles in Sudan were Muslim northerners. However, she argues that this is not to overlook the fact that a small number of Christian southern women were among early role models in some professions such as Physics.

In fact, the phenomenon of dualism is common in third world countries where we find that both traditional and modern sector coexists, rural and urban, poor and rich live together. For the case of Sudan, it shows the regional variation between the northern and southern part of the country. In the north, during the colonial period, development was given high priority and education chances were available to the northerners thus they proceeded ahead. In the south the interest of the colonizers was rather the Nile valley and all the riches of the region. Akol notes that until 1945, taxes were paid in kind, and there was no government school, no hospital nor even a single development project in the south. The southerners were denied common platform for involvement in public affairs as they were ruled apart in their respective areas. It was only missionaries who started introducing education in the south, but the kind of education was for spiritual life of the people and not a form of liberal education (Akol, 1994).

As regards the other three groups, the desire is only directed to meet short-term goals, which include the basic needs of life. This is because of the lack of political orientation of majority of southern Sudanese women, which is the result of
lack of education and other political reasons. However, the similarity of the four
groups is that they aim to empower women. The fight for empowering women has
strengthened the women groups in exile. Even the appalling attitude and enmity
between north and south as two distinct entities, which characterize the relationship
between the northern Arabs and southerner traditional Africans has been removed.
The women united to fight for their disadvantaged positions. This understanding has
been created in exile through the group interaction. It shows that when women join
efforts together, change can be achieved for the improvement of stereotypes and,
prejudices and ideologies created by history.

Although Hay and Stichter (1994:72) argue that women in Africa use societies
to foster unity among themselves and their loyalty to tribal institutions, it could be
emphasized that through the unity created by the groups the Sudanese women have
realized the significance of being one. The above analysis brings us to the
understanding that historic injustices have created a legacy of disadvantage that
cannot be conquered unless the people involved engage in dialogue. The dialogue
promoted by women in exile is a step forward to problem solving and conflict
negotiation.

I find the Marxism and Socialism feminist perspective useful in explaining the
current gap and disparity between men and women. According to this perspective,
both men and women should work together to create a classless society in which all
forms of subordination are removed and relations between sexes will no longer be
based on economic dependency. Thus women's liberation should be aimed at the
economic, social and sexual structures, which allow men to dominate women and
legitimize their power (Ramazonoglu, 1989:187 in Bryson, 1999:197). The problem
with this perspective is that it seems to ignore the political and ideological aspect.
Since gender identity is deeply rooted and embedded in our culture, social practices and interpersonal relationships, it needs a simultaneous solution that address all these issues together without eliminating one out. This explains Bryson’s argument that no one issue should be solved in isolation of the other because chances have cumulative effects and progress in one area can be both dependent on and upon a precondition for progress in others (Bryson, 1999:127).

She maintains that measures that benefit women will lead to a more general, just society where feminine goals are bound up with other progressive social measures. Such social measures I think could include women groups as one example. It is for this reason I also think that the cumulative effects mentioned by Bryson are significant if meaningful development is to be achieved. Campbell and Segal also contend that the problem of men and women is identified as complex psychological, cultural and social process through which the masculine is constructed so that it can be changed and tackled (Campbell and Segal, 1990). This means that women’s situation can be reversed and their status can be improved. However, another area of research that still constitutes an essential part of the theoretical framework of this study relates to the empowerment theories.

3.1.2 Empowerment theories

The empowerment and feminist theory have much in common and the integration of the two is particularly applicable to women’s organization. Feminist writers Worell and Remer (1992:22) conceptualize empowerment in the following two ways: “First as an individual process that assists women to cope in dealing with their life situations by achieving flexibility in problem solving and developing full range of interpersonal and life skills. Secondly, as a way to encourage women to
develop understanding of external conditions, that undermine and subordinate them as women or members of minority groups”. The above conceptualization of empowerment seems to comply with the motives that made the Sudanese women groups in exile to come together and learn from each other. Candella and Uggen (1993) writing on women groups argue that when women get together they begin to realize that the situation surrounding them is not personal or exceptional but social and created by social forces in society and that they can be changed. So, the desire to improve their lives motivated women to resort to collective effort.

Bricker-Jenkins and Hooymans (1986:11-12) mentioned "Feminism re-conceptualizes power as a force of energy that is inherently non-vigorous and which is oriented to liberating the strength and energy of women and others". Bricker-Jenkins (1994:102) again noted "empowerment involves fostering the development of personal and structural requisites that make people conscious and empower themselves". Empowerment as explained above is a strategy to alleviate poverty.

According to Singh and Titi power has two elements, one of them is local self-reliance or autonomy in decision-making process by all people and particularly women. The other, which is equally important, is provision of space for cultural affirmation and spiritual well being. These elements of empowerment they argue are essential to bring about changes that are indicators of sustainable development (Singh and Titi, 1995:64).

Studies conducted by Momsen (1991:11) and Motaal (1995:12) showed that there is need to empower women through women’s voluntary organizations so that they move out of the drudgery and hardship they encounter. Access to resources is not adequate to challenge root causes of gender inequality. As a result, emphasis has been put to assert women’s own agency and that is through women’s self-
empowerment that will enable them to break out of gender subordination (Jehan, 1995:7-9). Furthermore, he argues that in the last two decades the women's movement has succeeded in creating a common ground among northern and southern women. As a result, he asserts, by the 1990s several changes were experienced. First the number of women organizations increased and second many of the women groups shifted their focus from welfare to development enabling poor women to obtain access to productive resources such as credit, employment, income, literacy, health and family planning. It reflects the argument that women are trying to empower themselves by their collective action. They are trying to explore variety of issues and in turn help others as well as receiving and fostering an atmosphere where new social and interpersonal skills can be learned and modeled (Horne, 1999).

Connell also argues that many women organize and get together to improve their lives through various activities. These activities he argues generally constitute a united women's movement whose aim is to improve the situation of women (Connell, 1987:93). A study by Peck (qtd Riano, 1987:236) revealed that single mothers had identified empowerment as increasing conditions in which their needs and those of their children were met. They also go beyond economic self-reliance towards political self-reliance. This he argues involves mobilization and organization to end systematic subordination and call for a new agenda. Mies and Leornado also argue that it is essential to empower women and the disadvantaged by identifying the unmet requirements and addressing key issues through participation (Mies, 1986 and Leonardo, 1989 qtd. ibid). Narasimhan (1998:98) studying women groups in India noticed that benefits accrued as women joined group work. Among these are acquisition of new skills. He argues that women's access to income generating resources and share in decision-making has been enhanced through group work.
Many studies have indicated that for women’s projects to flourish they need financial schemes to give them loans so that they initiate economic profitable activities. For example, Vickers (1991:68) reflects on a women’s group running a sewing cooperative and a day care center. A women’s group in Indonesia is producing clothing, woven articles, silk fabric and embroidery. A mother’s club in Bolivia is operating various activities, which aim at improving the health status of mothers and their families. The club runs activities such as dressmaking, agriculture and small livestock, and investment in laundries, bakeries etc. All these activities are run with the assistance of United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and World Food Program (WFP). It could be for some of these reasons that Sudanese women groups evolved in exile in Cairo. It could be argued that through their collective effort, the groups have managed to secure financial resources from the donors to support their income generating projects. This is proved by the group members mentioning various sources of support such as Middle East Council of Churches, Bible Lands UK, Tear Funds UK, Netherlands Embassy and Arab Center for Childhood Development. I think that this is one of the achievement of the global feminist movements, which has strongly contributed to the theory of power by re-conceptualizing power to be equally shared between men and women.

3.3 Women groups in Africa

African women’s groups are relevant to this discussion because they embody similar traditions of group solidarity as those held by Sudanese women’s groups in exile. Although the examples brought are from various African countries, it does not mean that they are in any way equal to the Sudanese women’s groups under
discussion. But it is just to shed light on the group norms that are maintained as uniform.

### 3.3.1 Traditional groups

In Africa, women groups are available in many countries but under different names. Women organizations were also based on kinship, age, sex, secret societies and women interest groups, village level dance or work groups. African women have been traditionally engaged in cooperative efforts to cultivate and harvest their crops. A work group of ten to twelve women would work on one members’ farm one day and move to the other member’s farm the next day. Members could as well organize to bring firewood to a member who had recently delivered a baby. The firewood would last her for the period until she is strong enough to go and collect it on her own. This is very significant in traditional societies in Africa where labor is still intensive. Women by helping each other this way secure enough time to do a big job with less time and energy. The moral support they provide to each other is valuable and is a strong source of psychological support.

### 3.3.2 Women’s interest groups

In this kind of group women enforced rules and regulations that protect their interests. The women used such regulations during the colonial rule to fight against the colonizers. One example of this is making war found in Nigeria among the Igbo. Women used it to protect their own interests as traders, farmers, wives and mothers. When carrying out this sanction, women dressed in uniform and smeared their faces with ashes. They then gathered at the offender’s home at night and sing songs that outline the complain and dance. In extreme cases the house of the offender would be
destroyed. Making war was a strong punishment used to punish wrong doers in the society (Hay and Stichter, 1984:71-72).

The Korn women of Cameroon similarly had a punishment system, men who offended their wives could be summoned. The offended woman would give a high pitched call and upon hearing, other women would quickly come to help. The women would listen to the narration of both accused and accuser then later judge the case. If the accused man was found guilty, he was fined to pay a goat and fowl. If he was a habitual offender more drastic sanctions were imposed. They include wearing pieces of men’s clothes, painting their faces, and covering themselves in leafy vines, and parading to the offender’s home in the morning. They sang mocking songs while dancing. Sometimes they would restrict the offender from visiting other people and forbid people from visiting him. When the offender wants the women to forgive him, he puts Anlu vines around his neck and goes to the women to plead for forgiveness. If his pleas are accepted, the women take him naked to a stream and bathed him in purification ritual and finally bring the man to his home. He was then rubbed with powder and camwood and palm oil (Hafkin and Bay, 1996:47). It is worth noting that women groups were available in Africa since time immemorial and that women had the power to influence the society to meet their interest. Women’s organization is substantial because through it women protect their interest and develop skills that are essential to participate in wider political arena. Women learn to cooperate and attain a desired goal. They also learn to protect their rights. Such groups also tend to discipline men, as they fear the sanctions imposed on them by women thus places women in respectable positions.
3.3.3 Secret societies

These exist under different names in West Africa especially in Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Guinea and Liberia. The main function of these societies are to educate young girls, create cohesion among young girls, provide ground for secular political power and maintain equilibrium between the patterns of stratification in society. In Liberia today, through secret societies women can move to the powerful lineage and upward mobility. In Sierra Leone women leaders benefit from the initiated labor on their farms (Wipper, 1984:73). It could be analyzed that the situation of women in Africa deteriorated during and after colonial rule. The colonial rule codified patrimonial and patriarchal practices that established a gender hierarchy, which Hale (1996:71) attributes to British chauvinism.

3.3.4 Modern women groups

In Kenya, women's cooperative society has made efforts to promote handcraft and opened handcraft shops in Nairobi. The cooperative has expanded to over five thousand clubs and eighty thousand members. Hartcourt (1994:139) studying women's groups in Kenya noticed that the group enabled women to obtain titles to land. It also organized and consolidated an institution that mediated between customary resource and management rules and modern laws. The mediating tendency he continues enabled women to gain access to resources, which they had been deprived of during the colonial rule.

Cuturfelli studying women groups in Ghana and Togo revealed that Ghanaian businesswomen groups controlled the sectoral interest of retailers. In Togo, retailers in the capital made their voices heard in politics of the country because of political influence (Cuturfelli, 1983: 91). A study by Gelp et.al (1996: 20) found that the
women association of Mombassa maintained and preserved their culture through their association. They also conducted adult education classes, religion, childcare and sewing plus other community projects that not only benefited the group but the society as well.

The association for protection of the environment is one of the garbage recycling women’s group of Moqqatam in Cairo. The program has trained women in literacy, handicraft, sewing, public hygiene and sanitation. It has made women financially independent providing them with skills that qualify them to obtain income for their families (Guevremont, 1997). Steady posits that these associations are strong sources of psychological comfort. They promote and preserve standards and values that are considered good in society. They also sustain cohesion and develop solidarity among members (Steady qtd. Hay and Stichter, 1984:235). Pankhurst (1992:119) thinks that the church affects the daily actions of people, provides scenes for social interaction and defines the community.

In Sudan women are organized groups in their residential areas where they put money together and buy kitchen utensils for use by the members when need arises. This collective strategy initially developed a form of institutionalized self-help among women. It provided women a level of internal organization that improved services for any communal occasion at hand. Riano (1994) has cited this kind of collective participation among women who organized self-help groups and provided them an internal organization. In exile Sudanese women groups are as well involved with serving their community and in the process new organizational and leadership skills are learned. It could be argued that in times of crises women’s collective effort is duly needed for collective solutions. Since women started to organize, they no longer stay in isolation as they share problems and try to help each other in times of need.
This kind of participation in subsistence organization represents an improvement in their material conditions, which can later be imparted to the society. It is significant to point out that traditional women’s groups in the past were oriented to local welfare issues such as helping maintain the interests of women against male domination. This could be attributed to the self-dependence of societies as they drew resources from within the locality. But with the integration of society into the world economy and emergence of capitalism, societies tended to rely on market economy. This necessitates change of the needs of the women groups, which have to focus on socio-economic benefits that would enhance the integration of women into the economy and improve their living conditions.

It could be summarized that empowerment is about helping women to expand their capabilities to be responsible for their surroundings. It enables less vulnerability and fosters an atmosphere of greater dignity for women not only in economic terms but also in all aspects of their lives. Through group work, women gain more access to resources that place them in better positions of decision-making and self-autonomy and at the end benefits the entire community. It is obvious that women’s organizations act as a bridge between its community’s needs and resources. This explains the reason for women’s accentuation on community building, collectivism, caring, mutual respect and self-determination. Therefore, the overall conclusion is that, women’s groups is a potential source of empowerment as it improves their living conditions and those of their families. The groups have been a major source of economic support and psychological relief among the Sudanese refugee women in exile.
CHAPTER FOUR
PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

This chapter is based on first hand knowledge thus relies very much on data collected during in-depth interviews and also observations and fields notes of the researcher.

4.0 Development of Sudanese women’s groups in exile

The Sudanese women’s groups were started in Cairo because of dire need. In most cases the idea started simple by women coming together to socialize. Then later on they thought of doing some income generating activities that would benefit them. In an attempt to create a situation in favor of the refugee women, the Sudanese women organized themselves in groups and tried to perform some activities that at the end rewarded both the women and their families. The following comments by two of the respondents illustrate this:

The activities we make have earned us some income, which helps us since women are responsible for the economic maintenance of their families. We allocate some of the money to help ourselves in times of emergencies (Catherine)

Another comments by Josephine

The group has enabled us to overcome isolation and life indoor. We now interact freely with each other and share our problems

Sudanese refugee women mobilized to get together because of particular reasons as elaborated by the several groups. It reflects the argument that women are trying to empower themselves by their collective action. From these findings, it could be
argued that the Sudanese women groups in exile are not peculiar but that they are need oriented and they emerged because of the dire need to solve current critical situations in exile. Particularly the need to come together and interact was among the most prevalent reasons of forming and joining the group. The commitment to gaining skills enabled women to obtain employment or get income through self-employment.

Two respondents have illustrated this as follows:

Since I came from Sudan, I became frustrated because of staying indoors. I was sick psychologically but after joining this group I was relieved and I’m no longer sick (Catherine).

However, Erica maintains that,

I have learned many new skills that I did not know before. Such as printing T-shirts and embroidery. Above all I now have an income since that I can sell my products. I have also found a place to go and interact with fellow women with whom I share my problems and they are my source of comfort.

This demonstrates that Sudanese women’s groups are based on the necessity to solve the pressing requirements of women in exile. Secondly they are linked to empowerment, as women are in desperate need of empowerment not only to improve their status but also to help support their families. It could however be argued that women’s issues are a public concern because their interest spans from the household to the community, thus women’s activism emanates from their roles as guardians of health for families and communities.
4.1 Benefits and changes accruing from the groups

Politics based on solidarity recognizes that women gain by supporting each other and in a way they retain the idea of sisterhood\(^8\) phenomena. The focus on togetherness marks a turning point from individualism to collectivism. It also means that humans form a society and that they do not exist in solitude from each other but are interdependent. In fact Sudanese refugee women have benefited in many ways from the group work. The following is an illustration from one of the respondents, Mary:

There is great change in my life since I joined this group. I have an income and I can buy food for my children also I have managed to send them to school. I work as a teacher in the group and I'm happy with my achievement. I'm now relieved from the pain of staying indoor, we get together and talk about our problems. We worked day and night to produce eleven thousand T-shirts\(^9\), which we sold and earned more income.

In all groups studied the findings disclosed that women had greatly benefited from the groups and that many things had changed in their lives and ways of thinking. All respondents acknowledged with pleasure the new skills they had learned after joining the groups. Skills such as printing, embroidery and knitting, bead making, sewing and fashion design, use and repair of sewing machine have been reported to have helped women to obtain some income, which greatly supported their families. Women have learned how to make their own and children’s clothes, which is an investment in itself because they no longer have to buy ready made clothes that are expensive but make

\(^8\) View that women all should act like sisters towards each other by working to improve their status.

\(^9\) These T-shirts were produced on the occasion of blessed Josephine Bakhita the first Sudanese woman to be ordained Saint. The T-shirts were screen-printed with the image of the blessed Bakhita. They were sold cheap to the Sudanese community in Cairo so that every body would be able to buy. Some were sent to other countries such as Kenya and Tanzania to Christians there as presents.
them at home. The group leaders have gained special skills such as organization and management, leadership, communication and bookkeeping. One respondent said that,

I discovered that women have broader reasoning capacity when they work together. They have hidden creativity that I did not know. I'm now an expert in the sewing machine; she said that this was a hidden creativity in me.

These changes in women’s lives reflect the quantifiable benefits, however, as regards the un-quantifiable benefits women in all groups mentioned that they had found a place to go and interact with fellow women. Some said that they learned to associate with various kinds of people while others stated that they got relieved from stress and psychological tension due to loneliness. Ihsan reflects this as she puts it that,

Before joining the group I was idle, useless and a depressed housewife with no place to go, I slept all day suffering from what to do but after joining this group I was relieved and my stress is gone. I now get up very early in the morning and go for my group duties where I meet many friends to talk to and share our problems. I even started to read some materials such as magazines and books.

Others have appreciated boldness and overcome shyness as Awor reflects,

I have learned to communicate with different kinds of people and interact easily with them. Nevertheless, before assembling in this group I was shy and did not speak when I was among many people.

This shows that Sudanese refugee women have learned how to communicate effectively in addition to the various aspects narrated by the women. The skills they have learned will help them improve their lives. Riano contends that women need to learn to express themselves and defend against meddling and poor treatment (1994:263). This further suggests that women are or have been neglected and
therefore need to speak up to defend themselves. Voicing ones thoughts is a right, which is a great achievement if secured.

4.2 Additional miscellaneous changes

4.2.1 Members of M.A.A.N. women group

Members have been trained as Community Health Care Promoters (CHP). They mentioned that they gained great knowledge in medicine. All said that they did not know any thing about the new vocabulary they learned such as balanced diet, measuring body temperature, heartbeat, general hygiene measures etc. They reflected that they could now measure the body of their children and judge their health. They know what to do to a sick person before taking him/her to a doctor. They have as well gained work experience with the old age group (this is because after the training the organization seeks for employment for its trained members in hospitals and homes that have sick people who need care). Anisa mirrored that:

I'm confident that I can now work with the ministry of social welfare, and as a nurse when I go back home.

In fact this skill acquisition is essential, as there are practically few doctors available for refugee patients and even back home in Sudan. This knowledge can be of great importance for the refugee women to determine the health of their family members. Moreover, when these women go home the skills learned could provide employment chances as well as give them knowledge in health care, which is crucial for women as the first doctors at home. It is worth noting that health is a critical issue of concern in developing countries and especially in Sudan where women have less chances and
access to health facilities compared to men. These trained women would enhance the
spread of health information among women in the community. Two respondents
acknowledge the fact that they are able to care for the elderly who need special
attention. Mervat maintains that,

Not any person in the street can care for the old aged
people except trained people who understand the
psychology of the old age.

Muna also emphasizes that,

I’m able to understand, cooperate and sympathize with
the old aged that is undergoing difficult moments in
life. I’m bound to know that one time I will become like
them. This was something I did not have in mind before
but the course has enabled me to uncover it.

Some women expressed the need to introduce the course they learned (care for the old
age) to the Sudan when they go back home. It could consequently be concluded that
Sudanese women groups in exile are similar to other women groups elsewhere. They
have worked to improve the position of women and enabled them to earn some
income and managed to cope.

4.2.2 Maadi Fellowship group and Mothers’ Union

Members of these two groups emphasized the spiritual changes that took place
in their lives. Some said that they benefited from the discipleship and leadership
courses that they took. Moreover, the spiritual growth and the confidence they gained
in themselves enabled them to preach the spirit of non-revenge and forgiveness,
something that was not easy before. Another respondent Rose remarked that,

I have learned to educate my children in a Christian
way of life and the spirit of love has helped me in my
work place and home thus I’m more joyful than before.
Debora from the mothers’ union quoted that,

I have dedicated myself to the work of God since that I have a big responsibility to lead people. My actions have to be role model to others.

All respondents insisted that the spirit of togetherness has made them independent and to rely on God’s mercy. They learned to share people’s problems and encouraged them to remain strong in faith. This is as Lily puts it that,

I did not have encouraging and strengthening words before, my life was full of fear, but now we are known to many strangers and have had chance to express our views which was not possible when I lived singly. I began to look at things in positive way.

The above expression and the credentials gained exemplify the commitment of the groups’ members to the church and to the community at large. It shows the loving and caring nature of women by caring for the needs of others in captious times. These two groups are important because they give women strong faith and religious leadership, which in turn earn them respect both inside, and outside the church, this adds to their status in society.

From the study findings, the hypothesis that when women work together as a group they improve their living standards is positively established because the results revealed that women’s conditions improved as they worked jointly as a group to overcome the obstacles that impede their progress. It has further made religious belief fundamental in Sudanese community especially during their life in exile. In fact one of the most interesting feature of this study is the discovery of how women relate their relation to God. They put confidence and hope in him as the sole protector in whom they relied for their survival strategies and needs of life in such critical moments of
displacement. It would thus be interesting to know what their position or feelings towards God would be if they were in their original homes.

4.3 Challenges confronting Sudanese women’s groups in exile

Women are increasingly forming groups in almost all cultures. They are organizing themselves traditionally around basic needs of their community. But over the last two decades women’s organizations has grown far beyond their localities. A new level of women’s organization addresses issues of family and community welfare in a way, which adds to improvements in women’s status (Visvanthan et.al. 1997). This means that as women’s organizations get engaged with issues far beyond their environs they get confronted with various problems created by the increasing demand and needs of the women’s families and communities. These challenges tend to reduce the performance of the groups. Contemplating the obstacles facing the Sudanese women’s groups in exile, the groups interviewed established the following as some of the obstacles affecting their progress.

4.3.1 Lack of capital

This was found to be a common uncertainty that affected advancement of the groups in exile. Poverty is about marginalization, vulnerability, social exclusion and limited options in life and as these issues require empowerment, microfinance\(^\text{10}\) is one determinant of empowerment. Micro-finance is vital because it enhances income-generating activities to create jobs, which enable earning income. It helps to strengthen solidarity groups. As the absence of capital is a major problem in all

\(^{10}\) It is about credit and saving being available to be given for women’s groups to flourish.
groups, it affects the accomplishment of women, which in turn reduces the chances of improving their economic conditions. Moreover, women’s incomes are more crucial than ever to family survival.

This is as Mary puts it that,

> It happened that women stopped taking literacy classes because of lack of funds, but we volunteered to teach although some of them did not attend as they lacked transport allowance.

This suggests that the improvement of women’s conditions is dependent on capital or resources that can be used to boost their projects. This is why the provision of resources for women’s advancement is a requisite if meaningful development is to occur.

### 4.3.2 Punctuality and time

This is the second barrier that reduces the attainments of Sudanese women’s groups in exile. It is related in the sense that because of women’s multiple responsibilities, they often find themselves caught up by time before they finish one activity and shift to another activity. Nearly all women work as domestic maids, given the insecurity of the job women were seized by time before they go to their groups. It follows that they often reach the centers very late and being exhausted from the day’s long house work, their performance in the group is affected.

In fact I find it essential to employ Marx’s notion of class in trying to analyze the relationship between the employers in this case the owners of the homes where the Sudanese women work, and the workers referring to the domestic maids (Sudanese refugee women). Their relationship is never harmonious but one of exploitation because the maid is over worked and alienated from the fruits of her leisure time. The terms of agreement were not relied upon, for example the number of hours agreed
upon was exceeded and the maid was under constant inspection and abuse during the working hours. This however does not generalize the situation of all maids and the fact is that some employers were reported to have a respectable attitude towards their maids. In most cases women who had the chance to work with foreigners were happier than those who worked in Egyptian homes. The findings suggest that if women worked on their own they would organize their time effectively and will result in their potential contribution to the groups’ development. But as women worked under someone and under undefined work conditions, it impacts on their contribution to the groups. Nini reflects this in the statement,

If the number of hours for women’s work could be reduced or even if the employer adheres to the terms of agreement, the groups would do better than what they are doing now.

Sometimes women’s situations in their own homes did not allow them to fulfil their duties in the group. Sickness of a child or family member could prevent women from doing their assigned jobs in the group. This suggests that women’s multiple roles often interfere with their advancement. I think this elucidates the reason for feminists’ argument that both men and women should work as partners to enhance the development process.

4.3.3 Distance

Most of the women stay far away from the heart of the city. This is because rent is expensive around the city. It follows that refugee women tend to live far away in residential areas that are cheap and affordable to them. It impacts on their progress in the groups because they have to come a long way to the group meeting point. Naomi reflects this in the below statement,
We give one pound as transport allowance for the trainees but those who come from far distances complain that it is not enough.

A study by (Mori, 1999-98) reflects that many refugees live together in shared households in the poor districts and they live marginal lives in the city. This further confirms the fact that Sudanese refugees are not accommodated in camps or settlements in the asylum country but they make their own housing arrangements as soon as they come to the first country of asylum.

4.3.4 Resettlement program

It was mentioned that the massive resettling of Sudanese refugees to the second asylum countries was posing problems to the women’s groups in exile. This was explicated by one of the group leaders that,

Resettlement is proving to be a threat to us; most of our trained and qualified members are being resettled.

Another similar complains was,

The resettlement program is taking away all the trained women. Some of them don’t even finish the course once they start it. Those who finish the course do not finish their assignments\(^\text{11}\)

Therefore, those women who had the opportunity for resettlement don’t finish the work they were assigned.

4.3.5 Absenteeism

This refers to women’s continuous absence from the group or their constant failure to report to the group. This was attributed to family problems because sometimes

\(^{11}\) This refers to any kind of work given the women after finishing the course. In most cases, they were given material from which they make children garments, table cloth and bed sheet, bead making etc.
trainees who have children do not continue the course because of childcare. Some women fail to continue with the course because of a desperate need to earn income. In such circumstances, they want to be engaged in activities that reward them financially and within a short time. This means that women value the course but because of a pressing need they don’t want to spend three months taking the course without any tangible benefits accruing.

4.3.6 operating under strict regulations

Women in all groups maintained that the performance in a foreign country under different regulations affects their activities. They lamented that,

In Sudan we would be more productive than here. We are not in our country therefore; the restrictions imposed on us in the foreign land affect our progress. Such complaints were common among two groups, the Mother’s union and Maadi women fellowship group. In summary they argued unanimously that,

In Sudan our activities were broad because it is our home but in Cairo we don’t have the freedom because the landlords don’t want many people to come together in one house despite the fact that the houses are already rented to clients. The Egyptians don’t accept constant gathering in their apartments, they respond by chasing the client away. This is scaring us, as we don’t want to put our people into trouble. But we don’t give up, we divide ourselves and few of us would go at a time and preach the word of God to the families identified. This is important because some women do not have the chance to go and pray in the church because of lack of time and transport money. So it is our duty to see to it that the word of God reaches them.
Another major problem facing the mother’s union was lack of transport money for movement from one place to another in preaching the gospel. However, the church has solved the problem by availing them some money for transport. Therefore, from all the illustrations it is apparent that the Sudanese women’s groups are confronted with all sorts of harsh situations that affect the proliferation of their groups.

4.3.7 Solutions to the problems

In an attempt to stimulate the creativity of the women in the four groups and to find out how much they were aware with regards to problem solving, the women were asked to suggest some solutions to the problems they mentioned as obstacles to their performance. The interview revealed that women were very creative and in response to the question, they provided an array of options as solutions to the problems they encountered. The following are some of the suggestions:

Top on the list was the need to avail funds to finance women’s income generating projects. One respondent also noted the need to train NGOs so that they know the language of how to convince donors to fund projects. Training is a crucial component of women’s empowerment so that they gain the needed skills. This is essential because for women’s income generating activities to flourish there is great need to back them up financially.

As regards the issues of punctuality, time, distance and absenteeism, women suggested that if it was possible the employers should reduce the number of working hours for women or at least to the terms of agreement as set prior to taking the job. This was emphasized because most employers tend to over work their maids and violate the terms of agreement reached before the job commenced. For example if the
job requirement were house cleaning, then gradually childcare, cooking, washing and ironing would be squeezed in without consideration for overtime. As mothers and concerned with their sisters, who had small children, women lamented that the availability of a day care center would greatly enhance the ability of mothers with small children to participate actively in group work. Others felt that the church should assist women financially since some of them go searching for high paying and quickly rewarding jobs. This was mentioned because of the obstacle created by women who did not see value to continuing with a three months course but instead valued getting a job that would enable them to earn income to support their families. Some said that girls should be encouraged to join the group work because they do not have responsibilities. One woman however maintained that she sees no solution because women cannot stop performing paid domestic work, as it is the major source of their livelihood.

In regards to the distance, this informant felt it is not easy to solve because all is associated with money. The further you live from town, the cheaper the rent. Another woman said that, regarding the multiple roles of women it will take time to change them and the environment surrounding them. The group leaders however, felt that they will have to impose some restrictions as pertaining to admission of women to the group to undertake training. For example, they said they would accept only the women who had not been granted refugees status by UNHCR. This is because they will be available, as they won't go anywhere.

The implication for this is that it will eliminate vast numbers of women who badly need to gain some skills, knowledge and experience about group work, creativity and several benefits accruing from collective action.
4.4 Self-confidence, self-esteem and sense of agency

Regarding the question of how women related their achievement to the group, all women in the groups mentioned with confidence that they were satisfied with their achievement in the group. Each woman felt self confident that she had a group identity and gained self-esteem because of the collective action, which in turn gave the women’s group dignity and a sense of self-organization and management. As earlier mentioned, the group members have expressed that they gained organization and management skills, leadership skills and communication skills because of their day-to-day operations in the group. One woman argued that they can go anywhere and that they knew many strangers because they were an organized group, this would have been impractical if they worked singly or individually.

When a series of questions regarding what was true about women when they draw their efforts together as a group was asked, all women mentioned that the options given were true about women’s collective efforts. Basically the options referred to were, that women gain status when they have power. Moreover, the group work empowered them as they were able to make decisions that affected their lives, they had control over resources in their groups and they were confident that their sense of agency had been incessantly rewarding. They contended that women became literate and aware as they no longer lived in isolation but continuously interacted and gained interpersonal skills. In this, way women felt they knew their rights and how to demand them. They also argued that women have broad reasoning to win the confidence of those who undermine them.

Nevertheless, one profound and interesting remark by nearly all women in the groups was the impression that women in exile were better compared to men. Some reflected that women were better than men since ancient times. The women who
argued that women were better than men reasoned that if women were given opportunities for training, and if they were equipped with all the necessities they would create projects that are useful to society for example sewing, embroidery, health education, nutrition and sanitation etc. Women’s income fully benefits the household unlike men’s income. Women would also fend for themselves and no longer depend on men compared to the past where women were not enlightened and depended on men and their status deteriorated. Some women had mixed ideas and they felt that women could not be exactly like men. Others thought that women had big gap to overcome thus it would take them a long time before they become hundred percent like men. Some said that although women cannot become like men, they could do something for themselves.

All these findings suggest that, women had gained self-esteem and self-confidence that had changed their outlook on their position vis-a-vis men. They were convinced that if there was equality based on gender, women would move up the ladder as they profit from the chances available. Through the groups, many women discovered that their experiences were shared with many other women. The various views of women likewise means that women don’t want to be exactly equal or superior to men but they want to be treated as equal partners in all aspects of life. It is therefore important that women be granted high status and be on equal footing with men because women especially the Sudanese refugee women in exile have assumed the role of bread winners as most of the households are women’s headed households. It further shows that women are helpful in critical times and they are as important as men and thus deserve to be treated as such. It confirms the statement of the United Nations Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar who maintained that where
women’s views and experiences are absent the political process is incomplete (Vickers, 1993:150).

4.5 Women’s comment about the groups

The most outstanding and common achievement of the groups as perceived by the group members was the contribution of the group to having gathered together women from the various regions of the Sudan (East, West, North and South). The women contended that if this spirit was sustained it would raise the standard of women from the various regions in the country to the same level. It is as well important for the creation of New Sudan. This was reflected in the following words,

The group brought us together both northerners and southerners. It is something I did not think of before in Sudan but now I know the reality of the differences between the north and south after our free and open interaction (Mervat)

The group has brought together the political parties of Sudan in exile with the aim of voicing women’s issues. This crucial step is to improve the status of Sudanese women. The group is expected to lobby for the betterment of women’s position in Sudan while in exile so that when people go back home the situation is transformed (Ihsan)

Women should live their lives in-groups, learn from each other and try to help those women back in Sudan. We should not brood on our hardship and think that we will change without struggling. We must overcome our difficulties so that we can build a new Sudan, which is possible by coming together as children of the same mother, and share all challenges in life together (Ghada).

Other women appreciated the groups for giving them moral support as they joined hands together to help each other and other people in the community. The groups enhanced skill achievement and many other new things such as training some people who had never had a chance to use the sewing machine, it enabled some
women to read and write. It also strengthened women’s faith in God, which has helped the entire community. The researcher argues that it is vital that women join hands together to bring change in their societies, this is what empowerment is all about. Research into women’s way of knowing, reasoning and decision-making has shown that women think different from men. Thus, this difference can bring solutions to some of the major social problems. Vickers contends that because of women’s concern with relationships they look for holistic views, which focus on problem solving. As mothers, sisters and wives, they are accustomed to resolving disputes and aim at win-win-situation (Vickers Jeanne, 1990:130). Women’s special talent in negotiation enables them to see the inter-relationship between equality, development and peace. Thus, it could be argued that women are agents of peace. I think this explains their interest with the issues of the north-south conflict in Sudan, which has caused the civil war in the country to continue for almost thirty years. Yet there is still no promising outcome at the moment in terms of prospects for peace in Sudan. If women were given the full potential to participate in the politics of the country, prospects for peace might be eminent. It also indicates that if the warring parties in Sudan do not critically think of the win-win-situation as the best solution to the civil war, their efforts remain wasted attempts.

4.6 Advancement of women

When women were asked what they would do to advance the position of women if they had the right, a majority of the women reflected the dire need to educate women, and raise their awareness. Both formal and informal education should

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12 A model, which seeks fairness and reconciliation in problem solving rather than victory and retaliation.
be emphasized. The importance of formal education is that it bridges the gap between those that left education and dropped out of school. Adult education and vocational training centers should be established to benefit women. Women also need to be taught the law and know their rights so that they are liberated from male domination and oppression. This should be done by encouraging women to be actively engaged in civic activity that benefits and gives them status both inside and outside the society. For example, women should be mobilized to join associations and participate in community projects such as health education, nutrition, public hygiene and childcare. This facilitates interaction and exchange of ideas and common concerns instead of staying in their houses. Afajok believes that,

Nobody is incapable of doing anything if encouraged and given the chance to do so; she argues that women can think like men thus do not deserve to be deprived of such opportunities.

The second most important need identified as necessity for women is creation of employment opportunities. This will enable women to cease doing paid domestic work and will enable them to forget their difficulties. For financial assistance should be made available for women so that they start small income generating schemes that are profitable. They argue that women should be motivated to participate in such projects because they are managers in the community. Debora puts it that,

A woman exudes light because she sheds that light on the community she deserves to have numerous chances in life so that she faces the challenges in her daily life courageously.

Another consequential aspect referred to by one of the respondents was separation of religion from state. She said that she would prefer that no segregation be imposed. Everyone has the right to stay as a citizen of Sudan regardless of his/her color, origin, ethnicity, class and religion. Sudanese
should live in peace since they drink from the same calabash (the Nile) she continued. One of the respondents expressed the need to expose women to the new technological changes in all aspects of cultural life, education and science. She also emphasized the magnitude of removing all other barriers that impede the progress of women. In fact, these women’s answers shed light on the major problems surrounding Sudanese citizens. It highlights the realities of politics in Sudan as a multilingual, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic country. It further shows that the northern women have realized that the southern Sudanese are not fairly treated in the country and hence their suggestion of a secular state.

The reflection on the issues such as education shows the high rates of illiteracy in the country especially female enrollment in school verses male. It is common knowledge in Sudan that sex preference is at its peak and in any case, boys are given preferential recognition. It has resulted in high female illiteracy, unemployment and lag in terms of advancement. I think this illustrates Jehan (1995:1) who contends that gender inequality has become a major concern of the international community and a central development issue. The response has been the acceleration of women’s advancement, which is made possible through a holistic approach to development.

Finally yet importantly is the reflection on building the spiritual strength of women so that they bring up good families. Besides women also focused on the significance of women’s leisure time for their recreation. We can notice from the above answers that women’s concerns deal with issues that
affect the entire community. It is therefore crucial to give women special attention because the welfare of any society depends on their involvement in the society’s affairs. Women refugees should be given special attention because they are the most affected as they toil to meet the needs of the family. Other studies have shown that African women during economic and social crisis ensure the survival of their households and community. I think this explains why despite the hostile conditions in exile Sudanese refugee women continue to struggle to rescue their families from the vicious social and economic circumstances they face.

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13 The issue that considers women’s equality in the development process and decision making process and women’s involvement in all aspects of life in the process of social and economic transformation.
CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss how Sudanese refugee women’s groups empower women and how the family and community benefit from their empowerment. I will also discuss the general findings of the study in relation to other similar studies conducted. The study was initially designed to cover a sample of twenty-four women. In choosing the women, the main criterion was that they had to be members of any of the four Sudanese women’s groups studied. There is one significant difference among the groups in terms of the social demographic characteristics and the activities or objectives of one of the groups. The most obvious contrast among the groups lies in the education level of the pioneers of the different groups. However, the groups are similar in that all aimed to break the chains of isolation among refugee women due to confinement inside their apartments.

The most significant finding is one of the motives for women to join the group was deprivation, which is a psychological dissatisfaction where women felt unhappy and lonely because of despair in exile. This particularly is said to be caused by frustration and desire to overcome it (Rotkirch and Elenan, 1996:256). This is a critical stage of coping; it is thus crucial for women to cope with challenges they meet in their lives if they are to live longer as this determined their life span. The second motive was support for each other and sense of solidarity. This is critical because it enables women to help themselves in sharing the tragedies they encounter in their lives in exile. The third motive was material rewards. Women joined the group to learn new skills and knowledge, which will benefit them. As women managed to get income from the scale of the products such as knitting wool sweaters, socks, T-shirt
printing, card printing, etc, they improved their living conditions. Thus the groups were created based on the principle of survival in hard economic conditions. This confirms many previous findings that the reason for groups to work with women is because women have remote chances of getting jobs thus they are meant to create jobs (Elena, 1996: 258). So it is obvious that by creating their own organizations women empower themselves and in turn this imparts great importance to the community and society when they go back home.

As mentioned by some of the respondents, the benefits of group work are many. This means that practically working as a group and performing all the income generating activities rewarded the women and improved their positions as they were accorded status that empowered them. For example Afshar (1998:67) hypothesized that women’s lack of empowerment emanates from their relative lack of participation in economic activities. Tadasse (1995:184) also argues that women should be able to earn money and control their products, without this power, she continues, women’s status and well being of their families seldom improves.

Other studies have shown that the potential improvement in women’s status has earned them respect from their husbands because of the use of their income to benefit the family. Therefore the increased participation of women in economic activities in exile has led to their empowerment, which has also impacted on their families and community. A common feature of the activities is that women directly benefited from them and the income was used to support their families and send children to school. Therefore women’s income is crucial. Stall and Stoecket (1998:229) found similar results; they contended that as women help to supplement their husband’s salaries they are regarded as economic assets. The difference between my study and the one by Stall and Stoecket is that, my study is conducted where men
have no chances of employment. Since they don’t work therefore women’s income is not only supplementary and an asset but it is the sole income for the family’s livelihood thus a necessity. Stall and stoeckel’s study is assumed to have been carried out in places where men have employment opportunities and have salaries thus women’s income is considered supplementary. It is important to keep this in mind when assessing the impact of group work and women’s income on women as well as evaluating its outcome.

It was found that all women perceived group work as important. Through group work, women came together and socialized, exchanged ideas and shared their problems. They also set up income generating projects that provide them not only with skills but also set up workshops for them to start their own income projects. Therefore the more women get together the more they are empowered. More power means strength and recognition by society thus women’s groups are effective. Obviously, women’s perception of their work is essential because it gives them self-esteem, confidence, dignity, and sense of agency. Through the groups women learned many things and their lives changed, these changes have had an impact on women’s perceptions and attitudes. Women started to perceive things differently and in most cases, their perception was positive. By attaching new meaning to previously accepted cultural values and ways of life for example in the past women were not supposed to ask their partners to do any domestic duties. The men themselves did not accept performing domestic duties, even women were not supposed to work outside the home and come back late without the consent of the male partner.

Moreover, in the past people did not talk openly about domestic work. But now it has been exposed and you find that at any time the women meet they start to discuss about their jobs comparing their masters and lamenting on very many issues
that affect their lives in exile. For example, a house cleaning session is run at the women’s income generating project at All Saints cathedral at Zamalek. This course enables new arriving refugees women to learn first hand skills and knowledge about domestic work using modern facilities. The session is important because in most cases refugee women were of rural origin and have no know how of the use of modern domestic facilities. Such orientation gave women confidence in themselves before they started to render their newly wage earning duties of domestic household work. In fact without organization the newly arriving women would find it rather hard to adjust to the new environment in exile where they found a different life from the one they lived. But through an organized effort, the women volunteered to help to give orientation sessions to their fellow sisters who had recently arrived. The new arrivals have found more comfort than if they were to start from scratch. This highlights the significance of organization. It shows that when people are organized life becomes easier even if it was tough. The most important achievement of the Sudanese women’s groups in exile has been the effort exerted to help each other by sharing and offering services whole heartedly to the whole Sudanese refugee community in Cairo. This shows a kind of unity which may have never existed if they were in their country. It demonstrates that when people are in a foreign land they tend to be more closer and attached to each other than when they were in their own habitats.

Moreover, women’s access to income has enabled them to have say in decision-making matters in the household. Women alongside their husbands had a chance to suggest the allocation of the household budget. These were areas that most women were not involved in back home. Nevertheless, some men feel scared that women have taken over their authority and that taking part in decision-making was a threat to their power. Others however, have no problem, as they understand that the
situation is temporary. Women’s ability to have income has as well placed them in a position where they can have a word in reproductive issues. This is because one precondition to paid domestic work is good health status, meaning that pregnant women stand lower chances of getting work, as their performance automatically deteriorates. Being aware of this fact, women exercise caution regarding their reproductive decisions. In most cases they have been able to decide together with their husbands to abandon conception for sometime, this has increased women’s exposure to contraceptives. This however, is a hot issue in the community because it has caused, and continues to cause problems in some families.

In fact both areas, engaging women in decision making such as how to allocate use of household budget and to decide whether to have children or not is what scares most men, feeling that women are trying to over throw their decision-making authorities. Obviously, when women have access to productive resources, and are engaged in participation in the various issues that affect their lives, change can be achieved. This tends to empower them by enabling them to have control over their lives and be able to meet their unmet needs for their family and community at large. This is actually what empowerment is all about. Nevertheless, the changes that have occurred in women’s lives to contribute to their families and to their ability to cope with harsh life in exile are valuable.

My data suggest that these have resulted in empowering them and giving women better access to resources and decision making that enabled them to take control of their lives and families in such critical time of war with its concomitant effects. Mori’s study as well supports my findings. Her study discovered that access to independent income facilitated negotiation of the terms of marital interaction among refugee household. Women’s income enabled them to secure some autonomy
and enhanced self-esteem (Mori, 1999:99). Consequently, women’s groups seem to have empowered refugee women and improved their positions in exile as they managed to alter the hard circumstances they found themselves in while in exile. The groups also did not differ in aspects related to challenges affecting their group work progress. For example all groups reflected that lack of capital for acceleration of their income generating activities was a major obstacle to their performance. Punctuality, time factor and distance were as well other common dilemmas mentioned.

In fact the involvement of refugee women in many activities such as paid domestic jobs, group work, women’s own household duties, coupled with the long distances they travel from their destinations to work then to the group meeting center or from home to the group, are all time consuming and affect their performance in the groups’ activities. If women worked for themselves, they would have enough time and it would result in better performance of the groups. However, because women work under someone and under undefined work conditions, their effective contribution to the group is reduced.

The involvement of refugee women in many activities has a profound impact on their health and that of their children too. The heavy workload women perform both for income and in the group, plus household work in their own homes and childcare badly affects their health. The nature of paid domestic work is both energy and time consuming which affects women’s well-being. Women work long hours with inadequate rest and poor nutrition, which renders them vulnerable to disease. Their absence from home affects children’s health and the well being of the whole household.

The resettlement of many refugees in the second countries of asylum is said to pose special problems to women’s groups in exile. Most women after being granted
refugee status stop their activities as they are resettled elsewhere. This affects the
group because most of its trained people are going away. Sometimes other women
could start the course or training but would not finish. The women with things to do
for the group do not conduct their assigned jobs and in most cases, it is difficult to
assign the unfinished peace of work to someone else to finish it. In fact the plight of
many Sudanese is a big challenge to the nation as most of its professionals and
intellectuals who are supposed to develop the country are flying away. Even back
home in Sudan, due to unemployment and the policies of the military regime, many
Sudanese professionals have been forced to migrate elsewhere. Those who go abroad
for training don’t come back. This is attributed to the state’s lack of generating
employment opportunities and the absence of motivation.

Ahmed (1995) argues that it is also ascribed to the education policy, which
lacks clear direction for example, the likelihood of some particular fields of studies,
which are far advanced and lack a labor market in the country. Many graduates in
Sudan remain unemployed and work in fields outside their professions, which result
in under utilization of labor. Those who are employed in their fields are never willing
to go and work in some of the regions for example in rural areas because of lack or
scarcity of basic services and poor living conditions in those areas. This is a waste of
human resources, which are a great asset and a necessity for development of any
country. Similarly the war, has forced many Sudanese to escape their homes, poses
many problems to the economy of Sudan. It is predicted that if conditions in the
second country of asylum don’t change in favor of the refugees and particularly
women refugees, the same suffering faced in the first country of asylum may persist.
And if this were true, the educated Sudanese would not benefit from their fields of
study, as they don’t utilize their expertise. This would be a great loss to the Sudanese
economy as potential assets get wasted. It would as well have far reaching repercussions on the lives of the Sudanese people themselves.

During the fieldwork it was discovered that women expressed with resentment the need to leave or evacuate the first country of asylum. This is because of the treatment they were accorded by the host country. Most of the women reflected with despair on the poor treatment given them by their employers and the racist comments on the streets as they were called names. Women’s expectations are vested in resettling in the first world countries. But this is again not guaranteed as the probability of success in UNHCR for acceptance in slim. The women who are waiting for their results are hopeful and indifferent sometimes as the rate of denying refugee status are increasing. Those with rejected cases live with less hope of closing the painful chapter of their miseries in exile. Some wish that if there was peace they would go back to Sudan, others were not willing to go back to Sudan and not even to continue staying in the first country of asylum in this case Egypt. The women live with total dilemma and don’t know what to do with their miserable lives and their children in particular. It is sad however, to mention that the majority of the women were worried about the future of their children, who don’t go to school. It is apparent that as refugees, the children of refugee women face their own problems similar to the conditions their mothers live in.

The lack of schools to accommodate the growing number of refugees has created many red tape measures and conditions employed by the few refugees’ schools in Cairo. For example, St. Andrews church operates a youth and adult education program but the children can stay on the waiting list for almost nine to twelve months before securing a vacancy in the program. The African Hope School admits children only up to the age of eleven years. This means that the children
above the age of twelve are not eligible for enrollment. It is worth noting that the only school that admits most of the refugees' children is St. Luanga at the Sacred Heart Church. The problem is that the school operates in Arabic, meaning that children who had their previous education in English find it difficult to enroll. Additionally, all these schools operate lower level classes. This has made it impossible for children who wanted to join higher level of education, especially after completing the primary level, the children stay at home, as they cannot continue, even if they pass their exams. It is even hard for the refugee children in final year to sit for the final examinations as they are supposed to be examined together with other Egyptian students in their national schools.

One of the major obstacles facing refugee children is the issue of residence visas. For the children to be enrolled as potential candidates to sit for finals in the Egyptian schools, they must be legal residents with residence visas. This has made it impractical for the children to continue their education, as their parents have no residence permits. Certainly there is a common fear among the Sudanese refugees that if they obtain the visa, the UNHCR office would not grant them refugee status because they can stay without any problem in Cairo. In addition for the visa to be granted, the immigration office requires written evidence of the person and reasons for stay in Cairo. This automatically knocks the refugees out of question. So the above problems faced by refugee children causes endless nightmares to their mothers who are concerned and worried about the future of their children.

Generally, the situation surrounding refugee children, particularly girls, is not desirable. They are the majority who don't go to school either because they could not find vacancy in any of the schools or because the parents want them to go and work to bring an income to save the family's financial needs. This is because in most cases
female servants are highly paid compared to males. This has led to a proportionally big denial of education to girls. It could be argued that the reason for the young girls to join these groups was to find a place to interact since that they did not go to school. This is exemplified by the presence of five young girls in the primary health promoters training program run by M.A.A.N women’s group. The girls said that they joined the group because they wanted to go to school, but as there were no schools available for them, they decided to enroll for the Community Health Promoters course. They very much appreciated the knowledge they gained from the training, arguing that it was better than staying at home gaining nothing.
CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The study of Sudanese women’s groups in exile focuses on women’s empowerment. Within the framework of the feminist research prospective and empowerment theories and practice, the study seeks to explore how women’s groups improve the position of women or how group work empowers women. Basing my argument on the available knowledge of refugees and on first hand field work with women’s groups, the study demonstrates that the ability to interact with other women and access to resources from the church has gone some way towards empowering refugee women in exile. This has improved women’s living conditions and those of their families and communities at large. However, the success is far from complete as some groups’ lack financial backing that would facilitate their empowerment. Besides the evidence on how the groups evolved also gives an impression that all groups are need oriented, they aimed at tangible needs, for example women’s well being both economically and psychologically. As women managed to deal with the psychological tension they lived in through the group, it indicates the empowerment of the women, because they were able to cope alone effectively. Thus reflecting on the hypothesis previously stated the study assumed that women’s groups in exile have empowered women. Gaining greater autonomy in decision-making and women’s heavy contribution to the well being of their families indicates this.

Additionally women also managed to gain skills such as needlework, community health promoters, communication skills, leadership skills, organizational and managerial skills, group work experience, and consensus building and conflict resolution. However, actual measurement of benefits reveals that women have gained
extensively from coming together as compared to when they would have worked singly or individually.

Two reasons could be cited for this improvement, first, through the group women managed to secure sources of funds that provided capital for their income generating projects. If they had worked individually it would not have materialized. Secondly, the absorption capacity of women to the groups enabled them to deal with various challenges they met in their daily lives in exile. For example by sharing their experiences, interest, problems, skills and knowledge, women discovered that the problems they were confronting were never personal but general problems facing all refugees in exile. So in this manner, the efforts the women exerted as a group to help comfort each other and counsel those in most need have greatly marked their empowerment as potential problem solvers who don’t look elsewhere for solutions but have them from within themselves as women in the same community. These efforts at the end rewarded the individual families of all the women in the groups and later the entire Sudanese community in exile.

Ultimately an ideal society is one in which gender inequities were eliminated and women enabled to realize their full potential in all lifestyles. Activities that were once labeled female by tradition should be highly valued because women’s position cannot be extensively improved without far reaching economic change. When women are given agency to participate the economy booms and when women and men have power, the entire political structure will be revived. When this happens it is then that the outside world relates to it in new ways thus democracy prevails.

**Implication for further research**

The results of this study do not claim to be generalized to all women’s groups. However, its results reveal the significance of women’s organization and how they
empower women. It is well documented that income-generating projects need to be funded and that policy makers, donor agencies, refugee workers and researchers have ignored specific needs and problems of refugee women. Refugee literatures further record the capability of refugees and especially women in coping with life in exile. As such, to promote and enhance income-generating opportunities of refugee women to obtain self-sufficiency there is need to sponsor women’s groups in exile. For example, improvement of the income generating opportunities and taking into account women’s special needs is a necessity not only an asset.

The international community and all other bodies concerned with refugee affairs need to consider this seriously as it enable refugee self-sufficiency. Also the Sudanese refugees in Cairo need to be treated as such, since that the conditions surrounding their flight are similar to other situations that forced refugees elsewhere to flee their countries. The UNHCR office in Cairo should lobby on behalf of refugees so that regulations that protect the refugees are formulated. Additionally all institutions should be enlightened or trained on refugees’ issues particularly why refugees evacuate their countries. Failure to put this into consideration is equal to total violation of the basic human rights to the Sudanese refugee in Diaspora. The study calls for more research in women’s organization in the country of origin of the refugee women and in other refugee settings. The research should explore and contrast the similarities and differences of women’s group motives in critical moments in various refugee settings and the motives of women’s groups in their homeland.
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