

Breaking Barriers: Women in Transition

(An investigation into the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone)

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“Two parties are required in order to bring about oppression. One is the oppressor and the other is the one who accepts oppression. Oppression cannot be one sided. An oppressor cannot perform oppression in the air. Oppression is like a piece of iron which is formed by the striking of the hammer of the oppressor upon the anvil of the oppressed. Thus, women themselves participate in the attack upon their values by allowing themselves to be oppressed and by not searching out their roots.”

Ali Shariati (1991, p8)

Dedication

To my mother, who has been my total inspiration and who has succeeded in breaking barriers by overcoming the burdens associated with being an African, a Sierra Leonean, a Muslim, a wife, a mother and a career professional.

To my sons, Murad and Hafeez, who I hope would be the new generation of Sierra Leonean Muslim men, who will ensure that their female counterparts are given a chance at self fulfilment and to Najmah, my daughter, whose generation might not face the trials experienced by participants of this study.

Acknowledgements

Doing this research has been an un-bargained self realisation and life changing experience for me. When I decided to pursue a PhD after my Masters Degree, I neither envisaged nor imagined that it would be such a challenging task. At the end of this journey, I want to thank the Almighty Allah for providing me with the courage and strength to successfully face the multiple hurdles experienced during the whole process.

My supervisors, Prof. Gina Wisker and Prof. Bronwen Walter have been my pillars of support, painstakingly going through the drafts, spurring me on when they noticed a lapse and most of all, giving me support whenever I needed them. Gina has been my mentor and she has been a great inspiration to me since my Masters Degree. She inspired the idea of a PhD, and inspired my chosen career path as a university lecturer. I feel honoured to have worked under her constructive guidance and assistance. Gina and Bronwen became household names within my family. We have taken this trip together as partners, discovering ‘feminism’ in Muslim women in Sierra Leone and I appreciate wholeheartedly all that they have done for me.

My family has been my ‘rock’ throughout this journey. After getting married and starting a family, the research process took the back burner to everything that was going on in my life. I want to thank my husband for his patience and

my children for putting up with the sacrifices, the tantrums, the mood swings and the tears. I also thank them for their continuing love, encouragement and support. They provided me with the fundamental energies to overcome the many challenges that I encountered throughout the process. My parents and siblings have been wonderful with their support and taking care of my children in my absence in spite of their several commitments. The whole process has not been an easy ride for all of us and I wish to convey my gratitude to all those who in their own way helped me climb this ladder, with special thanks to the participants in this study. I will forever remain grateful.

Abstract

Sierra Leone is in transition to peace and development, from a previous decade long civil war. Educated Muslim women appear to have a great deal of expression, interest and passion to offer the process. The study investigates the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone society and explores their views and experiences of identifying and attempting to overcome the burdens of patriarchy, oppression and exploitation perpetrated by religious, social and cultural beliefs. The research and thesis consider in what ways these women and their views ‘fit’ in or challenge society and their perceptions of the potential they have as models to impact on the lives of Sierra Leonean Muslim women nationwide.

Using feminist influenced research practices in order to focus on the stories and voices of these women, the study contributes to the growth of knowledge related to the emergent changing roles and perceptions of Muslim women in present day Sierra Leone. This qualitative and interdisciplinary research develops a critical focus and deliberately combines literary sources in an informative context, with feminist research methods of interviews and focus groups on issues of gender equality and empowerment. Through the interviews and focus group discussions conducted, the research portrays the perceptions of the emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women, a cross section of grass-root Muslim women and a selection of male Muslims regarding

empowerment, knowledge, culture, independence and oppression. These are also illustrated as the ways the participants embrace the concept of feminism and adapt it by drawing on their Sierra Leonean, Islamic, cultural and social traditions.

The research examines the various ideologies that stifle the growth of Sierra Leonean Muslim women from their perspective and it analyses the strategies used by the professional women to tackle the oppressive and repressive customs and stand up against patriarchy. It was discovered through the findings that the research gives an insight into the determination and the conviction of professional Muslim women in advocating for social change and in making their voices heard. As an outcome, it is evidenced that this emerging social sub group of Muslim women appear to be inspiring self-development moves and changes not only among the uneducated grass-root majority, but in the fold of their Muslim men-folk., resulting in a visible impact of self development and self empowerment among Sierra Leonean Muslim women.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This research **‘An investigation into the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone’** aims to investigate the emergence of the new social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone and explores how they ‘fit’ in the Sierra Leonean society, and the impact the group believes they are making in their society, in relation to religion, culture, education and the status of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. It sets out to explore how they perceive their personal empowerment and their views and experiences in identifying and attempting to overcome the burdens of social, cultural and religious patriarchy, oppression and exploitation. The research is built upon my extensive reading and first-hand experience with professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone and it also ensues from my exposure in the framework of my personal and professional life to the phenomenon of empowerment and support groups which, in the last decade, are fast becoming popular and widespread in Sierra Leone. The main research questions are,

Why is there a new phenomenon of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone?

How do these women fit in the Sierra Leonean social and cultural society?

What are they doing to impact self development and self empowerment to Muslim women nationwide?

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The introduction and Chapter 1 introduces to the reader, the history of Sierra Leone and the concepts that

underpin the study. It brings out the research questions and explores the relationship between professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone as the main focus of the study, the importance and value of education, the principles of Islam regarding education and the empowerment of women in order to enable the women to identify the factors that enhance or impede their progress through support groups like FOMWASAL. The chapter includes the gap in knowledge on written and published works on the women of Sierra Leone and discusses the justification for embarking on and conducting the study. The second chapter presents the conceptual frameworks and explains in detail, the key concepts that make up a sound theoretical perspective. The key concepts of patriarchy, post-colonialism, feminism, black feminism, African feminism and womanism are presented and discussed in relation to Islam and African women writers' perceptions on education, empowerment and development which link with the main aims of the study. It takes a historical look at the effects of colonialism on the African's psyche, relating the effect on Sierra Leoneans and it gradually explores the relationship between Muslim women, tradition, empowerment and change. The chapter presents in detail the various realms of knowledge included in the study, and the boundaries of the research, with specific reference to the gap in knowledge that I was identified at the onset of the study. The study attempts to engage in dialogues between theorists whose theories underpin my questioning and interpretation, critics who work in similar areas, combined with my own contribution (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

The nature of the research questions determined the methodologies used to explore the issues of the study from different perspectives. The third chapter therefore delineates the methodology, the research methods and research tools, and the use of triangulation of methods, and discusses the ethical considerations taken during the study. It makes a defence of feminist research methodology and methods engaging with qualitative ethnography and mixed methods used in the study (Patton 2002). Using feminist methodology, this qualitative and interdisciplinary research develops a critical focus which combines literary sources as informative context and as a record of the imaginative responses of women writers to issues of gender equality. Mostly focusing on Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984) as background context with other feminist and black feminist approaches, I identified and analysed the thoughts and feelings which the participants expressed during the focus groups and interview sessions. Using grounded theory, the themes of the study were therefore based first on experience and on issues emerging from the literary source which chimed with this experience, which issues led into the research questions which were asked using inductive qualitative research methods which includes interviews, focus groups and case study. The themes were further clarified and refined as a result of the interpretation of data derived from the research and this thematic interpretation is seen to address if not always fully answer the main research questions.

With my theoretical background as a Women's Studies graduate, giving me a critical perspective, I have used myself as a case study for this piece of feminist social research. I have also used post-colonial and feminist criticism to explore and express how the emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone are moving toward change, evidencing the "breaking through the barriers" and "bridging the gap" expressions of their empowerment experiences. The use of feminist research methods and feminist theory and criticism enables one to ask, answer and explore the question of how these women are becoming more independent and empowered in challenging age old norms of tradition and culture.

I integrate evidence from my personal experiences in chapter four in which I have used myself as a case study. The chapter serves as a documentary of my personal journey as a young Muslim girl, to being a young qualified professional schooled in a feminist research environment through to being a wife and a mother. This chapter could be linked to the next chapter (five), which consists of a discussion and analysis of findings and proceeds from the main methods of data collection of interviews and focus group discussions. These were focused on identifying the themes, dilemmas, feelings and thoughts that surfaced during the study and they were presented as sub-headings based on the themes emerging from the data using Ba's novel, *So Long a Letter* (1984) as a guide. The research portrays through the interviews and focus groups, the perceptions of Muslim women regarding culture, independence and

oppression and observation, examining and analysing how they embrace the concept of feminism and how they adapt it by drawing on their Sierra Leonean Islamic traditions to gain more knowledge.

The sixth chapter contains the conclusions and recommendations of the whole research process. Conclusions are made following a thorough analysis of the materials and the contents which were collected through the interviews and the focus group discussions. The research questions are also answered in this chapter of conclusions. The whole process is a narrative study which applies the principles of feminist research and participatory action research principles, all from a feminist point of view, with emphasis placed on the unique voices of the participants. The study is inductive and the conclusions drawn from the study cannot be generalised and are therefore valid only to the research population examined. In spite of the enormous difficulties faced in obtaining data on Sierra Leone and confronted with the lack of official information and statistics that are non-existent, the findings from the research give an insight into the perceptions of Muslim women in Sierra Leone and the conviction of professional Muslim women in attempting to make their voices heard. Being a totally new subject of research and study with no existing literature in this specific context, no official statistics and figures and very little written material of similar areas in Sierra Leone, this topic was chosen in order to narrow the gap of studies related to Sierra Leone and its womenfolk, and to also put the issue of Muslim women in Sierra Leone to the forefront and in the limelight

and as an outcome, it is evidenced that this new group of Muslim women are inspiring self-development actions and changes among the uneducated grass-root majority in present day Sierra Leone, early twenty first century post feminist era.

This chapter is then followed by the references. Appendix One is a chronological chain of important events in Sierra Leone's history, Appendix Two entails a short introduction of each participant in the research and Appendix Three showcases the questions asked during the interviews and focus group discussions. Appendix Four is a copy of the constitution of the support group, Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL), followed by Appendix Five, a sample of the participant information sheet and lastly, Appendix Six, a sample of the participant consent form used for the research.

1.1 Research Background

Having been out of Sierra Leone for about seven years, I made a short visit to Freetown in 2000. The country was coming out of a terrible ten year civil war during which thousands of people lost their lives, their limbs, their homes, their families and their livelihoods. In fact, it was the war through the media that brought the small West African country Sierra Leone, into the thoughts and minds of peoples all over the world, initiating the worldwide campaign against 'blood diamonds' (United Nations Security Council Affairs 2000). The time of

my visit was a healing, recuperating and reconciliation period for Sierra Leoneans during which time the Government was initiating development programmes, as well as consolidating resources for the ‘going back to normal’ process.

It was this visit that resulted in the conception of the idea to embark on a study on professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The idea to conduct the research study about Sierra Leonean Muslim women came about, when after a decade of civil war, Muslim women seemed to be left out of the reconciliation and development process. There were just a small proportion of Muslim women in decision making positions nationwide despite the comparably large amount of qualified and capable Muslim women available for appointments.

High level jobs and positions were male dominated and even when they were offered to women, they were dominated by non-Muslim women. I realised that in spite of the increase in the number of educated Muslim women nationwide, there were just a negligible and almost invisible handful of them in high-placed, decision-making positions as opposed to a fairly higher representation of non-Muslim women in these positions. Sierra Leone, like many other countries worldwide, cannot boast of equality between men and women, or a fifty/fifty right to access and opportunities to higher education and positions of power. The few positions and jobs that are made available to women are mostly dominated by Christian women (Steady 2006). According to Conteh-

Morgan and Dixon Fyle (1999), jobs like ministerial appointments, members of parliament, diplomatic and other government appointments, executive, directorships and managerial roles, high level legal positions and headship of institutions are mainly dominated by men, with a few women in their midst. I then started to ask myself and consider questions to ascertain the reasons why this was the case.

With a strong Islamic background, gained from growing up in a close knit Muslim family where I was taught that there are no limits to education and ambition, mixed with the exposure of theorising and critical perspective acquired from schooling on the Women's Studies Masters course in a feminist research environment, it became quite evident on my visit that my experiences were exceptional and part of the research study was to share that 'wholeness' with other Muslim women in Sierra Leone. It occurred to me through research that the proportion of women in influential roles was an unequal representation of Sierra Leonean Muslim women and their achievements and abilities. I needed to investigate where the educated women were and the social difference they felt that they made to Sierra Leonean society. The necessity to launch a forum and enhance dialogue among stakeholders within the Muslim Community (men, grass-root and uneducated women and especially, educated and professional women through support groups), in order to discuss Muslim women's challenges and issues, became an obligatory priority. As prerequisites of partnership and development, equality and respect for women

was a wholesome experience that I was determined to bring to the fore. This was to identify the reasons for the situation and more importantly, to portray any effective change created by them in the system. Enhancing visibility and articulacy were major issues. To implement the strategies, using qualitative research methods in the form of interviews and focus groups (which are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 3) as a reliable source of information, appeared an appropriate approach especially since social assumptions are made about Muslim women in general based on political or cultural agendas. Hence, the advent of this research study. Another aim was to introduce the women's voices in an academic discourse and support their views of empowerment through relevant literature and research methods. This was aimed to convey a clear and empowering message to all female researchers and academics in a variety of fields to seriously encourage themselves and others to engage in a process of writing. This, in my opinion, would inevitably spur women in Sierra Leone to embark upon the long and complex road of 'voice and visibility' not just for themselves, but for the benefit of other women. The data from the research presented the actual thoughts and beliefs of the participants through the interviews, focus groups and observations (Chapter 5) and the connection that I felt with these participants emerged during the course of the study through my interaction with them as participants.

It was important to find out directly from the women themselves what their experiences were and how and if they felt they made a social and cultural

difference. These observations and problems altogether made launching, nurturing and conducting this research, a daunting challenge.

The curiosity to find out and investigate the new phenomenon of educated and professional Muslim women was justified as it became evident that research on this area and topic had not been undertaken. Islam is the majority or dominant religion nationwide with over 60% of the population, with a growing significant number of Muslim women making a mark of excellence in their areas of work and study (Koroma 1996). The continuing non-representation, silencing and invisibility of these women were a point of discord and excitement to me. The enthusiasm of the women which became evident through their established support groups, as portrayed further in the thesis, led to the decision to investigate the role of professional Muslim women and the support groups. This was in order to understand the phenomenon of the self perceived social effects of the work of such women in modern day Sierra Leone in the context of relevant social and gender related issues, realms of knowledge and published works, to be able to determine when and how such activities contribute and meet the need of the bulk of illiterate Muslim women. I later discovered during the study that there were some men and women with different religious affiliations who shared my concern. The concern shown through their comments, gave me a greater perspective on the issue. Many people who knew about the subject matter of the research applauded my efforts in trying to bring out this new area of research, for the benefit of society to

understand the aims and purpose of this new emerging group of women in their midst.

Upon returning, I continued to give the issue a lot of thought. I considered the social position of Muslim women in the Sierra Leone society, and weighed and analysed the non-existence of data on the subject, which I knew would be a steep challenge for an academic piece of research. There is a huge void of information and data about Sierra Leone and getting the specific data about Sierra Leonean Muslim women and the appropriate evidence to support the case of the new social sub group of professional Muslim women has been almost impossible as they have been non-existent. As a research problem, the study is trying to fill the gap and therefore be an authentic contribution to research and knowledge. Recognising my position as ‘one of them’, an insider, an educated Muslim woman, made me more sensitive to the concerns of this new sub group and gave me a new and overwhelming feeling of respect for the women as subjects of the research. It also gave me access and an insight to the perceived experiences of women like myself who are Muslims, educated and professionals. These factors enabled me to see that there were questions that needed to be addressed, thus indicating the necessity of conducting the research, to find answers, to explore how these women deal with ‘success’ and how they attempt to find reasons and solutions to the present situation of sidelining and marginalising of Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

The whole research process has been a very daunting experience. The first few months of my final decision to embark on this journey were characterised by feelings of uncertainty, nervousness and insecurity. Brainstorming and evidently deciding on the present topic and subject area for the study was a bit of a rollercoaster experience. I had a good knowledge about the role and life situation of women in Sierra Leone and Africa in general, being very passionate about women's issues and black issues. I finally opted and settled for the topic of Islam and women's issues in Sierra Leone not only because of my personal interest, but also because I realised that this had not been subject to any serious research both in and out of Sierra Leone. With this void and vacuum, I encountered the most difficulties all throughout my research journey as a result of the scarcity and non existence of research materials conducted on the issues of women in Sierra Leone and in particular, their status in Islam. This was one of the reasons that aroused my interest and curiosity about the forces that come to play in the power relations between Muslim women and the rest of the society.

1.2 Map of Africa: Influence/Perspective

Not everyone knows exactly where Sierra Leone is, nor about its history of commercial relations with the United Kingdom. More recently, readers might be aware of its legacy of violence from the 2006 Hollywood film titled 'Blood Diamonds', starring Leonardo di Caprio. Sierra Leone has a long history in relation to Britain, in terms of trading, education and latterly a violent recent

past. All of these events impact upon the position and opportunities for educated women particularly educated Muslim women in the country. The map indicates to the reader, the exact location of Sierra Leone (circled), its neighbouring countries and, it guides the reader to put into perspective the relationships that surface between the female status and the cultures and traditions, through qualitative data gathering during the study. In identifying various countries, the map guides the reader to locate the origin of some writers who are used as background references in the research, as a form or way of comparing and relating the similarities between data from the participants and the themes emanating from the writers. Because of the lack of education and the history of violence and patriarchal control in Sierra Leone, there is a dearth of educated women and a real absence of women who could have fictionalised and imaginatively expressed life in Sierra Leone.

It has been important in this study to locate African women who have written about similar contexts and issues. Although none have been from Sierra Leone to date, the conditions of life there for women have prevented any flowering of artistic expression. I have read many books by African women authors on the subject of equality and development and the work of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984) stood out as expressing similar concerns and issues to those underpinning my own research, therefore utilising the emerging themes from the novel to discuss the experiences of the participants of the study.

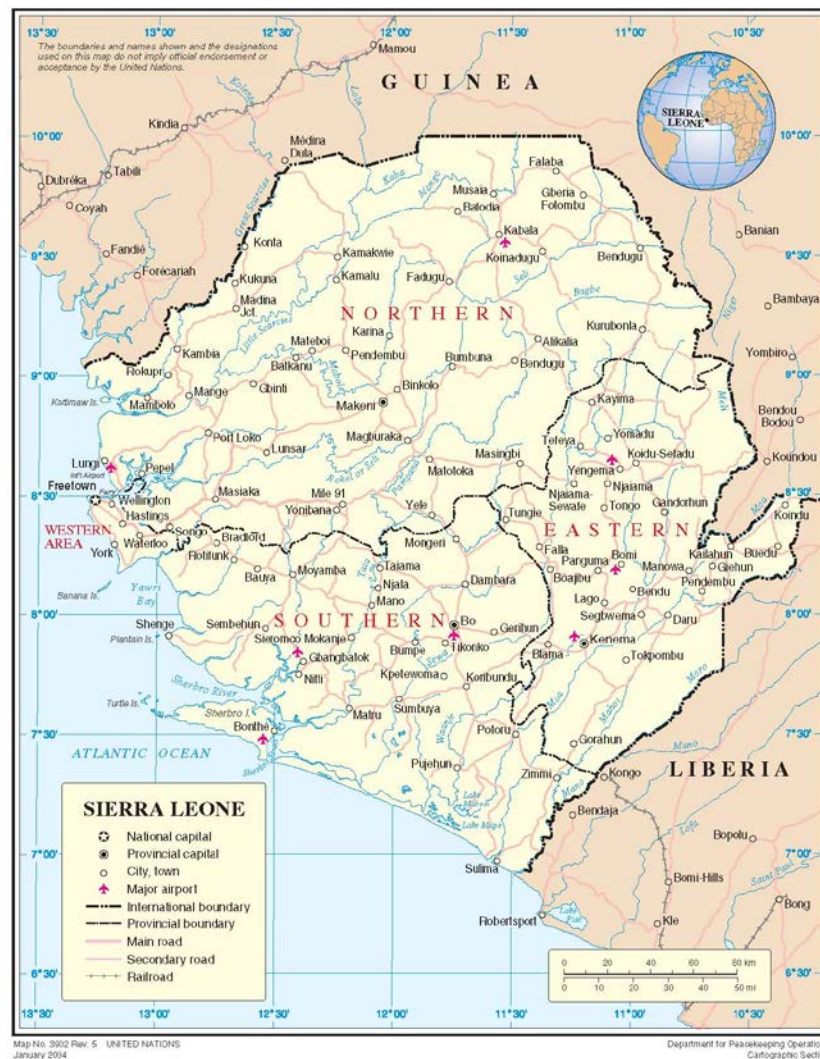


(UNITED NATIONS 2004)

Sierra Leone is located on the West Coast of Africa, North of the Equator. It is bordered on the North and North-East by Guinea, a former French colony, on the South-East by Liberia, a former American colony and on the West by the Atlantic Ocean. There are some cross border influences and very similar perceptions and attitudes toward the development of women with its neighbouring countries. There is also a similarity in patriarchal attitudes, with a share of some cultural and traditional aspects of colonial experiences, the role of their womenfolk in society and the issue of religions and their different doctrines.

1.3 Map of Sierra Leone

The map indicates to the reader the size of Sierra Leone and it also presents the major districts and towns.



(UNITED NATIONS 2004)

One can trace the introduction of Islam into the country and with reference to Appendix 2, identify the origin of the participants and link their different personal experiences in terms of cultural, ethnic and tribal beliefs. The next section provides a discussion of Sierra Leone's history and development, providing further insight into the contexts that underpin and affect the study.

1.4 Historical Background

A small developing country, Sierra Leone is approximately 72,000 square kilometres in size, with a 485 kilometre Atlantic Coastline. It has a population of about five and half million people (Census Report 2004), with a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious atmosphere. The predominant faith is Islam at over 60% of the population, followed by about 30% Christianity and approximately 10% of the population are Atheists, Bahais, Buddhists and traditional indigenous religious believers (Jackson 2004).

Founded by the Portuguese explorer Pedro Da Cintra in 1462, the name Sierra Leone was derived from 'Serra Lyoa' which means 'Lion Mountains'. This was as a result of his view of the mountains during a thunderstorm when he sailed by the coast, which he likened to the silhouette of a roaring lion (Alie 1990). The British later founded the capital, Freetown, first named 'the province of freedom' in 1787. Between 1787 and 1855, it became home to the 'black poor' or 'black loyalists' from Britain, the 'emancipated' freed slaves from Europe and the Americas, and also to the re-captives who were intercepted on the Atlantic Ocean after the abolition of the slave trade. The descendants of these new immigrants were to be later known as the Creoles and perceived as 'black Englishmen' in the whole West Africa region because of their assimilation of Western culture and the British way of life. According to Binns (1992), the aim of the founders was to create a 'civilised' African society, with the many trappings of Western culture. Freetown became a

British Crown Colony in 1808 and it served as the residence of the British Governor, who also ruled the neighbouring colonies of Ghana (Gold Coast), Nigeria and The Gambia. English was introduced and it became the official language, used in educational institutions, offices and within the government administration. The interior of the country gained British Protectorate status later in 1896. Sierra Leone gained independence from Britain in 1961 after the colony and the protectorate became united as a single political system (Alie 1990). This merger of the two systems brought the indigenes, the freed slaves and the re-captives together to run the new independent state of present day Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone consists of eighteen tribes and ethnic groups, each with its own language, culture and tradition. This mix rarely causes religious or tribal conflicts even though there are sometimes subtle ethnic divisions in terms of political affiliations, interaction and intermarriage (Foray 1995). The two largest ethnic groups are the Temnes, found in the North of the country and the Mendes, occupying the South and East. The third largest are the Limbas, who share the North with the Temnes. The Creoles are settled in the Western Area and Freetown, the capital city (Map of Sierra Leone). The Creoles are a minority group and they make up about 4% of the total population, but as their society was based on the assimilation of British customs, learning and education, they form the majority of the elites and they are the most educated group of people in Sierra Leone. This is as a result of their close ties and

interaction with the British colonialists, illuminating their adopted Western names, their 'white' language called Krio, 'white' sense of dress, 'white' religion and 'white' culture, acquired from their white masters during slavery (Wyse 1991). As a result of formal Western education and the privileged access to a range of resources controlled by the colonial authorities, allowing the Creoles many advantages not readily available to other Sierra Leoneans, they see themselves as more superior, 'civilised' and 'better beings' than the natives. Because they worked, lived and interacted more with the whites, they knew more about Western culture, religion and way of life and considered the natives and indigenes to be backward, uncivilised and barbaric (Skinner 1976).

According to Oyetade and Fashole-Luke (2008), a cross section of the Creoles wanted to relate more to their ancestry and be more African, valuing cultural traditions and rejecting the instilled 'white way' forced on them. They converted to Islam and practised cultural ceremonies learnt from their ancestors. This religious divide caused a rift in the Creole group and the Muslim Creoles formed their own communities within the Western Area, though not as outstanding and educated as their Christian compatriots. The Mendes from the South and South-East are the next educated group of people, the majority of whom are Catholics as they were receptive to the Europeans and therefore had more schools and Churches built in their region by Christian Catholic missions. The Temnes, the majority ethnic group from the North, had embraced Islam since its inception in Sierra Leone (Map of Sierra Leone).

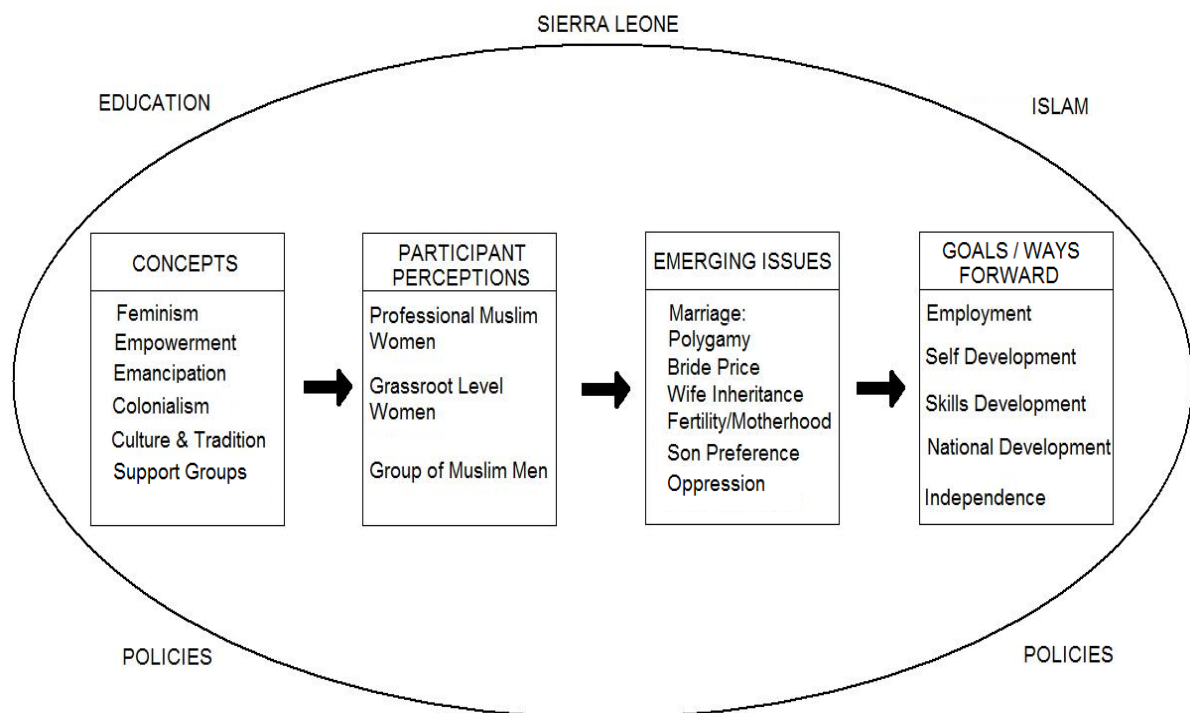
They fought against colonialism and they made every effort to resist Western education, the culture and everything associated with the white colonialists. This therefore evidences that the women pioneers in social change in post colonial Sierra Leonean society are Christians, from the Creole and Mende tribes. These are women who made a name in education, medicine, local and national politics (Steady 2001).

Islam was associated with traditional people who were Arabic educated, not Western educated and as a result were considered 'backward' and 'primitive'. Foray (1995) wrote that Christianity, on the other hand, was associated with the more modern, 'civilised' sector of the population. In present day Sierra Leone, the amalgamation of the British groomed and mostly Christian converted freed slaves, the Islamic converted re-captives and the traditional natives, can be considered as a cause of tension, disturbances and mistrust, mixed with global forces, have resulted in the country's state of under-development, poverty and illiteracy (Jackson 2004).

Since independence, Sierra Leone has been through several phases of development and transition, with violent disputes, political instability and economic deterioration. Persistent unmanageable levels of external debts, structural adjustment programmes, conflicts, displacement of people and environment degradation are all events that are the contributing factors that have led to the debilitating effect on the trend and status of the country and its

peoples (Koroma 1996). There have been several coup d'états and counter coups, military dictatorship regimes, democratic election processes and a ten years civil war that officially ended in 2002 (Appendix 1). These events have adversely affected the quality of life and the status of its people, especially the women and children. These, mixed with traditional cultural practices, have limited the opportunities for women in education, skills development, employment and participation in the overall development process (Rogers 2001).

1.5 Conceptual Diagram



With a mixture of issues and my own research practices used as frameworks depicted on the conceptual diagram, I generated the ideas and identified the

theories that underpin and drive the study. With professional Muslim women being the centre piece of the research, I explore the concepts of feminism, education, emancipation, colonialism, culture and tradition and support groups. Once the research was underway I began to correlate terms of the emerging issues such as oppression, employment, self development, skills development, independence and national development, sourced from extensive research and interpretations of the results of the interviews and focus group discussions underpinning the study. Because fiction is an imaginative way of engaging with and expressing lived experience and ideology and values in practice, it is useful both as indicator of responses and of themes which relate to Muslim women's experience in Africa. I therefore decided to use literary engagement and representations as expressions which could indicate themes to underlie my enquiry.

In this respect, I have used Mariama Ba's influential novel *So Long a Letter* (1984). I developed themes from it which underlie the questions asked during the study and the analysis carried out to interpret the findings. These are issues studied in relation to the male and female participants as collaborators in the phenomenon of the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone. This generates the possible links needed to fully understand the phenomenon of this new group of women and their aims, aspirations and pitfalls and they are there to gain information on their perceptions of both the issues and in the case of the women, the way forward.

At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, Heads of State of Governments representing the 189 UN member countries adopted the Millennium Declaration, in which they recognised their responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity, and their duty to the world's people, especially the most vulnerable. The Declaration listed seven objectives to which the world's leaders assigned special significance, part of which was promoting human rights and protecting the vulnerable (UNICEF 2005).

As part of the road map for implementing the Declaration, the eight Millennium Development goals of the United Nations General Assembly were: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality and empower women, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, to ensure environmental sustainability and to develop a global partnership for development. Most of these goals were established for 2015, and all eight of these goals relate directly to the rights, well-being and concerns of women (UNICEF 2005). In order to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development, women and men must participate fully and equally in the formulation of policies and strategies for the eradication of poverty, not just anti-poverty programmes, but it requires democratic participation and changes in structures to ensure that women have access to the relevant resources. These related issues formed part of the core discussions (in Chapter 5) held with participants of this research study, in order to bring out the perceived role of

professional Muslim women, in relation to the status of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The participants of the study, evidenced in Chapter 5, were more incensed with the issues of poverty, lack of education, health for women and children, and empathised that Muslim women will continue to be relegated and not achieve the ultimate goals of empowerment, education, dignity and development.

1.6 Focus

Women's struggle for equity and justice worldwide is as old as the history of their suppression (Adebayo 1996). The position of women in the so-called third and under-developed world, in Africa and especially Sierra Leone, is different from that of their counterparts in labelled first world and developed countries and the social impediments are varied. Theorising the status of Muslim women in Sierra Leone from a Women's Studies perspective therefore requires a deeper analysis to understand their situation. African women's lives are not totally identical and as Bruner (1993) explained, "...the vastness of the Continent; the geographical, linguistic, political and economic differences under which they live, make their experiences differ in terms of the level and magnitude of their common problem of patriarchy and male domination" (p67).

Women in Western Africa who dealt with colonialism and who have experienced the dilution and extinction of traditional cultures replaced by Western customs, religions and languages, do not have the same experiences as

women in Southern, Eastern and Northern Africa because even though they may have similar experiences with colonialism and might share some cultural identities, the latter's are combined with experiences of an apartheid system, resistance movements and racial discrimination (Gatens 1991). There are still some similarities and differences between the West African states in terms of religion and cultural beliefs, which are also enhanced in terms of the influence of their colonial masters. The Creoles of Sierra Leone have a lot of cultural similarities with the Yorubas in Nigeria but there is a unique element to each tribal/ethnic group across the board that is peculiar to it regardless of religious belief.

The aim of the study was to investigate, consider, record and represent some of the interests and the agendas of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone, and according to UNFPA (2007), to articulate their knowledge of empowerment and emancipation in impacting change in the lives of Muslim women nationwide. The work is therefore aimed as a form of representation of the position of Sierra Leonean Muslim women in relation to the concepts of empowerment and emancipation, thereby leading to self and national development, in a bid to improve their livelihood and the financial and social status of other Muslim women in the society. In the study, I concentrated on Sierra Leonean Muslim women who have made breakthroughs and are high achievers who nonetheless maintain traditional values in terms of domestic responsibilities. This is documented in the profiles of the participants of the

study in Appendix 2. I looked at these women who serve as examples to other Muslim women and who are showing that success for them is possible and manageable. These are 'normal' women, in the sense that they represent women who go out to fend for themselves and their families everyday, either in paid jobs or small businesses, women who raise their children and look after their families, and women who encounter and experience a variety of difficulties and obstacles in a non egalitarian society where they have to cope with lack of equality both in and out of the home. They are also an elite group of women who are privileged in some ways as in their education and jobs as opposed to the mass of Sierra Leonean Muslim women.

A very striking characteristic of these women, as further discussed in the findings section (Chapter 5), is that they seem nonetheless determined to make a change in their personal lives as well as in social, economic and political national arenas relating to Muslim women. I explored how this crop of first generation social sub group of professional Muslim women through support groups, act as models and advocates for change, by concentrating on the downtrodden, underprivileged Muslim women (the majority of the population) who cannot enjoy their rights and a good standard of living. The purpose was to go beyond the 'academic' role and bring into open society and the political realm, the presence of professional Muslim women, as a kind of strategic intervention to generate information and ideas which could lead to forging

links for the improvement of relations between Muslim women, their non-Muslim counterparts, and the government and its policies.

Women make up about fifty one percent (51%) of the total population of Sierra Leone and an approximate percentage of seventy-one (71%) of this total is illiterate and have no formal education (Census Report 2004). Approximately fifty to sixty percent (50-60%) of this bulk are Muslims (Census Report 2004). This high level of illiteracy among Muslim women in basic education levels is primarily responsible for their dis-empowered and underdeveloped state in almost all spheres of life because they are not equipped with the basic tools for survival in a competitive world. The high rate of illiteracy and low education, compounded with poverty and war crises, makes life more difficult for this bulk to sustain any form of development (Dixon-Fyle and Cole 2005). This has resulted in the inhibition of women's advancement in all spheres of self and national development because they cannot compete with the men and are therefore being deprived of equal opportunities. The unequal balance of illiteracy has put Muslim women on the lowest rung of the economic and social ladder and as a consequence, it seriously reflects on the quality of their children's well-being in terms of their level of literacy, their health and their economic status which inadvertently affects the quality of their contribution to society and toward national development (Kamali 2001). In most cases, they become victims of circumstances and remain as the most vulnerable members of society (Brooks 2007).

The nationwide adult female literacy rate is 15% (Census Report 2004) and Muslim women are in the minority of this percentage because of cultural and religious reasons, trailing behind men and women of other religious affiliations. High illiteracy is more widespread in Northern Sierra Leone, especially among the women as they were more resistant to colonial domination and Western education, as opposed to the South and the East where missionaries settled, built churches and started schools (Map of Sierra Leone).

The nature of this research is to explore the new social sub group of professional Muslim women in the Sierra Leone society especially in the context and set against the background of a high illiteracy rate, and to explore their impact on both the status of Sierra Leonean Muslim women and their contribution toward national development. The study looks at how and in what ways this emerging small percentage of educated, professional and independent elite of Muslim women have excelled and how they perceive their experiences to contribute and support change in the lives of Muslim women in society (Haddad and Esposito 2004). By exploring their characteristics, their views, their experiences and their strategies, the study evidences what impact they feel they make in other women's lives to effect nationwide empowerment. It is to be emphasised that the study focuses on the respondents' perceptions and experiences rather than the gathering of empirical evidence, which could be the focus of further studies. In present day Sierra Leone, education opportunities and avenues are now expanding, especially in the urban areas. With the

emerging group of professional Muslim women who are aspiring to be role models, there is an ever increasing awareness about its benefits among the young, old and especially among Muslim women. There is a marked and large expansion of women-oriented and women-run social and political movements throughout the Muslim world (Brooks 2007) and there has been a heightened demand for female literacy levels (based on Western notions of education). There are therefore bound to be new demands on the system to enfranchise the recipients. Even with the increased number of educated Muslim women in all spheres of the professional world, they still find themselves at the grass level, not yet reaching the mantelpiece of high decision-making and corporate leadership. This is evidenced in the lone figures represented in the interviews and focus group participants of this research. Discovering how these women have used their education and academic and professional success might provide suggestions for future action beyond the bounds of this thesis.

For Sierra Leone, emerging from the ten years civil war has been catalytic to the development of the social advancement of its women. FOMWASAL (Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone), as the umbrella body for Muslim women's organisations seemed to be the perfect entity to use in the research because it was representing the entire cross section of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. In trying to map out a new public identity for Muslim women, it is notable that this emerging social sub group or new breed of Muslim women exist in a range of different spheres of the professional world:

academia, business foras, high ranking government authorities, and they see themselves to be acting as agents or activists of the Muslim women's movement. From the mandate of their constitution, professional women members of FOMWASAL see themselves as the first pioneers for the promotion of Muslim women in Sierra Leone (Appendix 4). As they struggle among men in the development process, they gain awareness and an understanding of their subordination as members of a minority community dominated by men and non-Muslim women. The new sub group therefore advocate a massive participation of Muslim women in the process of sustainable development and their special focus is on the most marginalised and excluded people in the Sierra Leonean society, the uneducated and disadvantaged Muslim women. The aim of the educated sub group is for the uneducated and disadvantaged women to realise their rights, speak out, step up and value their lives. This is an imperative suggested by Waddud (2006) who implores Muslim women to resist the pressures of traditional customs and explore fully their individual autonomies.

The research aims to acknowledge this new social sub group of professional Muslim women and investigate their characteristics. By being educated and being professionals, the new sub group of women has not conformed to the prescribed traditional roles of Sierra Leonean Muslim women and they have rebelled against the patriarchal norms of subservience, submissiveness and domesticity. This new wave of 'change', an emerging embryo, is explored in

Lewis and Churchill (2008) who impress that, “The ‘rebellion’ of Muslim women is valid and is a consequence of the understanding of true Islamic teachings” (p46). In so doing, the subjects of the research can be seen to offer potential new role models for other women although how effective this might be would have to be explored beyond the bounds of this research and thesis.

The research explores the role played by the professional Muslim women in advocating change in the society, not just on patriarchal attitudes but within the ranks of Muslim women themselves. With the support groups, they attempt to weave the path toward empowerment and autonomy, re-examining how their perceptions change towards emancipation, work, advancement and progression by setting feasible examples for other women. Drawing on Brooks’ (2007) view on education and exposure, Muslim women in Sierra Leone are becoming more conscious of their rights, making headway in various directions like politics, administration and commerce. In investigating the characteristics of the new emerging sub group of professional Muslim women, the study looks at their growing confidence, their relationship with men, their homes, the future of their children and their possible futures as decision makers in society as compared to independent and strong Muslim women in the Middle East described by Brooks (2007). It also considers the efforts of research participants through support groups in eliminating the gaps between men and women, which they believe would ultimately lead to an overall change in their personal and social lives (Al-Sheha 2002). The research is committed to

discovering information and clarification about these women, to raise public awareness of the subject of the new emerging social sub group of Muslim women, and it does so by concentrating on their stories of empowerment, using the stories to indicate potential success, hope and feasibility. The study hopes to use their stories as suggested by Lindlof (1995) to serve as a driving force for other women to move on, progress and change their lives and self-perceptions beyond the scope of the actual research project itself. It suggests that they have developed some useful models such as the sisterhood of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL), a non-governmental organisation and support group pioneered in the early 1990s by a group of professional Muslim women. As an example, other organisations could use the experiences and aims and objectives of FOMWASAL as a way of addressing the situation of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, particularly problems of representation and power. These suggestions can be derived from the results of the research although, as suggestions and recommendations, they go beyond the scope of the thesis. Those taking heed of the research results and good practice suggestions which the women indicate could learn, embrace, amend and adjust policies so as to join the mission of women's emancipation and empowerment in Sierra Leone.

Since the early 1980s, the issue of 'women's affairs' in Sierra Leone has attracted international attention and legislation enacted at various levels, fusing with the global awareness of the issue preceding the organisation of the United

Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 held in Beijing. This interest has been directed at the promotion of women's participation in diverse fields and at the removal of all existing discriminatory practices against them (Haider 1995).

My research looks at the women's desire to be visible and it also looks at the high level of commitment of these women who are endeavouring to pursue a variety of positive contributions to the values and beliefs of Sierra Leonean Muslim women, thereby intending to bring about positive contributions toward self development and self empowerment nationwide. These contributions all relate directly or indirectly to improving the country's economic, social and political levels.

Using qualitative research methodology (discussed more fully in Chapter 3) with a multidisciplinary social and literary mix of methods, this piece of ethnographic feminist social research develops a critical focus on the position of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. It uses opportunistic sampling and focuses, on a sample of educated and professional Muslim women, examining their perceptions and experiences in identifying and overcoming the burdens of oppression and exploitation, first as women and then as Muslim women (Ali 2007). While investigating and analysing the personal strides made by these women in attempting to bring change in the lives of Muslim women, themselves and subsequently uneducated, disenfranchised women, the study

explores the connection between Islam, gender and empowerment and examines the role of education and women's learning from Sierra Leonean Muslim women's perspectives. The research uses their personal narratives as independent forms of knowledge relating them to and reading them through themes emerging from Mariam Ba's novel *So Long a Letter* (1984).

Whilst presenting the views and experiences of the sample of educated and empowered Muslim women's testimonies, one exploration in the study considers from a cultural standpoint the perceived relationship between the female gender and restraint and oppression and in so doing, it identifies how subservient and subordinate traditional roles are generally accepted among Sierra Leonean Muslim women, resulting in their 'lagging behind' in economic and social progression. This new group of women high achievers stand out as making a cultural and social difference unique enough to be subjects of this research study. Additionally, the research ascertains their views on if and how managing the burdens of patriarchy, womanhood and discrimination have strengthened their consciousness and propensity for radical action to effect change. Some of what they perceive and say could be most useful for the future empowerment of less educated women.

During the study, other relevant questions emerged from the process of enquiry and from the women's personal and individual stories. This is evident because the research explores the complexity of their experiences, their struggle to change social attitudes, to rebel against oppressive traditional norms and

customs, to improve on the man-woman relations and to highlight the government's interaction with Muslim women. Through the interviews and group discussions, it investigates how the new generation of Muslim women attempt to seek to distinguish and eliminate inequalities, and looks at the women's desire to be visible and acknowledged as pioneers for the emancipation of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The work was carried out in the context of social change (Jackson 2004) as present day Sierra Leone society is experiencing a women's movement where more women seem to be pioneering for a better life for women nationwide. Strongly dominated by non Muslim women, this movement poses a challenge to statutory laws and traditional attitudes towards women, where the women perceive to aspire and aim to change their experiences of not just being under (wo)men, but being the bosses themselves and being in positions where they can make important decisions and be given credit for what they do, their actions and their decisions.

The study also explores the professional Muslim women's fundamental changes of perspectives, their views of re-defining their interests and the restructuring of social relations. It deals with the personal success of the identified professional Muslim women participants, the purported success of the support group system run by these women, and the level of effectiveness so far in bringing about change in patriarchal society. Looking at their stories of how they became empowered and the active undertakings of actions in order to become empowered, the study challenges the perception of women as weak,

unintelligent and powerless using concepts from Al-Sheha (2002) who wrote about Muslim women in the Arab world.

1.7 Socio-Cultural/Educational/Political Background of Sierra Leone

A consideration of the socio-cultural and political background of Sierra Leone reveals a history of women's power and disempowerment. Alexander and Mohanty (1997) wrote, "Worldwide slavery and colonialism with their various effects blended with the diversity of cultural and traditional practices, mixed with customs and values, have created a patriarchal world that concurrently puts women in a disadvantaged position" (p23). Women in pre-colonial Sierra Leone were traditionally revered and respected and they had well defined social and political functions within the society (Fyle 1981). There are some indigenous Sierra Leonean ethnic tribes such as the Mendes in the South and South-East who have cultural customs and traditions that are considered to be matriarchal (Map of Sierra Leone 1.3). This is because the women can be selected to be chiefs, tribal heads and decision makers in their communities.

Traditional secret societies such as the Bondo and Sande societies are two of the oldest women's societies in Sierra Leone (Alie 1990). They have existed for centuries and have had a long and firmly established credibility among women and men. These women's institutions wield in their own sphere as much power as the men in their rituals and all the men in their respective communities from the lowest ranked to the highest chief, respected and feared

their rulings. As women's groups, they had developed autonomous structures, expertise in networking and cohesion and a sense of commitment as they had been the avenues and source for traditional education of young girls and women (Kamali 2001).

This tradition based educational process which can be compared to modern day boarding schools, was to teach young girls from about the age of puberty the history, moral expectations, cultural obligations and laws of the society (Rogers 2001). They were initiated into these women's institutions to receive training and discipline to become responsible adults, to be able to function properly in their socially constructed roles as wives, mothers, decision makers and home administrators. Considered as nature's first teachers, young girls turned into women and then mothers were enabled to perform their vital duty as the inculcators of the first principles of knowledge, morality and healthy practice in the child because in the Sierra Leone society, the majority of children's (the next generation) upbringing was entrusted to mothers because of their direct and prolonged contact with them (Kup 1958). It could therefore be said that traditionally, many Sierra Leonean women played a fundamental role in educating and nurturing the society.

With the influx of the Western educational system, many traditional values have been bastardised and changed to suit 'colonial modern' attitudes and opinions and traditional schools no longer hold as much credence and

importance in the minds of aspiring modern Sierra Leoneans according to Fyfe (1979). This has led to traditional schools fast dying out, even in the rural areas because of government pressure to send their children to the 'new normal' schools. These have hindered traditional and cultural knowledge to expand and to be passed on from generation to generation. After the 'founding' of Freetown by the British, Sierra Leone served not only as the administrative headquarters, but the educational centre for British West Africa (Foray 1995). Fourah Bay College, also referred to as the 'Athens of West Africa' was established in 1827 and it was the only European style university in Western sub-Saharan Africa for more than a century and was affiliated with Britain's Durham University (Conteh-Morgan and Dixon-Fyle 1999).

Boehmer (1995) wrote that churches and schools were built so that evangelism went side by side with education, instilling a change in the Sierra Leonean's perception of tradition and culture. Because the men had first contact with the colonialists with direct dealings with them, they were advantaged to have first knowledge of Christianity and Western education training as teachers and clerics. With the gendered inequalities inherent in these belief systems which they added to their own patriarchal behaviours, women have as a result been overburdened with responsibilities and deprived of education, economic independence and many basic human rights (Uraizee 2000). This mix of colonial influence and the Sierra Leonean patriarchal power established the right for men to use this knowledge to pacify women and make them believe

that they needed to be guided by men in all their doings. These instabilities have left the Sierra Leonean women, especially the Muslim women, struggling with themselves and the society to find an identity and their self worth, as portrayed by Davies et al (1992) in a research study sponsored by the Sierra Leone Adult Education Association.

Through the medium of education, colonial rule introduced new cultural values that conflicted with the old traditional values. In comparison to traditional schooling, Western education is competitive and examination-driven while indigenous education was more or less for the common good and lacked the pressure created by the fear of individual failure (Stratton 1994). With the advent of missionary schools, mixed with social pressures, education was being seen as a priority for boys and men whilst girls were left out on the pretext that it was a waste of resources (Adebayo 1996). Formal education for girls and women was considered not to be economically viable since they ultimately ended up as wives, homemakers (in the kitchen) and as mothers (bearing and rearing children). The 'domestic destiny' of girls was therefore uppermost in the minds of the mostly non-literate parents in their decision to send them to the 'new' schools. This consideration on the part of parents often translated into a preference for educating boys who, in their minds, stood to inherit family property and extend their clan name while girls are inevitably 'lost' to another family through marriage (Uraizee 2000). The slow development of education for girls has been largely due to the reluctance of parents generally to send their

girls to primary schools but as Alie (1990) wrote, "...the uncontested challenge has been to keep the girls in school until they completed their course of study" (p45).

Culturally, fully matured girls who are unmarried were generally looked at as prostitutes and loose girls, whether they were pursuing an education or not and as a result, parents put a lot of effort especially financial, into arranging early marriages for their daughters, as opposed to educating them. Another important socio-cultural reason regarding the education of girls has to do with parents' fear of their daughters becoming sexually active, losing their chastity before marriage or even worse getting pregnant, as this would effectively not just terminate their education but diminish their value for marriage and putting the entire family to shame. This conflicts with the 'safe' traditional schooling where there is no threat of the taboo because soon after young girls graduated from the traditional female secret societies, they were married off (Hiskett 1984). This fear further encouraged many parents to rush their daughters into early marriages, automatically ending their formal education. All these reasons evidently reinforced in the minds of the parents that educational investment in girls was a risky business and was therefore considered undesirable (Fyle 1988).

The economic demands of farming activities among the rural families also conflicted with the demands of Western education as this presented rural

parents with the dilemma of sending their children to school during the same hours when their help was most needed on the family farms. Nudged by the fear of committing economic suicide, the final decision was, in most cases, against Western education, with girls falling victims to such situations more often than boys (Makuchi and Abbenyi 1997). It was difficult for them to understand why Western education, even at basic primary level, took up to six years to complete, years that could be effectively used in successful farming and other economic activities with their acquired basic reading and writing skills.

Campbell (1997) reiterated that when considered, education for girls was limited to domestic subjects like sewing, cookery and housekeeping which were supposed to enhance their prescribed roles as wives and as mothers, as seen with the colonial masters and their wives. Since the nineteenth century, Christian parents among the Creoles had warmed to the idea of introducing and equipping their female children with Western and formal education (Fyle 1993). This brave move resulted in the impact made in the country's history by strong women who made a mark in national development. These women are seen as pioneers and role models to other women in the country's history. Having seen the effect and benefits of this move by the Christian Creoles, some Muslim Creoles from the start of the twentieth century followed suit in encouraging their girl children to seize and face the challenges of formal and Western education by attempting primary education. In the 1920s and 1930s, a

handful of daughters from rich Muslim elite families were encouraged to finish primary schooling and venture into junior and senior secondary education, leading to O' and A' levels. By the 1940s and 50s, Muslim girls were attempting college, teacher training and university education (Wyse 1991).

Enrolling girls into formal schools was a revolutionary move by the few Muslim parents because they had to be enrolled into missionary Christian schools or government funded schools that were run and conducted in a thoroughly Christian manner (Alie 1990). Islamic formal schools were non-existent and the informal Islamic schools or Madrasas only held classes in the evenings and on weekends either in the mosque or at the home of the teacher. Muslim boys and girls therefore got their formal education in missionary established Christian settings, learning more about Christianity and Bible studies while their Islamic education became secondary to formal schooling (Fyle 1993). In formal schools, they were taught that anyone or anything non-Christian was uncivilised, barbaric and uncultured, straightaway putting their minds in conflict with what they knew as their religious beliefs and what they were being taught at school. As a rule, potential pupils were not admitted into the schools if they did not have Christian or Western sounding names, and no other language was taught or used except English (Oyetade and Fashole-Luke 2008). It was also compulsory for all students to attend church services and praying sessions, with expulsion as the punishment for any defaulters. This has resulted in a far reaching state of generations of inferiority/superiority complex

on what is accepted and what is not, identifying anything similar to ‘whiteness and Christianity’ as superior (Conteh-Morgan and Dixon-Fyle 1999). This has in no small measure aided in the dying out of traditional cultures and beliefs.

1.8 Women’s Issues from a Feminist Perspective in Sierra Leone

The new educational system has brought new opportunities and friendships for the women and according to Mama (1995), this is an example of making the best out of the situation, which has helped women in knowing and appreciating other civilisations, cultures and lifestyles. In the case of educated Muslim women, it has enabled them to gain the benefits of Western education without renouncing their own customs even though many still face the contradictions inherent in Sierra Leone society. Some of these are the role expectations for women and the pressures of putting their homes and their family life as a priority before their careers. The new social order within the Muslim society is resulting in profound social, economic and political consequences (Jackson 2004). Seen as female rebellion and posing a threat to traditional and religious beliefs, their actions are misconstrued as resting on individualism and self affirmation and the abandonment of community interests.

On one hand, the women’s goals embrace the building up of their community by the inclusion of all women, in fulfilment of their spiritual and eschatological potential (Waddud 2006). As Waddud (2006) emphasizes, far from seeking to

disregard their religious traditions and texts, educated Muslim women are now motivated by a deep-seated desire to preserve the fundamental truths enshrined therein and develop religious understandings that speak with wisdom and credibility to contemporary audience regardless of gender. The adoption of Western culture and education has played a great role in the emergence of an upcoming and fast growing society of highly educated, professional, independent, assertive and emancipated Muslim women in the last thirty years (Leonard 2006), who celebrate their gender, culture and religion in the face of patriarchal objection and who stand as role models to the rest of the womenfolk in their communities. On the other hand more broadly speaking, and outside this small successful group of women, even in post-colonial Africa, women are being sacrificed at the altar of a male oriented society and men are exploiting the sex and gender system to maintain male dominance over the lives of women, control over reproduction and fertility and control over their economic wellbeing by the rampant adoption of patriarchal attitudes and social laws (Barlas 2002).

In countries with a history of colonialism, women's quest for emancipation, self identity and fulfilment are normally seen to represent a traitorous act and a betrayal not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief, but of the wider struggle for liberation and nationalism (Bulbeck 1998). During discussions and conversations with some Sierra Leonean men with patriarchal views who still resist change by refusing to understand the rationale behind the education of

girls and women, and women going out of their homes to do paid jobs, frequently ask questions like, *“Why do the women want to be educated? Why do they want to go out and work in offices, especially working with and around men, wasting money on clothes and transportation? Why do they want to work and then ask for time off work as maternity leave which they would spend at the same home that they seem to be running away from? Why are they not satisfied and happy with being at home and looking after the home and the children? Why do they aspire to be in positions where they can command and give men directives, wasting time that could be used in the home, cooking, ironing and washing”?*

Because of the deeply entrenched belief in the ‘domestication’ of girls, there were almost no Western educated Muslim female role models for young girls to emulate. There were no Muslim women in their communities whom they admired or considered ‘important’ or ‘famous’ as a result of being educated (Fyle 1993). The research therefore creates an avenue to fill in that void as it exposes and makes known, Muslim women who have broken through the barriers of subservient matrimony and motherhood, and cultural restrictive obligations, achieved high education levels, and are attempting to change the status of fellow Muslim women in their society.

Sierra Leonean women are seen by the majority of men as the passive, subservient ‘other’ whose primary role in society is childbearing, childrearing

and working in the home under the direction of the 'head' man. Steady (2006) corroborates and writes that, "...with the colonialist Victorian concepts copied by the Sierra Leoneans, especially the Creoles, women are confined to the home, domestic issues and housework" (p41). This set of restrictive practices and unenlightened behaviour has continued into the twenty first century where most women have no say in decisions that are made on their behalf, whether as housewives, petty traders or someone engaged in any learning programmes that can possibly take them out of the house, possibly become part of a network of other people and possibly seek out their independence.

Most African countries are patriarchal and role stereotyping is embedded in the culture. In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is the norm that men are better positioned in terms of gender-power relations (Kanneh 1998). The Sierra Leonean patriarchal system goes one step further in the oppression/power relations of its women in that there is a mixture of immense demands and responsibilities from the women, and limited rights and opportunities offered to them, resulting in a situation of disempowerment and inequality (Nnaemeka 1997).

The traditional Sierra Leonean society has continued to uphold some negative traditional beliefs and customs that militate against women. Customs such as early marriage, polygamy, wife inheritance, the preference and prioritising of boys and sons over girls and the stigma related to spinsterhood and infertility are virtual guarantees of man's dominance over women (Rogers 2001). These

institutions perpetuate women's subordinate positions and make them generally voiceless and powerless in matters affecting themselves. The study thus aims to show and register how professional Muslim women protest against retrogressive cultural norms that reduce women to silence and deny their subjectivity. All these interwoven burdens silence and constrain the development of the Sierra Leonean Muslim women making them triply disempowered (Nasta 1992) as evidenced in the findings chapter (Chapter 5).

1.9 Islam and Women in Sierra Leone

Islam was brought to Sierra Leone in the late sixteenth century through trade by Arab Merchants (Jalloh and Skinner 1997). The Arabs and migrant traders from the Middle East and Northern Africa settled in the Northern parts of Sierra Leone and gradually through trade and social interaction, Islam was spread from the interior and rural areas, to the urban areas and the capital city. The converts emulated the teachings of the Holy Quran and they referred to themselves as Muslims (Jalloh and Skinner 1997). On the other hand, the colonialists and the Christian missionaries were first settled in the capital Freetown, where they also traded with the natives from the interior and gradually found their way to the interior and rural areas, being administrative heads and building schools and churches. With time and the gradual spread of Islam from the interiors to the capital, a cross section of the Creoles converted to Islam.

According to Mahmoud (2005), religions are based on cultures, traditions, different patriarchal interpretations and sometimes, unjust legislations. These have sealed the fate of almost every woman believer and have been used to make women treated as and feel inferior to men. In Christianity, some denominations like the Roman Catholics claim that women were meant to have a different calling to men because there were no female prophets in the Bible, nor any female member of Christ's twelve apostles (Holy Bible Matthew 10:1-4). In Islam, some Muslims also opine and claim that no woman was mentioned either as a caliph or helper of the Prophet (pbuh), nor as a prophet in the Holy Quran and the Hadith. Some of these interpretations characterise the fierce resistance both in Islam and Christianity, not just for change, but for women to hold leading and responsible positions both in the Mosques and the Churches respectively. Sarwar (1984) wrote, "Patriarchal (mis)interpretations and selective (mis)readings of both the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran, mixed with oppressive customs and traditions have made religion one of the main sources of patriarchal oppression" (p31). The result of many interpretations and spreading of negativity is that entire societies have mistreated their female members despite the fact that Islam for example, has honoured and empowered women in all spheres of life. In Islamic law, a woman is considered equal to her male counterpart in religious, social and patriotic responsibilities and duties. She has a right to education, she cannot be forced into marriage and she has all rights to be an autonomous, independent entity in her family, her community and her society (Omran 1998).

A central feature of the rules of conduct in the Quran is the intent to improve the social position of women. There is a whole chapter in the Quran, (the book of laws) called 'Sura Nisaa' that is dedicated to Muslim women and their lives in Islam (Holy Quran 4). Islam preaches great respect and protection of its women against the ills of the society and teaches that women are autonomous beings, having a right to equal opportunities in life. It emphasises that women are the partners of men, the sisters of men and that, "men should seek paradise under the feet of their mothers" (Holy Quran 4/14).

Islam champions all movements to improve the status of women by giving them human, civil, social and economic rights that were never previously given to women, even at a time when societies were overtly traditional and socially under-developed (Ibrahim 1997). It gives women an equal legal capacity with men, which means that she has the ability to enter into all kinds of contractual arrangement and to conduct business on her own without the need for her husband's consent. Such a legal right given in the seventh century is yet to be completely achieved by the modern married woman in some contemporary societies where the husband has a certain right to oversee his wife's affairs. It was not until 1965 for example, that French women achieved this legal right (Ichou and Ismail 1999). In present day twenty-first century, even the United States of America has still not ratified the United Nations resolution for the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women

(CEDAW) put forward by the United Nations General Assembly since 1979 with a view to raising public awareness of violations of the rights of women worldwide. The status of women in Islam is seriously misunderstood and it is wrongly implied that the behaviour of individual Muslims and Muslim communities invariably reflect the laws and the orthodoxy of Islam. Jaward (1998) wrote, "Islam has been misconstrued as totally patriarchal, suppressing and oppressing the lives of women and it is this misrepresentation that has resulted in the constraints of the advancement of Muslim women worldwide" (p 21).

Islam has one primary source or book of laws (the Holy Quran) and the reliably transmitted reports and collection of sayings and acts attributed to the Prophet (pbuh) by his companions (the Hadith). These two govern all the teachings and doctrines of the religion (Tabatabaie 2001). In the past recent decades, Islam which means 'Peace' in Arabic, has been misinterpreted, the teachings have been misunderstood, there has been a gross abuse of some of its laws, and all of this has resulted in misrepresentations in the form of terrorists, Islamic fundamentalists and the waging of holy wars. Many of the things done in the name of Islam like suicide attacks and terrorist bombings are distortions of what the Holy Quran preaches, distortions and mis-interpretations which are mainly done by men (Haddad and Esposito 1998). "...And when it is said to them, Do not make mischief in the land, they say: We are but peace-makers..." (Holy Quran 2/11).

Religion plays a role in the making of decisions and the setting of national priorities and it determines the role of women in a patriarchal society where women are disempowered, considered inferior and have limited or no access to knowledge and power (Jalloh and Skinner 1997). According to Al-Hakim (2005), most religious interpretations lean on a clear gender based hierarchy with macho masculine principles that perpetuate male dominance of social institutions. In Africa, especially Sierra Leone, Islam has been adulterated, misunderstood and combined with traditional values and customs. Using patriarchal values to claim that Islam permits and sanctions deeds against women like polygamy and inheritance of property, the combination of the religious misinterpretation and traditional patriarchal customs leads to the oppression of women, stifling their growth and reinventing their essence as the 'silent other' (Al Mahdi 2005). The low status of Muslim women and social attitudes that are reinforced by customary laws have resulted in low access to education, low participation in decision making at managerial and administrative levels, low incoming earning levels, poverty, high fertility rates, poor health and violence against women (Beck and Keddie 1979).

The (non) advancement of Muslim women in Sierra Leone and the sub-region gives cause for much concern. Ingrained social attitudes and cultural misconceptions pose challenges that would take several years to overcome (Haider 1995). This is one reason why Muslim men are suspicious of what to

them represents a threat to their traditional authority. They have been inclined to be autocratic in their homes, rendering the women to be submissive and lacking self confidence. According to Engineer (1999), the fear of God and the fear of being sent to hell are a few of the religious doctrines and strategies that have been propagated to hold women down. The anxiety to control the women's activities reflects on their denial of permission of participation in the public sphere, thereby completing the woman's alienation and ensuring her exclusion from the male dominated arena. With lack of education, even in Islamic teachings and doctrines, women have had to accept and swallow misinterpretations done by men, on the laws of the religion. This gives way to arguments that some men have used the laws and twisted the meanings to their own gain and advantage. Clarke (1982) viewed that early marriage, arranged and forced marriages, polygamy, wife inheritance, domestic violence, fertility, son preference and the bride price are some of the issues that have conspired in perpetuating male dominance and promoting patriarchal principles leading to the marginalisation and silencing of Sierra Leonean Muslim women, the slow progress in their self development and the lowering of their self esteem.

1.10 New Social Sub Group of Professional Muslim Women in Sierra Leone

Gradually, from all indications during the research process, the barriers are being broken down and a better understanding of the issues of education, empowerment and self 'enhancement' is being developed. Sierra Leonean

Muslim women are gradually now becoming motivated to be more active through informal education programmes that are closely related to their way of life. “This is all so because education is seen as the only means to enable them to create a more viable society and to fulfil properly their functions in the society and within their families” (Jalloh and Skinner 1997, p21).

The strategies adopted by women to combat these systems in different countries worldwide have been different although the objectives have been the same. They have protested against all pervasive oppressive systems (Mahmoud 2005) and their struggle has been long and strewn with successes and failures. Successes include for example, countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone’s next door neighbour, where the first African female President and Head of State was elected in 2006. Also, Muslim dominated states like the Islamic Republic of Iran (after the Islamic Revolution), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, and other Gulf States have implemented the changing of some legislations or policies regarding equality, voting rights, membership of parliament and non violence against women. Failures have also been demonstrated in some countries like Sierra Leone, where in 2002, men as well as women believed that they were not psychologically ready to have a female President and Head of State and saw it as an almost impossible feat as it is customary for women to be treated as minors and consequently not allowed to hold any supreme political positions. Other countries have also failed in attempts made in appointing women to key and significant jobs or offices

normally seen as only for men. The hierarchical principle of the natural authority of the man and the passive receptivity of the woman is evidently undergoing a contemporary upheaval (Ali 2007). Having suffered such discrimination, a small percentage of the Muslim women in Sierra Leone are now making a place in the public forum and they no longer see it as an option to stand in the shadow of men. This is evidenced in my research with the professional Muslim women who participated. Even though a very small percentage, from the conclusions drawn, it is anticipated that this new trend grows, matures and develops into the emergence of more Muslim women in the public arena.

Unlike the established status quo in which men easily get away with flouting conventions, in recent years, as a result of exposure to Western education, Sierra Leonean Muslim women are fast abandoning the acquiescent attitude and now question and analyse what they believe in, and insist on what they believe should happen. Many now consider themselves as equals and counterparts to men in relation to jobs, access to formal education and the economic and financial world. They perceive Islam as essentially a religion of advancement of human life (Milton-Edwards 2004), they are now vigorously attempting to pursue and gain access to good jobs, access to further education, and access to decision-making arenas. With education and their new enlightenment, these women still play their prescribed accepted roles as mothers and as wives whilst refusing to be bound by the four ‘cardinal virtues’

of piety, submissiveness, purity and domesticity (Bruner 1983). This is also evident in the group of professional female participants in the research, who mostly juggle their married life, life in the home and with their children, and securing a life as a professional.

This does not dispute or negate the fact that there is a lack of structures and facilities put in place in the Sierra Leone society to enable and support women to manage a career. As Lewis (2000) suggests in the presentation of perspectives between the private and public domains, the world of family and home is directly related to women while the world of work and paid jobs is strongly related to men, therefore structured as two opposite worlds. From the social outlook, it is a mechanism/hindrane for the women's potential in both the society and her place of work where mothers have to make a choice between their careers and the families in times of an ill child, school strikes or long vacations (Modupe-Kolawole 1997). Sierra Leonean women generally but Muslim women particularly are therefore under-utilised and under-represented in executive positions and they earn much less, about 30-40% less than their male counterparts in the same or comparable job (Muana and Corcoran 2005). This is because, as illustrated in the discussion of the findings (Chapter 5), that traditional cultural laws expect the place of a woman to be in the home and definitely not as the head of an institution with an equal or higher status to any man.

In the last twenty years, Sierra Leone has experienced a sustained burst and an influx of Muslim women in the educational and professional arenas. The availability and adoption of Western education and Western values has created a new emerging society of professional Muslim women who question prescribed traditional customs and beliefs, and who celebrate womanhood with their physical and intellectual capabilities (Al-Hakim 2005). As evidenced in Chapter 5, they are dedicated to being the pillars of their families, dedicated to their roles as wives and as mothers and assuming the many burdens to protect their families whilst maintaining a professional work schedule. With change and progress happening, the women attempt to show that unjust traditions are rooted in a culture that can evolve.

Since the declaration of the end of the civil war in 2002, there has been a new revitalised growth of development programmes in the country (Forna 2003). With the effects and consequences of the war mixed with the slow movement of progression on development and the facilities for women, they have inspired a new dimension to the meaning of determination and change. The professional Muslim women of Sierra Leone, especially pioneers of support groups who have participated in this research, have envisaged that empowerment for the rest of the womenfolk can be reached through participation, and they are therefore attempting to equip the mass of grass-root women to participate in the process of development and to play a positive, inclusive and active role in the society. Based on objectives from the FOMWASAL constitution (Appendix 4), through literacy classes, skill

acquisition and enhancement trainings, professional Muslim women provide learning opportunities for Muslim women as a means of attaining sustainable personal and national growth.

The new emerging society of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, the subject of this research, is refuting the discursive silencing of the subaltern (Spivak 1990) and they are claiming the right to have their voices heard and attempting to join the arena of changing discourses and representations. From the analysis of the data collected in this study (Chapter 5), the women indicate that they see themselves as sisters on a pilgrimage, aspiring to be role models within their communities to the grass root level illiterate/semi literate women, while attempting to succeed in changing the image of Muslim women in the society.

1.11 Support Groups

In all African societies (allowing for variations in cultural norms) the main channel of influence is the family and the kinship group (Nasta 2000). Support and empowerment groups for women have been a worldwide phenomenon in different forms of consciousness raising, women's training and women's development groups (Oyewumi 2005). Establishing and running support groups give this new crop of women the advantage of solidarity and sisterhood to effectively combat male domination and free other women from certain religious and social restraints. In Sierra Leone, women secret societies and other community based groups have been in existence since pre-colonial times

and their primary aim had been to support each other in times of need, sharing their problems and their joys (Jones and Palmer 1987). The groups are not only used as a forum to educate women, but also to enlighten and help them recognise, identify, confront, tackle and overcome oppressive customs and traditions (Bulbeck 1998). Believing that lack of opportunities early in life mortgages a woman's potential through all stages of her life, the group aims that young Muslim girls and women should see education as a basic human right and a key factor to reducing poverty and promoting empowerment, change, peace of mind and development.

The support groups provide the tools needed for enhancing the self esteem of vulnerable women to enable them to become more assertive and shift from helplessness to efficacy (Wadud 1992). Through these groups, professional Muslim women are challenging gender inequalities in different aspects of their lives, making improvements on their living conditions and attempting to reduce the inequalities.

These issues are also explored in African women's fiction, which was used as a stimulus for discussions and an underpinning stimulus for arguments leading to this research study. Ba like Emecheta, two West African women writers who vehemently write for change in the social status of African women, significantly implore African women not only to embrace sisterhood but to refrain from judging the decisions and actions of their 'sisters'. Holloway

(1992) expresses that one leading cause of women's sidelining in society is as a result of women being their own enemies in taking time to fight themselves instead of fighting for themselves. The notoriety of backbiting, gossiping, malice and accusations often sabotage efforts made to create and initiate change for the benefit of all women.

In propagating sisterhood and collective support that provides the spirit to resolve issues, professional Muslim women as evident in the research are advocating for women to see the need to work together on issues of empowerment, emancipation and autonomy in order to see a successful implementation of change in the society's attitude towards Muslim women. As a literary text used as a guide during the study, Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984) showcases Aissatou, the second protagonist who leaves her polygamous husband, travels overseas with her children and combines the demands of family life, education and work responsibilities to live an independent and somewhat fulfilled life. In other words, she is the brave victim who chooses to live her life in the most responsible manner without a husband. She is perhaps the ideal symbol of the modern African Muslim woman and mother, even though the society shows its disapproval of single mothers and divorced women by referring to them as 'fallen women with no sense of decorum' (Stovel 2008). On the other hand, Ramatoulaye, the main protagonist is abandoned by her polygamous husband and all responsibilities of work, household and family are laid at her feet. As the 'ideal traditional African

Muslim woman', she is a victim who decides to bear all the vicissitudes, believing that it is her responsibility to accept all the suffering and ill-treatment dished to her. Yet ironically, she depended and found solace in Aissatou her friend, who gave her moral and financial support. Ba succinctly portrays that these women of 'loose decorum' are ultimately admired by their traditional counterparts who do not have the freedom, confidence and strength to make their own decisions and to work for change.

1.12 FOMWASAL

The existence of support groups in Sierra Leone like the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL) is part of the reaction of some professional Muslim women protesting against the silencing and unfair attitudes they experience. The group is a major contribution to the development and publicity of the independent and educated women participating in the research. Founded in 1993 by a group of professional Muslim women, FOMWASAL, a registered civil, non profit, non-governmental organisation (NGO) represents one such kinship group whose importance cannot be over emphasised.

As a federation and an umbrella body of over fifty Muslim women's associations in Sierra Leone, it has a membership of over one thousand women with a wide age range, from different ethnic, social and educational backgrounds, originating/hailing from different parts of the country (Appendix

4). Run by volunteers and a few paid professionals, the federation has an executive board comprising of representatives nominated by each registered association, allowing and giving a chance for the concerns of each group to be heard, and the volunteers help with the day to day administration and running of the office. Emerging and growing as a national faith-based NGO with emphasis on promoting and protecting the interests, welfare and aspirations of its members in line with Islamic injunctions, the group provides social services and contributes to the overall health, literacy and economic empowerment of its members in the form of counselling, television and radio educational programmes, medical, financial and careers advice.

The idea began to form in the minds of some educated Muslim women for establishing an Islamic organisation for women when it was observed that there were educated Muslim women in various parts of the country who wanted to increase their knowledge and practice of Islam. Some had already formed Islamic study groups, organised classes for uneducated women and established schools but they operated in isolation, not knowing of each other's existence. There was no mutual encouragement and no exchange of ideas, programmes or information. It was thought that there was a serious need for a body which could express the views of Muslim women at national and state levels. Many women societies already existed in the country, mostly aiming at social progress for women and Muslim women were part of these but in most cases,

they were dominated by non-Muslims who were not interested in an Islamic approach to social problems and current issues.

According to the constitution, the vision of FOMWASAL is a world where women are totally empowered to be role models in making positive impacts in religious and secular matters (FOMWASAL constitution 1995). The mission is to propagate Islam in Sierra Leone through the establishment of educational institutions and other outreach activities and to improve the socio-economic status of the Muslim populace especially women, youth and children through training, the provision of qualitative education, health, micro-enterprise schemes and advocacy (FOMWASAL constitution 1995). The rationale for these 'fighting' women was to seek out justice and resist oppression and discrimination from their male counterparts and non-Muslim peers. From social perspective, the group addresses the virtues of womanhood and it attempts to influence the choice of female representatives in local and national offices. This role is therefore seen as the sign of solidarity and commitment to the causes of Muslim womanhood, dealing across board from the most educated and prominent to the grass-root illiterate level. The group provides the chance and opportunity for women to meet, network, discuss and exchange ideas, problems and worries in a secure environment. It encourages members to utilise the provided counselling services offered by professionals when needed so as to in effect help reduce the stress of the burdens that they carry.

From the study, with the prevalence of these support opportunities, many women have shown themselves to be responsive and very enthusiastic to partake in the activities and programmes involved with the groups. A strong sense of togetherness and sharing characterises their empowerment process and the identifying of the factors that enhance or impend their progress. In the last thirty years, Muslim women in Sierra Leone have excelled in education; they have acquired degrees, post graduate qualifications and professional experiences. With the participants of the study as examples, Muslim women are establishing themselves as professionals in key jobs and specialisations and they are asserting themselves on the decision making rungs of the development ladder. While pursuing Western education, the women in this research, through FOMWASAL their support group, are going the extra mile to study and understand the Holy Quran (the main and primary book of Islamic teachings), so that they are in a position to interpret and understand what the religion dictates in order to augment the position of other Muslim women to create a more viable Sierra Leone.

This research focuses on the group of educated successful Muslim women and through interviews and group discussions, explores their perceptions of the causes for their success and the support systems put in place to nurture, support and implement their impact in the lives of ordinary Muslim women. Conscious of the great importance of education in their lives, the women devote themselves to learning and exert themselves for the spread and progress of

education for the bulk of Muslim women in every possible way. As a result of the insistence advocating for Islamic education to be incorporated in mainstream formal syllabuses for schools and higher educational institutions, the support group FOMWASAL has marked the beginning of momentous changes not only in social and political spheres, but in the domains of education and learning.

In their quest for change, the new crop of professional Muslim women try to offer a suitable worldly and religious education and training in an integrated and balanced fashion that strengthens and enhances the personality and faith of the majority of uneducated Muslim women through the organised education programmes of the support groups (Kamaruddin and Kausar 1995). Using Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia as examples, the group advocates that Sierra Leonean Muslim women have the ability to hold and maintain any position of responsibility, even as the head of the country. The study explores how the professional educated Muslim women in Sierra Leone are perceived by the grass-root majority of Muslim women as members of the elite in the society to chart the course of a new beginning for the bulk of the un-educated grass-root women. It also explores the role of the support group FOMWASAL in particular, and how the professional Muslim women are expected to lead in the struggles against oppression, neo-colonialism, exploitation and the abuse of power.

The new social sub group of professional Muslim women through the support groups aim to promote Muslim women's equal access to economic resources, land, credit facilities, education, health care services and social development opportunities that recognise self development and self empowerment for poor Muslim women in society. These are envisaged to improve the status, health and economic welfare of Muslim women and girls nationwide. Through advocacy programmes, they aim to offer full participation on the basis of equality with men in decision making at all levels and introduce mainstream gender perspectives and analysis in all policies, programmes and strategies, especially in the public service (FOMWASAL constitution 1995). With the help and support of the government, they also aim to eliminate all forms of violence and discrimination against Muslim women (Appendix 4). As an umbrella federation, the group is also trying to ensure that Muslim women are adequately and sufficiently educated to know their duties, responsibilities, rights and privileges to enable them function efficiently and effectively in the country's socio-economic growth and development as this indirectly affects their self empowerment.

With ignorance as the main perpetrator of powerlessness, the emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women is trying to face the problems rooted in cultural values and dispelling the misconceptions about the inferiority of Muslim women in the society as illiterate and uneducated housewives or small business women, by showcasing their education, their vocations and their pride

as Muslims. Because they are usually subject to limitations, abuse and imposition as a result of the negative attitudes towards them, they try to redress socio-cultural factors like wifhood and motherhood that play major roles in their present condition (Al-Sheha 2002). With grit to pursue and achieve a new beginning and opportunity, the educated women seem determined to do justice to cultural and social expectations and not feel frustrated with the demands of mothering and domestic responsibilities. As a motion of change to signify matriarchal independence, dignity and survival, the women activists respect the family institution as a cultural value and emphasize that the principles of wifhood and motherhood do not influence negatively their position in society but are laid on family values and loyalty.

1.13 Knowledge Gap

In the exploration of the constraints upon Muslim women in Sierra Leone, my contribution to knowledge through this research is to explore the cultural responses of women and the ways in which a new kind of educated women can challenge such beliefs and behaviours and change women's social positions and achievements from within and without, through perceptions and practices. The study creates a new understanding of the existing issue and identifies what it means to, and, for black, minority and oppressed women who encounter prejudice and inequity in their daily lives (Braxton and McLaughlin 1990).

Coming from a Women's Studies perspective and using feminist research methodology, the thesis is written based on and using women's own voices and their individual perceptions of empowerment, education and self development. The topics and subject areas looked at are studied from women's individual outlooks, and my evidence shows that these represent the participants in the most authentic way, Muslim women, their emotions, thoughts, and the complexity and many facets of the female entity and nature. The topics also underpinned the desire and intention to legitimise and voice women's opinions in the way that women choose to tell their own stories of empowerment and development, in order to shed light and increase awareness of this on an academic as well as applied level (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007).

1.14 Justification

The study is innovative due to its investigation on professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone as this group of women have not been subjected to research and serious academic scrutiny. It makes a new and original contribution to the knowledge world of education by developing an understanding of the new society of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone, and it is also a stepping stone in researching other women's issues in Sierra Leone and Africa in general. With the lack of literature from Sierra Leone in a range of subject matters and topics, and the non-existence of authentic and reputable data and statistics of even basic national structures, this research will enhance data and

information on Sierra Leone and fill in the gap and void of information for research and leisure purposes.

The number of researchers who engage in feminist, gender and women's issues is high and as a result, any publications and information that is gained in the field of gender and about women, promotes public awareness of the subject (Devault 1999). Researchers and their works therefore help in getting the issues on the public and academic agenda, and possibly initiating and taking active steps towards diminishing the gaps between men and women in the society. The exploration of this phenomenon relates theory to practice as it is often argued that theories and the academic world are disconnected from the real world (Cryer 2000). The investigation of the phenomenon of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone builds the connection between the two worlds, the academic and the real world, represented by the desires and wishes of the women. This connection leads to the establishment of theory which is related to practice (Reinharz 1992). Its significance also indicates the development of further research so as to expand knowledge about and for this group of women in the Sierra Leone society. By undertaking this research, the evidence provides an interdisciplinary point of view in addressing the issue and concept of the new society of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone. This qualitative piece of work, conceptualised within the framework of setting out to understand the women's relationship to their success, from the point of view of their own perspectives sets out to dispute Epstein's (1973, p2) statement that,

“women settled like sediments in a wine bottle, they always settled to the bottom...” by celebrating the number of Muslim women now in traditional male and Christian dominated spheres.

There are personal, academic and professional reasons for me to explore the gaps and the lack of literature and information on the subject of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, looking specifically at the new emerging sub group of professional Muslim women and their strategies to break through barriers and to inspire and effect change in the lives of other Muslim women. Such changes in the lives of others are beyond the scope of this research but the interviews with women who are not highly educated suggests that they perceive the educated women as potential agents of change whose development could well affect their lives and social behaviours.

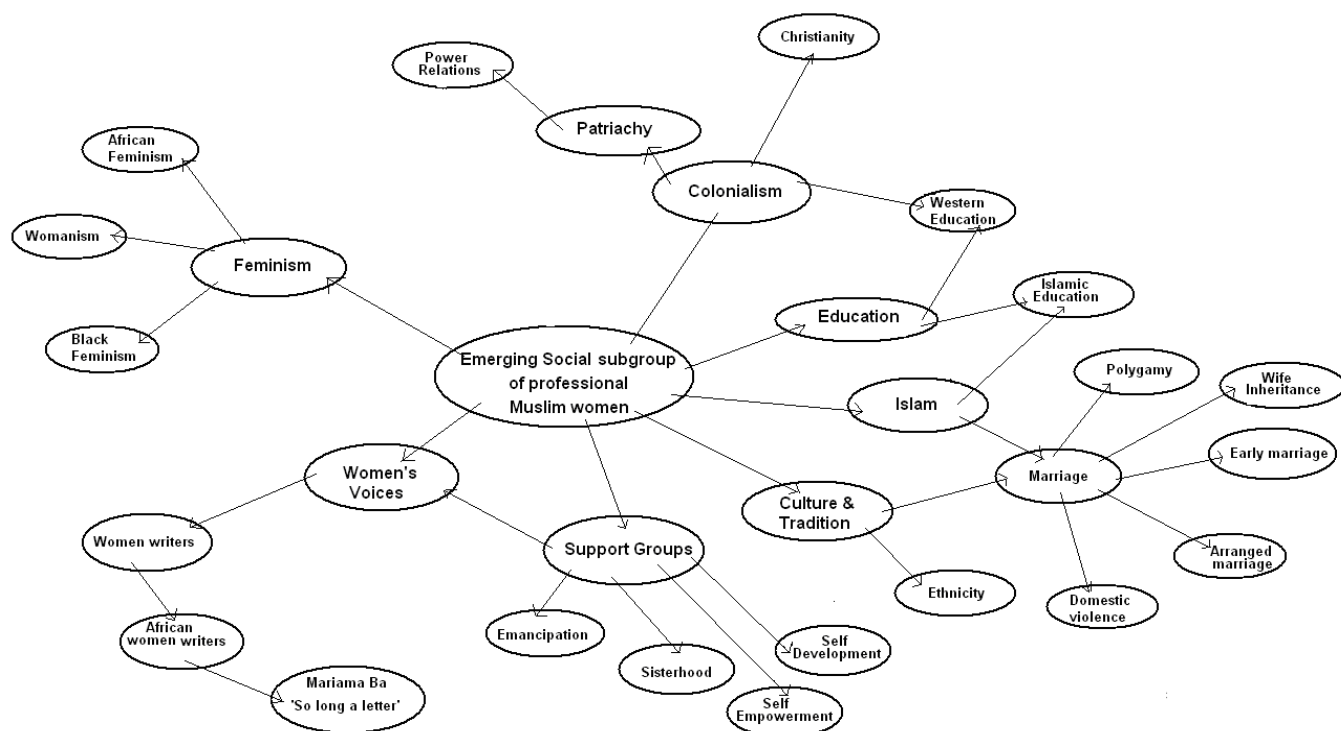
The following chapter presents and discusses the concepts of the research and the way they were integrated into the conceptual framework of the research. The conceptual framework serves as a basis for the choice of research method and the selected research tools. The chapter also presents the research approach leading to the conceptual framework and the selection of research methods and tools.

Chapter Two: Theoretical perspectives

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the theoretical perspectives which have emerged from the literature and indicates ways in which my own research is informed by and contributes to the literature. Key emerging theories from the literature underpin the development of the research questions and the interpretation of the data. They include: the concepts of power, gender and ethnicity, which underpin patriarchy, Western colonial controls, and religious controls. These are set against and interpreted by theories arising from feminism and empowerment. These theories also inform the themes which develop from the literature and emerge from analysing and interpreting the data.

2.1:1 Exploring Theoretical Perspectives



The research title, **Breaking Barriers (Women in Transition): An investigation into the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone**, brings together debates about the possibilities and potential of equality and emancipation in Muslim women's lives in present day Sierra Leonean society based in the main on the experiences and perceptions of a number of successful Muslim women. The diagram above depicts a visual representation of the exploration of theoretical perspectives carried out in this study, and these perspectives are discussed and explained in this chapter. When considering the status of the new social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone, and exploring what they are doing to impact and improve self development and self empowerment to Muslim women in society, several theoretical perspectives emerge which can be used to enable us to ask, theorise and address the research questions, and later analyse and interpret the findings from the data. Principal amongst these theoretical perspectives are the concepts of power, gender and ethnicity, from which flow the concepts of patriarchy, Western colonial controls, and religious controls, set against feminism and empowerment. All these perspectives of education, economics and changing times are centred on the specific context of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, their emancipatory perceptions and actions and the influence of empowerment groups on their existence.

There are inter-relationships between these perspectives and they have been highlighted within the chapter. These theoretical perspectives relate issues of

power and ‘finding a voice’ to empowerment. Colonialism and patriarchy are related by power relations between the colonialists and the colonised, while colonialism and educational perspectives have Western education as an underlying relationship. There is a very strong and direct link between education and Islam, a link between culture and tradition with Islam of which marriage is a common denominator, while there is an obvious and direct relationship between support groups and women’s voices. A number of distinct issues also come into view and are linked when exploring the primary theoretical perspectives. These include Christianity that is linked to colonialism, and African feminism, black feminism and womanism all branching from feminism. The study uses a literary example as a platform and so refers to African women writers, while the main focus of the study is the existence of the new social sub group of professional Muslim women, their actions and voices toward self empowerment, self development and sisterhood as a result of support groups, how they fit in the Sierra Leone society and what they are doing to impact social change nationwide. All these perspectives are looked at and discussed in detail in the succeeding sections of the chapter.

From a literary and sociological view, this interdisciplinary study analyses the tremendous efforts involved in opposing the trend to pathologize and dehumanize Muslim womanhood, with which these women are engaged.

Alongside the recognition and awareness of the underprivileged status of women inspired by the discrimination against them, the development of certain

theories grasp the uniqueness and essence of these women and encourages them to express themselves through their voice, their writing and through their way of thinking (Al-Hakim 2005). These new outlooks examine the place and status of Muslim women in the Sierra Leone society and critically investigate the direction to which Muslim women aim, both as individuals and as a group.

This chapter looks at the structures and systems that serve as barriers to the development of Sierra Leonean Muslim women, and dwells on those experienced by them in their society. It is my evidenced belief that Sierra Leonean Muslim women have to cope with the unresolved issues of disempowerment and social standing that stem from patriarchal social norms and codes. It is justifiable to therefore say and agree with Bulbeck (1998) that a gender influenced exploration, elaborates on existing studies to create new knowledge in this field.

The commitment to gaining information about women and gender issues promotes public awareness and helps in getting the issues on the public and academic agenda (Richardson et al 2003). This also means, possibly taking steps towards diminishing the gaps between men and women in the society (Lewis 2000). Such steps are beyond the reach of this thesis itself, but it is hoped that the research and thesis can be read and used to support such developments later. As the researcher, I had strong faith in the capabilities and skills of my participants, both as individuals and for the women, as members of

an established collective support group. This is so because they seemed to have made an impact by a tremendous effort to develop and chart their journeys in life, taking into consideration the traditional and social attitudes towards Muslim women, and in the process they have challenged and are attempting to change stigmas and stereotypical perceptions of Muslim women.

The study also focuses on these women because they have made the choice to embark on the journey of change not only for self empowerment and development, but because they seem to want to affect others through their enlightenment and their model, which influence properly understood and directed, could change the destiny of thousands of illiterate and undeveloped Muslim women in Sierra Leone. Therefore, engaging naturalistic methodology strategies that inspire sensitivity to the women being studied have advanced the advocated change policies that are creating an awareness of the rights of Muslim women as individuals and as members of a group. According to Steady (2006), this all prompts the promotion of legislation, the collection of data dealing with the causes of the male-female disparity and the carrying out of institutional reforms and processes.

2.2 The Effects of Patriarchy in Defining Power Relations between Muslim Women and Men

According to Devault (1999), in culture and religion, gender difference shows itself in the existence of the difference between men's and women's interpretation of values, judgements, motivation, interests, literary creativity,

feeling of identity, the cognitive process and awareness of the construction of social reality. Bennett (2006) wrote that historically, when dealing with the difference of the sexes and gender equality/inequality, patriarchy is viewed as the first structure of domination and submission, that men learn how to hold other human beings in contempt. Walby (1990, p10) defines patriarchy as, “The universal social domination of women by men, based on relationships where men police women’s childbearing and sexuality and where they exploit women’s labour”. Patriarchy is also based on the relative exclusion of women from arenas of social life apart from the household.

Uraizee (2000) sees patriarchy as an institutionalised form of male dominance over women within the family and in the society. Her view is quite similar to that of German sociologist Max Weber (Sydie 1987) who defines patriarchy as a social authority based on a family structure in which the oldest male presides over an extended family. He suggests that because it is normally men and not women who hold the powerful positions in important social institutions, these institutions are therefore reflecting capitalist male oppression. From the African perspective, the power of the African woman is besieged and limited by neo-colonial and patriarchal ideologies.

Social relations are of the dominant and the weak, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed, the active and the passive, which according to ascribed social roles, are the masculine and the feminine

(Rowbotham 1992). Uraizee (2000) defines power as, “Power is all about control and is associated firmly with masculinity and the male” (p48). It is also imposed on a group of people who are refused social identities in the social categories of race, class and sex. African women especially, fall into these three categories, in addition to this study’s perspective of religion. These factors signify that power relations are based on patriarchy and can imply the existence of victims in this system. They can be economic, legal, political, social and psychological and include traditional family structures that are based on authority (Fenstermaker and West 2002).

Colonialism, religion, culture, tradition and taboos are common grounds of oppression relevant to the status of African women and their experiences of domination and subjugation (Charles 2007). Because of patriarchy and its power relations, the concept of masculinity and the male is that of provider, protector, the dominant and the active while the concept of femininity and the female is that of submissive, dependent and passive (Lorber 2001). In Islam, the male is considered as the head in all major social and religious institutions. Even though unintentional, this encourages patriarchal attitudes to thrive. With these prejudices, the Sierra Leonean Muslim society expects females to be the complete opposite of males, forever seeking help and protection from them, and with no support in their expected prescribed roles of domestic work and financial dependence.

Looking at why there is the phenomenon of the social sub group of professional Muslim women and the establishment of the support group system, how the group fits in the society and what they are doing to impact and improve self development and self empowerment of Muslim women nationwide to alleviate and change the subordinate status of Muslim women. I identify certain aspects of their lives that they use for the transformation of power relationships in which the women's capacities, abilities and strengths are considered together within various other systems of domination. This is so because, according to Brigden (2007), in order to change the relations of domination which structure society and which define the subordination of these women, there should be an investigation and an understanding of how power works.

2.3 Colonialism, Christianity and their Impact on Professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone

According to Boehmer (1995), colonialism is the exploitation of weak peoples by a larger power. It became one of the most profound historical encounters to affect more than half of the globe from the sixteenth century onwards. Beginning with the expansionist tendencies of Europe in the late sixteenth century, colonialism was a process of systematic political, economic, cultural and religious brutalisation (Quayson 2000). Its dominance and exploitation resulted in a complete disintegration of social, political, cultural and economic superstructures in the colonised territories as the subjects were bound to

absolute obedience losing all their rights and autonomy as human beings (Myers 2003).

In political terms, colonialism meant direct control over a country, including the exploitation of its resources and its labour (Spivak 1990). In the case of Africa, before the slave trade, private European companies were already trading with the natives. They had a barter system of trade where goods like gin, wine, salt and spices were brought in from Europe and other parts of the world in exchange for gold, cloth, ivory, timber and palm oil from the Africans (Crowder 1968).

As the businesses got bigger and stronger, the private companies asked for help and protection from their governments to set up protectorates or colonies in Africa, in order to formalise trading arrangements with the Africans (Jalloh and Skinner 1997). Since the trade of raw materials and resources was good, lucrative and profitable to their respective countries, the trade increased to the exchange of firearms and ammunition, and gradually escalated to the trade of human beings as slaves. The slaves by definition became the properties of the Europeans (Quayson 2000). They were bound to absolute obedience by the dominance of their masters, therefore losing all their rights and autonomy as human beings. Smith (1958) wrote that the introduction of Christianity by missionaries sent by churches was to justify the economic exploitation of the African people.

Africa had its own cultures, values and ways of life before the arrival of Western missionaries and colonialists (Cooper 2005). There were some matriarchal cultures and societies in existence where priestesses were deified because of their contact with the gods, and womenfolk were generally powerful and well respected in their communities (Kuzwayo 1985). There were institutions where women in their own sphere wielded as much power as the men, and played a significant role within their societies. In pre-colonial Sierra Leone, women were appointed as 'Mammy Queens' for local administration and they were consulted for their opinions before any decisions concerning their communities were made. These institutions played a great and important role in the lives of the women, portraying their power as mothers, teachers of culture and tradition and at the same time, showing their wisdom and expertise in all affairs (Abraham 1978). The groups portrayed the power of women as a unifying force not only for women themselves but for the society at large. The women respected self reliance and were always at the forefront in generating work to care, feed and look after their families. During colonialism, these women's organisations lost their vitality and their capacity to mobilise, wield their power and even exact retribution when women were abused (Emenyonu 1987).

The European colonialists were intent on making the Africans as malleable to European desires as possible (Fanon 2001). As Fanon (2001) insisted, they had brought with them a different culture and way of life, Christianity and the

Bible, Western education and the colonial languages. Several women novelists have commented on the intentions and effects of European colonialism. Emecheta (1986, p106) wrote, “It has always been the duty of Europeans to impose their culture on whoever they come in contact with”. The ‘new’ way of life was adopted and the missionaries were embraced by the unsuspecting Africans who were convinced that the new ways were related to a better lifestyle. In Sierra Leone, the colonialist Victorian white families were emulated as models and names were changed to sound more ‘white’ and European, indigenes changed their way of dress and discarded traditional Sierra Leonean and African fabrics and attires. There was also the pressure of the men going out to work while the women then expected to stay home, knit, cook, sew and entertain (Steady 1975).

Subjection to the rules of the colonists has left a far reaching impact on African women. With the view that only men should go out to work and earn, the women are mostly confined to the house and hidden from sight except in the role of fending and fetching for the family and this phenomenon has become second nature to Sierra Leonean men irrespective of religion, race or economic status (Jackson 2004).

Supporting the influx of this new culture, strong willed and assertive African women who were used to farming, community building and decision making were then regarded by their men as similar to nineteenth century European

women who were passive Christian housewives and mothers (Boehmer 1995). Their Victorian ideal was that women were to stay at home and concentrate on child rearing and domestic labour. The British officials and the missionaries had brought with them their own notions of the proper social and economic roles for their wives and partners who were with them (Modupe-Kolawole 1997).

Sierra Leonean women like other African women, especially in rural areas, traditionally owned their own land for farming and for other purposes as they were entitled to certain property and legal rights. Colonialism in the form of greater industrialisation and urbanisation encouraged the African men to control all the land, taking the right away from their women (Mama 1995). The values brought by colonialism encouraged them to believe that certain domains like politics, agriculture, law, the differential spread of education were for men, therefore endorsing the ethos of male superiority. Charles (2007) emphasizes the point that African men bring in traditional tribal laws mixed with colonial Victorian submissiveness for women in order to ensure complete control over the women. This has left little room for Sierra Leonean women, especially the Muslims, to exercise their own individuality and can be seen as a metaphor for patriarchal and colonial domination (Jones and Palmer 1987). There was therefore a failure to recognise women's knowledge in standard forms of received knowledge. Jones and Jones (1996) wrote that, "As they suffered under the two 'colonialisms' of Europe and men, the end of the

European colonial rule did not bring substantive changes to either, as the women continued to suffer disadvantages and discriminations in many facets of their personal lives, and in terms of reduced options accessible to them in their communities” (p53).

In 1947, the formal dissolution of colonial empires started and African countries began to gain their independence. Many Africans must have erroneously thought that it was the end of all conflicts, including culture conflict (Wyse 1991). They were left in a more confused state than ever, in a double bind of collision in deciding what was good and what was wrong in comparison to what they used to know (African culture) and what the colonialists instilled in them (Western culture). Ironically, the emergence of several social groups, including the new sub group of professional Muslim women, may be attributed to the western educational institutions founded by the western missionaries as I noted that all of the women in this group that were interviewed without exception had attended western Christian missionary schools.

2.4 Feminisms, Womanism and Social Change in the Sierra Leone Muslim Context

The assumption that underpins this research and is also supported by gender researchers and feminist writers is that the place of women in society and their occupations are not merely the result of their predispositions and personal choices (Bobo 2001). Throughout history, the woman’s place in society has

been greatly affected by patriarchal structures shaped and dominated by males (Hooks 1999). These social structures produced a set of beliefs with regard to the 'right state' of women, a set of assumptions regarding what women should do and how they should behave and live their lives, and the rules they should abide by. In some societies, male dominance is so absolute that women are unable to make decisions about their own aptitude, skills, and desirable courses of development.

Suleri (1992) wrote, "In post colonial history, the lives and stories of women have been shaped by their endless struggle to make a transition on the empowerment scale from a state of oppression to a more advanced and desirable state of emancipation" (p761). With Muslim women in Sierra Leone considered as one of the weakest groups in society and based on facts and the growing evidence that African women generally were not enjoying the same rights as the majority of the population and that their underprivileged stance in terms of equal rights and opportunities compared to men's was disgraceful, the rise of feminism in the 1960s came as a response to the reality of women's lives as a group in the world.

Simone De Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex* (1949) serves as the ideological foundation of the feminist theory, as it coined the gender concept of 'the other', indicating the perception of women as different, and referred to as 'others' by society. This is so because men were believed to be the objects and thus

women were the subjects. De Beauvoir (1949) went on to claim that socialisation rather than gender is what makes 'woman', a woman. This expression became the mainstay for feminists. During the 1960s and 70s, millions of women had protested against their role and perception by society (Friedman 1983), a process that was marked by group organisations and acts of protest against a castrating system which they called the patriarchal structure of society. This second wave feminism has had a profound effect internationally.

Alongside the recognition and awareness of the underprivileged status of women as a group, was the discrimination against women and the price that they were obliged to pay for their rising awareness (Alexander and Mohanty 1997). These have encouraged women to express themselves in a unique way through their voices, their writings, their ways of thinking (perceptions/points of view/stances) and for some, through motherhood (Goertz and Mazur 2008). These new perceptions suggest that Muslim women should not be judged and evaluated in relation to the 'other' or the norm represented by males. They should rather look at Muslim women's place in society and the direction to which women should aim both as individuals and as a group, regardless of social codes and norms, looking at their distinctiveness and uniqueness and the aspects that should be encouraged and threatened in them and not compared or judged in relation to others (Nnaemeka 1997).

This chapter looks at the effects that social structures have on the place and status of Muslim women and also, a description of the effect of the structures and systems that serve as barriers to their development. It shows that initiatives to diminish gaps between men and women in the society require the undertaking of active social actions and a change in individuals' minds towards a more empowered position. The thesis focused on selected individual women's perceptions of the process of empowerment and the choices they make about what to do and how best to implement this new knowledge both for themselves as individuals and collectively as a group to enhance and augment the status of other Muslim women in the society.

Bobo (2001) suggests that an exploration on gender from a feminist outlook serves to support further studies, elaborate on existing studies and knowledge and create new knowledge. The intention therefore is to study and understand the issues, dilemmas and topics that are involved in the process of empowerment and to investigate the factors that enhanced or halted them in the course of their lives. The research attempts to show the capability and skills of professional Sierra Leonean Muslim women as individuals and as members of an established group who have to make a double or triple effort to assert their aspirations and make their way in life while challenging and changing stigmas and typical perceptions of Muslim women. It focuses on a group of professional Muslim women who made a choice to embark upon a long journey, to learn about empowerment and decide bring some forms of positive

change with the knowledge and insights they had gained in the process, to the lives of other Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

The feminist revolution was one of the most significant developments of the late twentieth century, affecting relationships between the sexes and influencing social, political and economic spheres at every level (Alexander and Mohanty 1997). It was a historical landmark and a turnabout in terms of placing feminism on the public agenda as well as taking action based on the necessity to change the status of women, especially in Africa. Change was effected in Europe and the United States in the 1960s and gradually spread to Asia and Africa from the 1980s onwards (Bulbeck 1998).

Awareness of women as individuals and as members of a group created the need to make a change. The change was carried out through institutional processes and reforms, the promotion of legislation and the collection of data regarding the causes and magnitude of the male/female disparity, towards diminishing the gap. Despite this, Collins (1991) shows that all these, mixed with feminist theories, have been criticised as being aimed and referring to white middle-class women, inevitably alienating the non-white and the poor in the society. Black, African and post colonial women have asserted that it is not only patriarchy that is the cause of their suppression, but their skin colour which according to (White 2001), increases the intensity of suppression and reduces their status as low grade properties. Feminist theories exhibited a

recurrent pattern in that their analysis tended to reflect the viewpoints of white middle-class women of North America and Western Europe (Mirza 2008). The irony was that one of the powerful arguments feminist scholars made was, the limitation of scholarship, which was falsely universalised on the basis of limited perspectives.

Feminist scholars became increasingly aware that the problem with existing scholarship was not only that it left out women's voices, but the voices of many social groups had been silenced. An identity was constructed out of the recognition of otherness and difference, and post-modernism became an ally to feminism (Adebayo 1996). McRobbie (2008) criticises and rejects all oppressive and male-centred identities, overcoming the oppression of women, while attending to class, race, ethnicity, age and sexual orientation. For white European and American women, feminism has predicted itself on ending gender discrimination, demanding equal job opportunities, voting and property rights, while for African and African-American women, feminist ideology reflect specificities of race, class and culture. It is for this reason that the former has failed to make any lasting appeal to Africa and its Diaspora as they view feminism as a largely white construct which ignores daily experiences of race and economic hardship (Carby 1987). Cultural context has a great effect on economics, education, perception and the daily quality of life and for this reason, a Westernised white feminism has little to say to and for Black women, because the contexts were and are so different.

Although many black women do not identify themselves with white Westernised originated feminism, they have similar views about the situation of women in their 'social sub-group' worldwide. African women particularly believe that feminism is addressed to white middle-class women and they relate more with womanism which they say considers not just women, but black African and African-American women and their way of life. Most African feminists espouse womanism or African feminism which is regarded as a brand of feminism that includes female autonomy and co-operation, with an emphasis on nature over culture (Wisker 2000). According to Emecheta (1986), African feminists and womanists find empowerment in their children and families as opposed to Western white women who view multiple childbirth and marriage as being oppressive and restrictive to their careers, work and economic wellbeing, giving significance to the concepts of nurture and culture. Their essence negates the traditional portrayal of the subservient image of black women as passive, always prepared to do the bidding of the husband and family, having no status of their own and completely dependent on their husbands.

Disch (2005) advocates that womanists and African feminists neither wish to alienate men, nor do they wish to alienate the bulk of their traditional sisters. They believe that many African traditions and mores are worth preserving, in support of what Alice Walker (2005) describes as a philosophy that celebrates black roots and the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of

black womanhood. Black feminist thinking also emphasises the ongoing interplay between black women's oppression and black women's activism, with the perception that the world is a dynamic place where the goal is not merely to survive, fit in or cope but rather a place where black women feel ownership and accountability and have the individual responsibility, choice and power to act and bring about change (Awkward 1990). Collins (1991) also states that, "I believe that only collective action mixed with individual empowerment can effectively generate lasting social transformation of political and economic institutions" (p52).

African feminists and womanists disapprove the debasement of African women and men wreaked by colonialism, and they protest the mores of the traditional society that condemned women to a prescribed fate of subsistence, subservience and silence (Umeh 1996). Their main concern is to criticise the patriarchal bonds that keep back the growth of the women's minds and their social lives and, to challenge the social status of women. This is because African women have had to struggle against colonisation by Western powers, colonisation by their own men, and traditional attitudes that reserved formal education for males (Fishburn 1995). Tripp et al (2008) delineate African feminists to aim and address the formerly unvoiced members of the society; women, as wives, widows, barren women, young children, girls, mothers and grandmothers, while trying to improve and correct the patriarchal female

image. They believe that African women have to be examined and appreciated in their diverse roles as mothers, daughters, sisters and wives.

Despite significant progress, in Sierra Leone, gender gaps are still remarkable as there is a discrepancy between representatives of men and women in politics, the education system and the commercial sector. The state and government is considered a masculine world as it is dominated by men, and it denies women access to politics, government and the attainment of public status as opposed to the almost free access that men typically enjoy. In spite of visible progress made in 1995 by neighbouring Liberia in electing Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf as the first female Head of State in Africa, Sierra Leone's previous government of ten years (1996-2007) (with three years in exile because of a military coup) appointed six women as government/cabinet ministers out of a total of forty positions and of these, only two of the six women are Muslims. The newly elected government of September 2007 appointed seven female ministers out of a total of forty-five positions, with three of the female ministers being Muslims, showing a 0.5% in total representation but a 9.5% increase in Muslim women's representation amongst the women ministers. Also, only sixteen women made it as Members of Parliament (MPs) out of one hundred and twenty-two seats, with five Muslim women out of that total (Sierra Leone Government Gazette Statistics 2008 vol. 27).

A significant feature of the last decade within Sierra Leonean politics is that a 'Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs' was introduced in 1996 and has since been in existence as a result of a vibrant women's 'voice' during the general elections of that year. The ministry, now merged with the 'Ministry of Social Welfare', has a mandate to specifically deal with women and children's issues, with women as Minister and Permanent Secretary (Sierra Leone Government Gazette 2007 vol. 56).

2.5 Similarities in African Women's Voices Projected by African Women Writers

Literature and art tend to capture and represent the lived and felt realities of people's lives and also to offer the opportunity to express feelings, reflections and social comments about such experiences (Finnegan 2007). They also sometimes through new perspective and imagination, suggest potential ways forward. Literary texts have provided much useful background information and expression of women's thoughts, feelings and arguments about gender and ethnic inequalities in Africa. Their use forms an underpinning core to this research since they inform thought and expression of their problems, and perhaps in Bruner's (1993) words, 'the ways forward' (p42).

Women writers have published books and other works of art depicting the oppressive dilemma of women all over the world. Umeh (1996) also viewed that literary activity has rescued silenced, disenfranchised and invisible African women from the margins, enabling them to speak, to be seen and to be heard.

Black women writers emerged from the troubles of slavery and colonialism to make their presence known in the literary world. African-American women writers were the first set of black women writers to be acknowledged and published. Their themes mostly ranged from racism, slavery experiences and empowerment. Christian (1985, p18) declared, “In their works, black women writers have encoded oppression as a discursive dilemma, that is, their works have consistently raised the problem of the black woman’s relationship to power and discourse”.

After African women gained access to institutionalised education, independent of the traditional patriarchal ideologies, a new literature of feminist committed literature emerged by African women writers. According to Fishburn (1995), they used their writings to acknowledge power as they gained access to the pen. They had been discouraged from intellectual distinction and encouraged to direct their ambition toward marriage and motherhood but they are breaking traditional patriarchal standards by challenging these social norms (Currey 2008). The vision for most African and black women writers is feminist oriented, encouraging black and African women to maintain positions of strength, autonomy and equality in their relationships with men (Newell 1997). This is a vital sign of re-empowerment within the emergent literature that deals with the socio-economic and class factors that contribute to African women’s oppression.

African women writers only started publishing in the past forty years. This is because, to speak out as an individual and as a woman meant that they were defying prevailing traditions and views set by patriarchal societies (Bruner 1983). Their writings are seen as representation of alternative possible solutions in black women's lives and it was when they gained access to institutionalised education that a new literature emerged: feminist committed literature by African women writers. Coop (2008) describes their prescribed role in the 'literary revolution' as a means to destroy the stereotypes of black women, to present the relationship between men and women as 'complementary' and to affirm the black/African family and community. They show the contradiction between the stereotyped images of the black mammy, matriarchs, and the actual experience of women as the conveyors and transformers of the values acknowledged by the black/African community (Busby 1992).

Black/African women's literature reflects the community, the cultural ways and they preach liberation and assertiveness to all black women. According to Toni Morrison (1993, p68), "Black women's writing is an art of historical reclamation, a way of charting roots and identity, and it is a political act of breaking silence for women from diverse backgrounds to explore that contextual diversity". It is believed that it is women's ubiquitous cultural alienation and powerlessness that precipitates women to review, revise and

rewrite the events in their lives. It erases silence and it is seen as a vehicle for creative power.

“Writing is a form of empowerment for black women” (Lorde 1984, p107) and it provides testimony of their experience as both individuals and members of a community while providing enlightenment, self-awareness and great enjoyment to their readers. Their works explore the use and abuse of women and black women as victims of traditional patterns is inherent in their works (Christian et al 2007). The African women writers present a more adequate picture of African women’s material reality and history, than that offered by male or non-African writers and they stress that African women have dignity, power, self-respect and an identity beyond passivity, voicelessness, motherhood and wifehood. They speak for millions of black/African women through their novels and they aim to address the formerly disenfranchised, invisible and unvoiced members in the margins of the community: wives, barren women, young children, mothers and grandmothers, enabling them to speak and be seen (Wilentz 1992).

African women writers describe what it is like to be female in patriarchal African cultures where the women struggle against colonialism by Western powers and colonisation by their own men (Amadiume 2000). In their works, they mostly focus on patriarchal beliefs and practices that must be eradicated (son preference, polygamy, double standards, rigid sex roles, wife inheritance

and above all, the glorification of motherhood and fertility in order to render women powerless). African feminist writings play a part in creating a world in which women can live complete lives, a world that affords women opportunities for freedom, creativity, cultivation of the intellect, work, self-expression, political action, friendship, intimacy, and love on the same terms as men (Oyewumi 2005).

Bruner (1983, p25) also intimated that, “Despite vast differences in traditions and beliefs among African societies, any female writer must have defied prevailing tradition if she speaks out as an individual and as a woman”. The act of writing for these writers was to make a place for themselves in an elite, male dominated arena. As a result of all the obstacles, African women writers have been fewer than their male counterparts, have published later and have received less critical attention and acclaim. Introducing women’s voices into African literature was a novelty. The last thirty years has witnessed an explosive growth of interest in African literature and it is within this time that black women writers based in Africa began to receive recognition, rightful acclaim and wide readership (Umeh 1996).

Amidst all the suffering and exploitation, Gikandi (1987) defends African and black women writers that, “They do not only entertain but bring joy, the comfort of enduring friendship, the satisfaction of academic achievement and social power, the independence of thought and the affirmation of personal

identity to their African and black women readers” (p85). With their novels, short stories and dramas, committed female authors like Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba to name a few, present a more adequate picture of African women’s material reality and history than that offered by African oral literature (Busby 1992). These women are engaged in a literature of de-mythification and complete liberation of the way African women are portrayed in literature written by African men, as either idealised and traditional or debased and modern. They also try to redress the images of African women in oral narratives, in order to lead women out of the corner into which African oral literature has relegated them (Oyewumi 2005).

The Nigerian-born writer, Buchi Emecheta insists that she can be regarded as a ‘feminist with a small *f*’ because she writes about the little happenings in everyday life as she sees them through the eyes of other African women (Fishburn 1995). Like many other African female writers, she shows that socio-economic and class factors contribute to African women’s oppression, economic exploitation and marginalisation and in her works, she writes that African women have been an integral part of their communities and their societies, and that they have often maximised their positions with resources gained by their own labour (Carby 1987).

Mariama Ba from Senegal is one of the female African writers whose work I dealt with directly in this study. In her novel *So Long a Letter* (1984), she

presents the situation of women in Senegal, disadvantaged by the tyranny of chauvinism, poverty, culture and custom (Aluko 1987). She combines Western feminist analyses of the oppression of women with those of African values of women, together to form a community. The novel encompasses a society, more so a continent in transition as she incorporates African communal values as well as Western feminist ones. She puts her focus on personal experiences and religious and social customs in a patriarchal African culture (Aluko 1987). As she writes about the everyday happenings in the lives of her protagonists, their living situation, their responsibilities, their expectations and their ordeals, her novel is a conscious criticism of African Muslim societies as she illuminates the need for social and political reform with regards to the position of women in the society (Booker 1998). Having herself suffered from the 'otherness' in her society, she depicts the life stories and concerns of all African Muslim women, hoping to establish a balance between males and females, and African tradition and modern Western views.

As an African feminist, Ba exposes the social injustices and inequities experienced by women of all age groups and how they deal with the burdens of everyday life (Stratton 1994). She viewed that, "All African and Muslim women have almost the same fate which religion and unjust legislations have sealed" (Ba 1984, p12). Her work describes a community of women, with the two opposing views of tradition versus modernity, working together to create a place for themselves and their children. It also exposes the oppressive

relationships that are sanctioned by a religion and culture, which seem to reinforce the domination, subordination and submission of women, mixed with myths and customs like rigid sex role socialisation practices (Umeh 1996).

Women constitute the silent half of the social world population. In recent times, they are now asking for opportunities to have a voice and to be heard. Disch (2005) explained that because of this phenomenon, most enlightened and empowered women try to encourage more and more women to join the process of reading and writing in order to be able to produce a meaningful 'female' knowledge for a more meaningful society.

The emergence of feminist criticism is crucial because it brings new attention to neglected works by black and African women writers and also develops interpretative practices adequate to the explication of their works. Hernton (1987) wrote that most of their writings are an odyssey of the real lives of nearly all black women including the writers themselves and they are engaged in a literature of demystification and complete liberalism. Black women's writings reflect their community and portray the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class as crucially interlocking factors in their works (Nasta 2004). The African female writer is thus looked upon as a member of the elite in society, who chart the course of a new beginning for her people. She is expected to solidarize with the women of her protagonist's class and condition and lead in the struggles against oppression, neo-colonialism, the abuse of

power and exploitation. Whilst the storylines are replete with anger, suffering, frustration, love and the importance of family as stifling factors, the female protagonist, serving as a model for other women would normally transcend victimisation, assert dignity, withdraw from participation in a system that humiliates her and move toward self reliance. Ba (1984) also propagates and promotes female support systems in the form of family or a network of kin or non-kin who bond, share and sustain problems, trauma, fears and aspirations in order to assume survival, sanity and peace.

With these expectations, readers want closer contact and understanding with the writers, and they want the writers to share their burdens, appreciate their problems and seek solutions to their problems (Bruner 1993).

2.6 The Role of Islam as a Vehicle of Social and Educational Change

Religion is tied to education as also to the mind and to reasoning. Learning and scholarship are central to the Islamic faith and culture. Islam's first divine message was a direct instruction for learning, "Read! Your lord is the most bounteous, who has taught the use of the pen, has taught man what he did not know..." (The Holy Quran 96/4.).

Education is seen as a factor used to eliminate and reduce poverty and oppression while promoting peace, tolerance and development (Abdul-Hameed 1995). Many problems faced by Muslim women are as a result of lack of

education and enlightenment. According to Tabatabaie (2001), in the global economy, countries with poorly educated populations and high levels of gender in-equalities are usually slower to progress and are less able to compete with countries with an educated populace and gender equality. Education is therefore a fundamental cause of change in people's lives and it is seen as the key to opportunities and advancement. In defending it, Katrak (2006, p21) wrote, "...without education, and without attempts to gain the same level of knowledge, skills and qualifications, men and women of the same social group and status are doomed to living inferior lives in terms of their development".

Islam views education as the foundation of human dignity. The Holy Quran, which is the greatest source of beliefs for Muslims, views the education of women in the same way as it does with that of men, and even provides women with all the necessary guidance. It is obligatory for all Muslims, both men and women to seek education as Islam frowns on illiteracy and ignorance (Holy Quran 96/7). In order to establish a fundamental culture and civilisation, Islam recommends that receiving an education that opens the mind to the realities of life and the universe is compulsory upon every Muslim man and woman (Yamani 1996). The Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him) is quoted as saying, "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" (Holy Quran 58 1-4). It is believed from the hadith that the prophet preferred a thorough education based on the dignity of all, to an excessive devotion. This is because he taught his

followers that nothing was better than progress in knowledge, which he believed leads to everything good and guards from evil (Seestani 1994).

The history of Islam is rich with women of great achievements in all walks of life from as early as the seventh century (B.C.). Because of the misconceptions and misinterpretations of the rulings of Islam, it is recommended by Islamic scholars that a distinction between what was legislated by Islam and prevailing social customs at any given time in history must be made (Khan 1993). For example, some customs like slavery and polygamy are examples of social issues prevailing before the inception of Islam, that Islamic law was compelled to address, and choose to prohibit entirely or limit through conditions (Radwan 2005). The opinion of a learned Muslim woman is valued and respected and therefore, Islam teaches that women are entitled to an education and that they should have the free will to pursue whatever form of knowledge and means of empowerment that they desire (Omran 1998). “Anyone who deprives women of scientific, political, economic or social activities in the name of Islamic ethos is acting against the will of God” (Holy Quran 39/19). According to Abdul-Hameed (1995), seeking education is an obligatory act, therefore, offering and providing an education is a duty that is incumbent on the society and the state. As a result, Madrasas or Islamic schools are normally attached to a mosque, providing boys as well as girls an early start in reading the Quran and learning the fundamental principles of the religion and the precepts of the faith.

According to Islam, education should be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The government or state of any peoples must therefore secure the means of education and assure a variety of educational media to serve the interest and welfare of members of the society (Rafiee 2004). It should enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society and should ensure the religious and moral education of children in conformity with their own convictions. Sahgal (1992) believes that Muslim women are oppressed through lack of religious education. She insists that, "...women have to be educated to use religion as a tool and not leave the interpretation up to men" (p9). The new crop of educated, professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone have therefore pursued an education toward reason and independent judgement, postulated for men as well as for women. This is in order to bring about a better understanding of the true Islamic precepts and for people to cease the many misinterpretations that are mostly detrimental to women (Al-Sheha 2002). These women view education as a precondition for economic development and as a vehicle of social progress and socio-economic transformation. They see it as the single strongest influence on women's ability to control their own future and as a help in the fight against poverty and suffering. Acquiring an education has inspired and enhanced changes in their life-style, increased their awareness of health and other issues and raised their recognition of human rights and women's rights (Jaward 1998). Islamic and Western education for women and girls is therefore being postulated as the

only means to enable them to properly fulfil their functions in society and within their families.

In terms of equality and partnership, as well as in terms of human integrity and honour, Islam bans all forms of discrimination. "...if any do deeds of righteousness, be they male or female, and have faith, not the least injustice will be done to them..." (Quran 4/124). A woman is considered equal to a man, with an entitlement to equal rights and duties, her own civil personality, financial independence, and even has the right to maintain her maiden name after marriage (Al-Sheha 2001). With regards to jobs, Jaward (1998) reiterates that there is no decree in Islam which forbids women from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions where society might need them the most. Islam has guaranteed for women, the right to participate in religious and worldly affairs as well as the right to work and be involved in trade and commerce. Historical records show that in the early days, reflecting 'true' Islam, women appeared at public functions, studied and taught in learning classes and schools, traded in markets, sat on consultative councils and participated in battles (Ichou and Ismail 1999). With these decrees and rulings, women have a right of election as well as the right for nomination to political offices. This also includes their right to participate in public affairs. "A Muslim woman has the right to determine her own destiny, to preserve her independent state and personality and to respect the rights and duties of others" (Tabatabaie 2001, p17). Even within the family, Islam looks

at a couple in a family unit as a pair of eyes, two partners in business, each having their own physical, mental, spiritual and emotional characteristics which when correctly integrated would constitute the framework of a family. Mernissi (1997) therefore commits that complementary coordination and balanced relationships are the basis of a family and if one partner exceeds the limits, the balance would be easily disturbed. However, due to the existence of other rules in Islam, such as the prohibition of women from leading men in prayer, maintaining the balance is always an uphill task for women and this is often used to the advantage male domination in other facets of society.

2.7 The Role of Support Groups in Social and Educational Change

There is an extensive body of knowledge in literature regarding personal, group and community empowerment (Elliot 2007; Wisker 1996; Rappaport 1995) and furthermore there is evidence that empowerment establishes and increases a sense of efficacy and capability in individuals, groups and communities. Empowerment groups for women have been a worldwide phenomenon initially in different forms of conscious raising and awareness, women's training and development groups since the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. Empowerment is a process which enables individuals or groups to change balances of power in social, economic and political relations in society (UNDP 1994). Since women are generally accepted as being the most disempowered members of the oppressed classes, the term 'women's empowerment' has come to be associated with women's struggle for social

justice and equality and the empowerment of women is linked to power relations of domination and subjugation. Rappaport (1995) writes, “Empowerment is predominantly an ideology and an outlook on the world, and only those who are truly committed to the fundamental values of empowerment are able to focus on the process and practical methods of implementation” (p72). It is frequently used to describe a process wherein the powerless or disempowered gain a greater share of control over resources and decision making. Empowerment significantly changes women’s evaluation of their ability to cope with society and the opportunities and experiences that the society provides for them (Maynard and Parvis 1995). The process is thus aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces which marginalise women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context (Kimmel and Aronson 2003). The ability or lack of these opportunities has a direct effect on the characters and their role in the development of the society.

Empowerment is also an interactive process taking place between the individual and the society, marking a change in the individual from a ‘worthless’ to an assertive achiever, a decision maker and a problem solver with socio-political virtues, thereby portraying internal (the belief in the ability) and external (implementation of new ability) change in the individual’s life (Lorber 2001). With the acquisition of skills in creating a self change, my participants are able to take active steps to bring out the internal and external changes that they have experienced in terms of making decisions about

themselves, identifying the obstacles in their lives and making an informed choice to diminish the gap between men and women in the society (Morrison 1993). By empowering themselves through education, they can play a vital and significant role in the country's development as well as save themselves from social injustices and inequalities. Empowerment for Muslim women in Sierra Leone is therefore a claim to have a right to do things in and out of the home creating a new public and private identity, and to be acknowledged for doing these things. The empowerment process also indicates that the women have to be aware and to understand the social, cultural, political and religious realities that shape their lives and they have to be more aware of their ability to change this reality (Flannery and Hayes 2000).

The manner of the procedure enhances a person's social understanding, broadens one's horizon, and instils in the women the belief in the feasibility of social change and it offers an opportunity for them to make a change. It also makes them aware of the existence of other channels and sources of influence and has the potential to influence the structures and systems which had seemed inaccessible and unreachable to them (Jackson and Scott 2002).

This study investigates a specific phenomenon of empowerment groups for women, with a view to empowering Muslim women in Sierra Leone, in a way that hopes to ensure their advancement and promotion. This is the ultimate hope for the support group, FOMWASAL and also to provide Muslim women

with adequate tools and methods that would allow them to make a breakthrough and penetrate the labour market and the public sphere. The groups also act to promote gender equality and help women cope with the constraints and barriers which they encounter acknowledging Adubra (2005) who wrote, “Women must overcome a variety of obstacles before they can achieve gender equality and attitudes in the society have to change in order to advance” (p 9).

Sierra Leonean Muslim women try to ‘have it all’, in some contrast to their counterparts in the West: marry, have a family, raise children and invest in their career paths. In recent times, women all over the world, from the Western developed to traditional bound Asia and Africa, are aspiring to gain it all and maintain their careers, motherhood, family life and wifehood with the support of partners, family structures and social facilities (James 1991). As evident from the cross section of male participants some husbands are supportive and display a profound respect for their wives’ abilities, they do not (for the most part) take over family responsibilities.

Many professional women therefore sometimes face and experience the hardship of being the ‘token’ woman in a man’s world (Friedman 1983), while they have to balance their need for power and position with ‘feminine behaviour’ and work the second shift of managing the family and taking care of children. This study appreciates that the educated Muslim women who have

made breakthroughs still have to cope with unique difficulties like facing traditional attitudes from people and being blamed for the demise of some traditional activities and that the grass-root illiterate women encounter more difficulties in their desire to change their position in life.

According to Beck and Keddie (1979), female associations and support groups are powerful in cultures where social institutions and values inhibit efforts made by women to establish solidarity in one another. The groups therefore help women become aware of the existence of additional channels and sources of influence so as to be able to challenge male domination. Moghadam (2007) shows how empowerment groups have developed in the last decade as a mechanism by which women are inspired to deal with inequality and discrimination, with a specific intention to provide women with adequate tools and methods that enable them to cope with the obstacles which they face.

In advocating for the strengthening of the women community and promoting the status of women (Rutherford 1998), an all-round education provides the tools and techniques to enable them to choose alternatives, promote themselves and display higher levels of self-efficacy. It therefore becomes the power to achieve greater resources and it gives the power to change people's lives. As Elliot (2007, p6) confirms, "Without education, skills, knowledge and qualifications, people of the same social group or status are limited to living inferior lives in terms of personal development and growth, employability,

access to jobs and the ability to affect leadership and national decisions which affect their lives”. With the focus on learning and education as the most vital vehicles to ensure emancipation and the key factors for changing women’s status, support groups tailor their teaching guide to meet the specific needs, focuses and experiences of the women, in order to give them formal and informal knowledge (Rappaport 1995).

The support groups that operate and manage the empowerment issue have a fundamental belief that through an implementation of the empowerment processes, women become stronger and more empowered as individuals and as members of a group. They are seen as a source of power by the members and they encourage individual empowerment because of the unique contribution of the group to its individual members. These include emotional and social support, the acquisition of new skills and the development of the ability to engage in public activities and gain self-esteem and self-confidence (Kimmel and Aronson 2003). The groups create a body of knowledge for women, about women and, this empowerment allows women to claim responsibility for themselves, find the power within them and act within the framework of the social structures in order to diminish the gender gaps (Lewis 2000). In the case of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, they help to break the silence, and allow the women to discover, name and identify themselves whilst legitimising and making their voices heard.

Support groups explore how oppression and survival lead to solidarity, confirming Hernton's view (1987) that only sisterhood and togetherness can effectively combat the awesome spectre of the sexual mountain. He takes us up the mountain, scaling its steepness so that we can feel the tremendous and painful pull of the climb. Muslim girls and women have been historically ignored, belittled and suppressed and in talking about the existence of the mountain, its size and its steepness, we are obviously discussing the attitude of men toward women. Uraizee (2000) describes the issue of sisterhood as a combined feminist and national struggle and that it bestows strength and confidence where timidity and weakness existed. The groups have had a great impact in the lives of Muslim women and in the society as a whole. Support groups include in their policies the aim to promote the works, values and goals of individual members for economic, social and political purposes. They do not only provide an education for the grass root women, but also enlighten and help them to recognise, confront and tackle oppressive customs and traditions.

The research deals with the support group: Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL) whose members have chosen to engage in the empowerment of Muslim women, creating opportunities for their self fulfilment and advancement. They aspire to enable Muslim women to reach and have significant knowledge about dilemmas, issues, thoughts and feelings via the difficulties they have to cope with while trying to move 'against the tide' to start to make their way in a small stream in order to

eventually reach the big current. The main objective of FOMWASAL is to recognise and identify Muslim women's issues and problems, for the purpose of an improvement to their conditions and status. FOMWASAL is gradually succeeding in bringing Muslim women to the fore, making them visible and advocating for their voices to be heard. They are seen as pioneers of a new life for women and advocates for the Sierra Leonean Muslim women to find a place in the fast growing modern society. In agreement with suggestions by Jaward (1998), as a community based group, FOMWASAL has been instrumental in changing social attitudes, in giving a sense of togetherness and belonging to the majority of Muslim women who have been and are being discriminated against or ostracised by their community for some reason and in helping the 'victim' women to fulfil, question and move beyond prescribed roles. One of their greatest contributions has been to insist that the values, opinions and objectives of Muslim women be respected and used as the basis for development initiatives and to integrate the women into the development process at all levels, so as to improve their quality of life. By making recommendations to the government with a view to amending, codifying and repealing laws affecting Muslim women in Sierra Leone, FOMWASAL advocates for the government to channel forces as a priority to benefit Muslim women and girls as a means of changing their overall status and establishing a different public and social agenda. In their preferred direction for change, the group provides loans and access to the teaching of self reliant and income

generating skills so as to empower and enhance the role of the grass root and illiterate bulk of Muslim women in national development.

As a support system, it provides an open, supportive and empathetic climate of sisterhood where the women dwell upon their life experiences and are given the opportunity to learn from the experiences of other women. The purpose is to open and improve communication networks between women so as to empower themselves by group support and education strategies. The goal is to introduce a change in Muslim women's attitudes about themselves and other women, with the intention of demonstrating significant higher levels of self efficacy.

2.8 Reflection of Focus

Having looked at social, cultural and political changes that are occurring in the arena of women and empowerment, and the promotion of the unheard voices in relation to colonialism, patriarchy and feminism, this chapter delineates how the status of Sierra Leonean Muslim women may evolve through the help of the emerging group of professional Muslim women in the society. Black feminism and womanism especially helps us to understand the problems related to race, gender and class and guides us to relate with the changes offered by the empowerment group to establish concepts and theories to bridge the development gap between Muslim women and the rest of the Sierra Leone society. As a result of the research, I am tempted to conclude that the emerging sub group of professional Muslim women are a demonstration that Sierra

Leonean Muslim women are attempting the challenge to survive against all odds. They are a strong testament and indicator that with the ongoing pressure mounting on these women to act on change and improve on their status in society, positive change can be experienced in the lives of the many young and disadvantaged Muslim women in Sierra Leone. In a now modern and increasingly Westernised society, there are changing conceptualisations and perceptions of women's roles in the society and with an education and their determination, Muslim women are proving through the increased numbers registered in educational institutions, that they can be emancipated and empowered, hold a professional paying job, and successfully fulfil their other roles as mothers and wives. With the established support group systems and the strategic programmes put together to change and ameliorate the welfare and standards of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, my evidence shows that this new social sub group of professional Muslim women are in transition and seem to be moving on the path of success in breaking barriers for Muslim women nationwide.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the methodological paradigms underpinning the research and the approaches used for collecting the data. It outlines how the thesis was produced and the ways in which the research process itself was central to the final text. It explores qualitative research methodology using narrative, feminist, focus group, interview, personal case study and literary evidence approaches by capturing the authentic voice in storytelling amongst the participants, who are a select sample of professional Muslim women, backed up by grass-root Muslim women and a group of Muslim men. I also used my personal experiences as a case study and used literary evidence from texts by African women writers to authenticate the journeys made by the social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone toward self empowerment, and inspiring a national awareness of their aims

The research process is indicative and it begins by providing a background to the key research techniques used, and details of the fieldwork carried out. The study is not about observing actions but about issues and perceptions that emerge during the process. This chapter delineates the research process and outlines the research methodology and methods used. It also gives the reasons and the considerations which affected the choice of methods and methodology in the whole process.

The research uses qualitative methodology in a feminist research paradigm, using focus groups and interviews, which engage with narrative and storytelling

methods, and a case study. I held interviews and focus group discussions, collected personal stories from the participants, analysed the stories and discussions, posed questions, and listened to the feminine voice, both as a subject and as an object. I tried to confront the complicated task of social scientific structuring from different sources and, according to (Devault 1999), looked at the materials that are introduced in a 'feminine' language. In aiming to preserve the authenticity of the feminine voice through these stories, one of the approaches used during this research has been my personal case study. I recorded the process, recounting past experiences, and combined knowledge gained, as a researcher, a Muslim woman, a mother, a wife and a professional/career person. Taking into consideration my exposure to theory and analytical tools gained from a Masters Degree in Women's Studies, I highlighted how the issues of the research have affected my perception of development in the context of the status of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. In this ethnographical study of identifying and understanding the nature of the new emerging social sub group of Sierra Leonean Muslim women, my experiences were described and analysed in conjunction with those of the participants. From the constructivist paradigm (Oakley 2000), I realised that it was not possible to completely separate myself from the researched and study the phenomenon from an objective point. I also had to deal with the possibility that reflections and perceptions of some of the participants would be enhanced, developed or changed as part of the research process, because the presence of the researcher can change perceptions and views.

I read, studied and investigated feminist theories, post colonial theories, black theories and African theories about black women's lives from Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Alice Walker and perspectives from Buchi Emecheta, Ife Amadiume, Fatima Mernissi and Nawal El Saadawi on that of the African woman. I also searched and researched Sierra Leonean literature about women and their role in self and national development, exploring any data on the lives of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. To consider the theories, aims and essence of the research and to explore the changes in the women's lives, it was important to consult both individuals and established sources like the support groups for their perceptions on the emergence of the new group of professional Muslim women. In identifying participants by using the purposive sampling method, I looked at women who I had met through networks of people I had come across and who have made a significant mark nationwide in their achievements. I also looked at men and women who I had direct and easy access to for the group participation, in order to get their views on the emerging social sub-group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

Feminist methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation are powerful research tools, as they engage research from a unique perspective that provides depth, meaning and context to the participants' lived experiences in light of the larger cultural society they live in (Charmaz 2000). Women, especially Sierra Leonean Muslim women, have typically been silenced in society as a result of powerful and restrictive patriarchal protection, hiding many truths and (her)stories, feminist research methods are an important

approach for addressing women's lives. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007), they take a holistic perspective approach and seek inside understanding, giving space for stories and voices normally denied an audience. In a way to help eradicate cultural barriers of silence, the study aspires to bring to the fore, the valuable voices of the participants and generate knowledge based on experiences, connections and relationships as a representation in the main body of research. The research concentrated on the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone and it investigated the phenomenon of the emergence of professional Muslim women, their experiences, activities, achievements and the impact they perceive they make in the society and in the lives of other Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The research also looks at their views on their contribution towards sustainable national development. All this was looked at from a unique point of view in the research where the professional Muslim women are seen as pioneers of change, expressing their personal stories as Kleinman (2007) puts it, 'empowerment stories'. The study emphasised the views that the women were not perceived as victims of male dominance but were considered with the view of closing the social gap between men and women.

The research study attempts to draw upon a mixture of qualitative research methods. Qualitative approaches seek depth, insight and understanding and they explore the perceptions of individuals and groups (Cryer 2000). The key methods employed were in-depth one to one interviews and focus group discussions, putting emphasis on their narratives and testimonies. These were supported by the reading of literature on the life situation of Muslim women in Africa, *So Long a*

Letter (1984), a personal case study and the analysis of ethnographically collected data. From Cryer's (2000) point of view, the methods stress intuitive judgement and invite the participants into dialogue, providing greater understanding of the women's experiences, their multiple roles and the behaviours of men and women toward the new emerging society of Muslim women.

The study is a piece of post positivistic research which is inductive and theory-building in nature, allowing the themes to emerge as the analysis unfolds. With an interactive format leading to the emergence of new themes and subject focus as a result of the use of open ended questions (Denscombe 1998), this allowed maximum freedom of response and created new questions and revised perspectives on the data as the analysis progressed. With the qualitative methods used to collect fieldwork data, it identifies cultural norms and vocabulary thereby contributing to a better understanding of the findings. The research therefore focused on the voice of Muslim women recounting their stories of personal empowerment through their own outlook, and it examined whether in their view, their personal empowerment experiences have succeeded in closing the 'power' and social gap between Sierra Leonean men and the Muslim women.

Using the purposive and opportunistic sampling method (Barbour 2008), eight professional Muslim women were identified and selected as interviewees. As most of the educated and professional Muslim women were willing to be part of the process, I considered the executive and ex-officio members of the support group FOMWASAL, as a particular subset group of people of interest for the

interviews, taking into consideration their level of education and their job status and ranking within the country. I also identified and selected another set of eight professional Muslim women and four semi-literate/illiterate grass-root level women, mostly members of FOMWASAL as the interest group for the purpose of the focus group discussions. Deciding to avail a well balanced analysis of the situation of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, I explored the inclusion of four male participants, randomly selected, with a range of well educated to semi-literate status for the focus group discussions. These are all people that I had direct access to, and also people that I had met through networks of people I had come across.

Even though the numbers of educated and professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone was increasing, there was a limited choice in locating those in active professions. Therefore, the support group was a great source and base in getting my sample participants. With the men, it was a random choice between the educated and professionals who identified themselves as practising Muslims, and the vast amount of available semi-literate/illiterate men. As a consequence, I opted for a tribal chief, who was also an Imam (a religious cleric and head of the congregation and place of worship called the mosque) and three university educated professionals. During their group discussion, I encountered the power of patriarchy, culture and tradition and how it blends with Western education on the minds of these men, when analysing their diverse perceptions on the role of women and their reactions to the emergence of professional Muslim women within their communities.

As backup evidence and to reinforce the evident view that professional Muslim women were making a change in the lives of Muslim women, I utilised a select sample of four grass-root semi literate Muslim women for an independent focus group. The research also explored the personal 'success' of the identified professional women as participants in the research process, and it looked at the 'success' of the support group system that they have put in place to relate with grass-root level women. In the analysis and conclusion of the study, it tends to evaluate the extent to which they perceive that they are succeeding in changing social attitudes toward Muslim women, consequently leading to national development.

With the focus group discussions, I took into cognisance the significance of storytelling and oral literature in the African culture, as stories are a rich source of knowledge of women's learning (Jones 1992). The process brought to life the different stories and experiences of the participants in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. With the mix of feminist methodology and a literary and social feel, the research developed a critical focus on the position of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, and the interactive process of the research methodologies used allowed the participants to voice out their opinions and bring in mutual feedback (Bloor et al 2000). This enabled the transition of the women to portray the many difficulties they face in order to gain autonomy.

This research has been conducted to enable successful educated professional Muslim women to explore, in groups and in the context of a safe environment,

their views about their own experiences, the power they have been able to develop against the limitations of traditional expectations. It has also given them opportunity to make suggestions which could be taken up by the less or completely uneducated women who are far more disempowered and marginalised. The responses from this second group, not the main focus of the study but there to provide further information and context, indicates that indeed they could learn much from the ideas of the educated group and that furthermore society really needs to change if they are to become empowered. Results from the group of men indicates a deep-seated set of social inequalities based on gender divisions, a set of responses which confirm the difficulties voiced by the two women's groups. Overall also there is some positive information about what kinds of strategies women and society might employ to better enable and empower Muslim women in Sierra Leone, although such suggestions and certainly their actioning lie beyond the bounds of this thesis.

The effectiveness of approaches used, as suggested by (Maguire 2001) formed the conceptual framework in the study and the research design combined qualitative research instruments in the ethnographic fieldwork. These involved focus groups, interviews and the use of the researcher's journal as a case study. The conceptual framework of the research also linked the theories and perceptions about empowerment, education, feminism, change and the African and Sierra Leonean Muslim woman's social position. It built upon the intersection of the individual woman's process of empowerment, and the effects of the empowerment change on other Muslim women in the society. The research itself is an enquiry into the

combination of the personal empowerment process through learning and education, and into its implementation in the form of sisterhood support (Rowbotham 1992). This latter was theorised using feminist approaches based on its characteristics.

As the research developed, several questions and enquiries arose during the interviews conducted and the focus group discussion meetings forming the emergence and categories utilised in the 'Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings' chapter (chapter 5). The research paradigm combined social, educational, literary and feminist theories in order to address and to provide answers to the research questions. Feminism was recognised as a body of knowledge which clarifies the nature of the relationships between knowledge and power. It also considers the relationship between patriarchal social systems and the place of women, taking into consideration the things that affect their lives as individuals and as members of a collective (Wisker 2001).

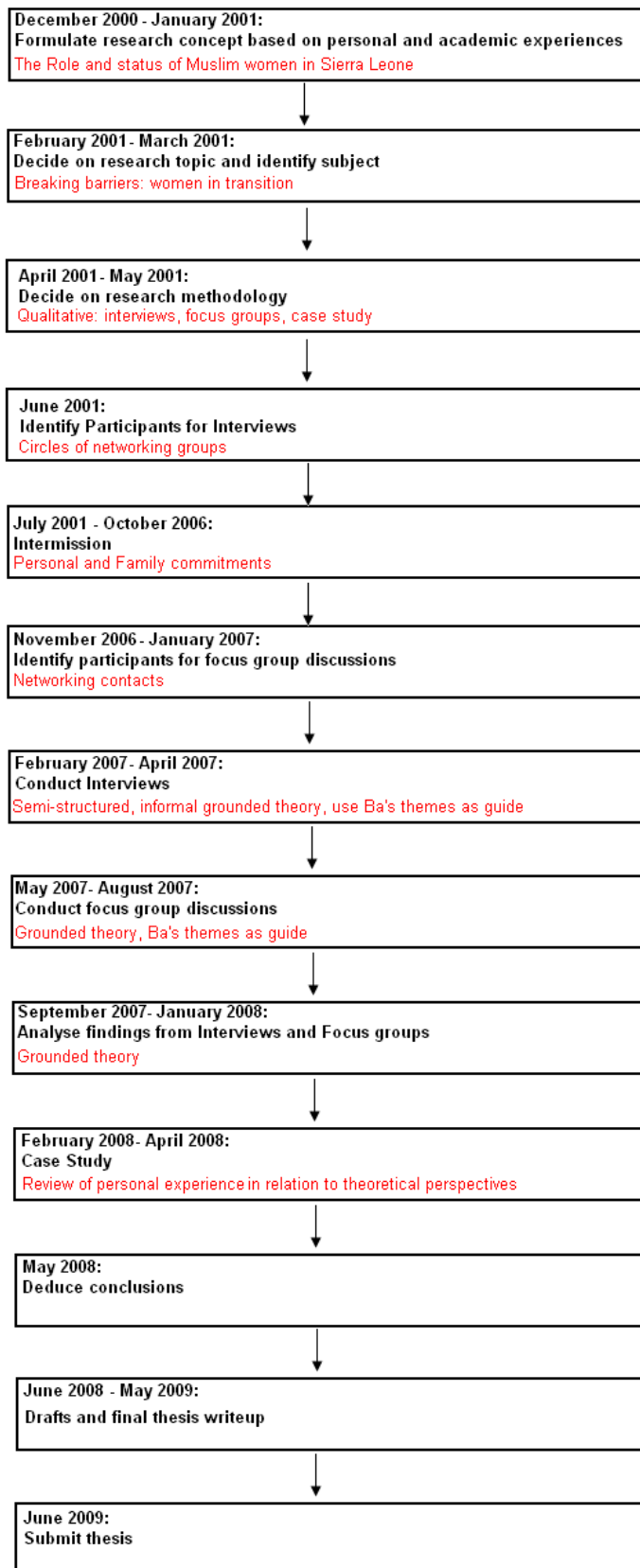
The research was also guided by empowerment and education theories, feminist theories and black/African feminist theories. African-American feminist ideologies reflect specificities of race, class and culture. I used black feminist theories by Barbara Smith (1981) and Barbara Christian (1985) and Alice Walker's (1989) concept of *womanism*, as their theories demystify the traditional male-oriented black men by portraying black women to be resilient and resourceful. With the concept of feminism, I drew on Buchi Emecheta's African concept of *feminist with a small f* which is an adaptation of feminist philosophy

with an emphasis on nature over culture (Carby 1987). African feminism deals with the socio-economic and class factors that contribute to African women's oppression, economic exploitation and marginalisation seen through the eyes of other African women (Fishburn 1995).

The research is interdisciplinary, as is much feminist research. Given the issues to be addressed and the fact that the primary interest is in understanding the participants' lives from their own perspectives, it seemed appropriate to pursue all data and information using qualitative constructivist research methodology. The research is a piece of work based on inductive qualitative methods of inquiry which threw new light on findings. Adopting Rappaport's (1995) theory, using a qualitative-constructivist research approach is the most suitable for answering the research question and sub questions deriving from it after a subjective examination of the thesis, and the study of gender and empowerment. I therefore engaged in a selection of methods, ranging from random to purposive. This triangulation of several data collection methods was carried out in order to achieve internal validity in this qualitative-naturalist research (Robson 2002). As mentioned earlier, the synthesis of several methods provided the insights and the observation of reality from the participant's point of view.

3.2 Research Flow Diagram

RESEARCH FLOW DIAGRAM



The diagram above shows the general flow of events and work carried out in completing the study. It shows the step by step process from the inception of the study, the brainstorming process, and the wrestling with different ideas to get a research topic, all combined with the final steps made for the completion of the thesis. The research spanned over a time period, identifying individuals and the support group as participants in the study and a long intermission from the course because of personal and family commitments which took me to reside overseas for a number of years. About twenty months was spent in the analysis and writing up of the data collected during the interviews and focus group discussions, on to the final submission of the completed thesis..

3.3 Qualitative Constructivist Methodology

Qualitative research is sometimes seen as harder, more stressful and more time consuming as compared to other forms of research methods. As Delamont (1992, p5) puts it, “Qualitative research is only suitable for people who care about it, take it seriously, and are prepared for commitment”. It tends to focus on exploring in as much detail as possible, and aims to achieve ‘depth’ rather than ‘breadth’. The whole study was done to attempt to identify the different categories and concepts of professional Muslim women, to attempt to gain a deep understanding of their concepts and their situations, and to study the women in their natural and comfortable settings like in their homes, in their kitchen and to focus on their dealings with other women as suggested by Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996).

Qualitative methods emphasize the process of remembering, recounting and writing about life experiences and everyday practices and encounters. This enabled me to understand the contexts of decisions that professional Sierra Leonean Muslim women make, interpreting the subjective implications of these contexts for the individual woman, while describing and analysing her personal experiences.

The qualitative constructivist method of research is used in conjunction with the principles of feminist approaches. This research strategy and paradigm encouraged and justified the women to express their authentic voices on the issues of empowerment and change for self and national development. The study was a qualitative-constructivist-narrative as it pointed out the principal issues of obstacles and balance, all from the participant's point of view (Jackson and Scott 2002). The narrative approach (Lorber 2001) allowed me to listen to the voices of the women, with the intention of learning more about the phenomenon of professional Muslim women and understanding the magnitude of the significant issues of these women.

The discriminatory political and social perceptions regarding Muslim women's place in society are deep and ancient and they were set many generations ago, making it inevitable that the perceptions built about women have been absorbed from the society (Rowbotham 1992). The qualitative constructivist method enabled me to trace these effects that shaped Muslim women's self perceptions while I described their stories of self empowerment at the same time. This method

acted as an empowering force that allowed the women to tell their stories of empowerment from a powerful stance, giving them a sense of significant and important accomplishment.

3.4 Research Approaches:

3.4:1 Feminist Approach

As a feminist study, one of the challenges or goals is to achieve knowledge in ways which are not typically used in orthodox studies (Silverman 2004) because it raises awareness and according to Gibbs (2008), researchers and academics hold the view that through writing about the female situation and the experiences of women, public awareness increases. The process therefore aspires to draw a large amount of attention to female standpoints, especially those made by the long downtrodden in society (Harding 1991).

Qualitative and feminist studies recognise women as researchers and encourage the qualitative-constructivist approach, feminist outlooks and the researcher's own experience to authenticate feminine discourse (Cryer 2000). It also justifies sensitivity to the subjects being studied and this makes the process considered as empowering. Affiliating with Harding's (1991) approach, it is important to draw on traditional methods and methodologies in conducting the research, strengthening the feminist outlook.

3.4:2 Narratives (Oral Traditions)

A major goal of the study was to listen to the voices of the new social sub group of educated, professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone, talking and unveiling their perceptions about empowerment and change, and the significance of knowledge in the social and political discourse in which they are involved. I also listened to the viewpoint of some grass-root level women and Muslim men on the strategies and the effects of the new sub group of professional Muslim women. In order to examine the situation of Sierra Leonean professional Muslim women, extensive interviews and focus group discussions were organised independently. These according to Wisker (2001), allowed for iterative checking and cross checking of evidence between the different groups of participants.

African cultures across board, embrace the oral tradition of reciting tales. This is a process of transmitting orally, a cultural heritage from woman to woman and from one generation to the next. Emenyonu (2006, p32) wrote, “The use of orature and oral tradition in the form of unscripted stories told by mothers and grandmothers has shaped the lives of countless generations”. He explained that throughout pre-colonial African societies, women were artistically gifted and prominent figures in oral literature, where the mores and morals of respective African cultures were passed from one generation to the next. This was a strategy that represented historical traditions since there was no access to any written work.

The oral tradition is quite eminent in the Sierra Leonean culture and stories are viewed as a rich source of knowledge of women’s learning. It is characterised by

the active interchange between interactive responsive storytellers and participatory listeners (Awkward 1990). Oral literature or story telling is a form of simultaneously transmitting the cultural norms and heritage, educating generations of people about the history, weaving their personal stories and values of the society and community, while at the same time entertaining the listeners with stories, songs and dance drama (Boehmer 1995).

The aim of the study was to hear from the women themselves, narrating their personal journeys, celebrating their ‘voices’ and observing the sense of pride and satisfaction in each of their personal achievements at this stage in their lives. The participants had clear memories of different events and they provided first hand personalised accounts, varying in detail and length. In utilising the narrative and storytelling technique, the women comfortably expressed their thoughts, emotions and feelings, while recounting the hard times, hiccups and hitches that they encountered in their quest to move away from the social norm expected from Muslim women in the society. This method proved to be very important in the research process because it allowed the women to go back in history and appreciate it as a cultural means of education. It also allowed me to ‘bring back to life’ their various efforts and struggles, and enabled a true understanding of the women’s experiences as Muslim women as they narrated their ordeals and their experiences with ease. Flannery and Hayes (2000) reiterate that much can be learned from stories of women in formal education settings and even so, more from women’s stories from studies conducted in informal settings.

Whilst tape recording, I identified and wrote down statements, sentences and picked up visible reactions that were implicitly significant throughout the interviews and the discussions. Analysing all data according to emerging categories, themes and patterns, I found out that the same themes recurred in the interview sessions and the female group discussions and they were expressed with the same energies, emotions and attitudes as themes, causes and reasons for the status of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. As the study was built on feminist approaches, Patton (2002) suggests that all elements of narratives, the unsaid, facial expressions and body actions were considered to be just as important as the clear, explicit and forthright statements. I chose this type of in-depth investigation because I believe it leads to a better understanding of the relationship between Muslim women, power, education, empowerment and oppression, thus helping them to develop and create their own perceptions and agenda on non-conformism and breaking barriers. At the end of the eight in-depth one to one interviews and the four sessions of focus group discussions, very strong and poignant issues like social attitudes towards Muslim women and religious and cultural restrictions were discussed, analysed and vetted as being pointers to the disadvantaged situation that Sierra Leonean Muslim women find themselves in.

The research brought out the recognised pre-eminence in the oral tradition that ensured enlightenment and empowerment for African women (Nnaemeka 1997), by providing the avenue to freely express themselves and for their voices to be heard. This is to buttress the point that women have been eloquent and prominent

story tellers in many cultures for thousands of generations, yet their different voices were not heard enough in the public sphere.

The oral tradition acknowledged the power of women as preservers and disseminators of cultural traditions especially in patriarchal societies, and this acknowledgement according to Finnegan (2007), engendered solidarity among women and firmly situated women as significant socialising agents in the community. Orthodox academics and scholars have sometimes criticised it, postulating that it leads to the problem of non-objectivity because it is the narrator giving their own point of view. Feminist scholars have embraced the subjectivity of the process because they believe that it offers an opportunity for the women to voice out their views and their opinions, and as Kanneh (1998) puts it, “A large majority of Sierra Leonean women cannot read or write, so they depend on oral tradition to remit history and educate their children about important aspects of their lives” (p8).

3.4:3 Focus groups

Olesen (2000) writes that focus groups allow the world to be enlightened by reading or listening to the voices of insiders, listening to the ways in which people interact and, in this case, listening to the authentic voices of Muslim women and men in Sierra Leone. This builds meaning to the process and helps to capture a glimpse of what is going on in the minds of the participants. By speaking, the participants were encouraged and able to express their views, illuminate and shed light on their own process of learning, of empowerment, emancipation and self

development, ultimately understanding their perceptions (Barbour 2008). This allowed the researcher to do research ‘with’ the people rather than ‘on’ the people. Rappaport (1995, p96) also justifies the use of narratives in qualitative research by stating that, “We are led to help people to discover their own stories, create new ones, and develop settings that make such activities possible; all activities consistent with the goals of empowerment”.

The narrative method can be seen as the subjective-reflective nature of the narratives which coincides with the feminist ideology of compassionate, un-authoritarian understanding of the ‘other’ (Reinharz 1992). It is a powerful mechanism through which one can describe, understand and accelerate the empowerment process on a personal, communal and organisational level. It allowed the participants to speak out in any way they saw fit and in using orature and narratives, the study examined how their personal stories point to a transition from a prior state of oppression and low esteem to one of self empowerment and emancipation. While analysing their stories, as evidenced in Chapter 5, the research shed light on the connection women make between the knowledge they gain because of the education process and the power they acquire as the root of the empowerment process (Harding 1991).

Focus groups have been viewed by Reason and Bradbury (2001) as enervating because of the skills and experience needed to be able to conduct and sustain the process, with a good, relevant, reliable and authentic data collection material. I have viewed them as liberating and empowering for the Sierra Leonean group,

especially the female participants, as the process provided the fora for joint learning and the creation of joint knowledge. The focus groups also allow the world to be enlightened by the reading of the oratory of the women as insiders, while capturing a glimpse of the happenings and their life experiences.

In this research, the focus illuminates that a woman who investigates the lives and attitudes of other women is exposed to information pertaining to empowerment, women's learning and social change. As the researcher, I drew on my own experiences to shed light on certain aspects of the phenomenon of professional Muslim women and also helped to broaden an understanding of the studied phenomenon through their authentic stories. Relating to the principles of participatory research, I was involved in the study and became an active participant and an active listener. Being a feminist research, this promoted the sharing and creation of knowledge in order to gain knowledge (Stanley 1992).

The focus groups sought to identify the cultural characteristics of tradition particularly in relation to core Islamic beliefs, its purpose and goals, and looked at the strategies of Ba (1984) as a literary text in portraying them. The group then related the findings to the themes and subject matters of Islamic/Muslim women in Sierra Leone. I brought in some of the proceeds from the one to one interviews and the groups, and tried to establish the relationship between the views and demands of the individual professional Muslim women and compared them with those of the members of the focus groups. With the focus groups, as suggested by Maguire (2001), I was required to examine the general behaviour, relationship,

and the often unseen institutional and organisational structures and relations that shape the ways we live, work, love and play.

The groups mirrored everyday discussions that Sierra Leonean Muslim women have among themselves and about themselves, thus enabling them to discuss their personal experiences from their own viewpoint. This elicits responses that throw light on their reaction to the oppressive experiences they encounter and also allows the women to learn to identify factors that either advance or halt their fight for personal empowerment and personal development (Bloor et al 2000). The groups allowed the opportunity for interaction to occur between participants, and this resulted in the free flow of ideas and the exposure of similarities or differences that had emerged from each individual's life history or experience being developed. The participants were able to reflect on their interpretations of their experiences, in comparison to other members of the group.

According to Punch (1998), materials which had not previously been perceived would normally emerge from interactions. In this richly woven tapestry of recollections and goals, both bitter and sweet, the focus group discussions brought to life the different voices and experiences of the women as we tell our life stories in the form of the traditional African storytelling pattern. With the vivid descriptions of their environments, their relationships and their actions, each participant revelled in the opportunity to speak their minds out whilst enjoying the attention from keen listeners. The result is a unique, lively and rewarding journey for the listener or reader, who travels across generations, through a variety of

mother tongue expressions, to share in the conversational worlds of our compelling stories.

From the end results and proceeds of the study methods, I made conclusions about the interaction between positive self and national development, and the new social sub group of educated professional Muslim women via their 'survival' strategies of sisterhood and support networking. For the focus group discussions, there were two groups of four professional Muslim women each, one group of four grass-root level Muslim women and one group of four Muslim men as participants. The last two groups were used as back up evidence to the main focus of professional Muslim women in the study. I chose this all Muslim group of people, both men and women, to give them a chance to view out their opinions and not have to relate or justify their ideas with those from non Muslims.

Throughout the group discussions, with the seating arrangements in a non-hierarchical manner (Robson 2002) and everyone facing each other in a circle, participants exchanged perspectives across a range of topics from class, gender and education to responsibilities and expectations. Participants interacted on a first name basis and only referred to women or men who had been to the Hajj Pilgrimage with the respective titles of 'Haja' or 'Alhaji'. They examined social and economic structures of their communities, looked at self reliance and self empowerment schemes, and suggested skills for advocating change in values and attitudes towards Islam and towards women.

The group discussions were conducted in English except for the session involving the grass-root level participants. This was conducted with a mix of English and Krio (the lingua franca, normally called 'broken english'). The session proved to be an empowering experience for the women as they developed new communication skills and learnt how to voice out their views without feeling intimidated.

By utilising the purposive sampling method for identifying and choosing samples for the research, I selected professional Muslim women through networks of people I had come across and to whom I had direct access. I identified eight women for the interviews and sixteen people for the focus group discussions including four male participants. I opted to include Muslim men in the study, in order to better reflect the different gendered perspectives and to better understand gender relations, with a conscious choice of just four, based on the reasoning that the objective was to focus on professional Muslim women. The make up of the group included four illiterate/semi literate grass root level women in a group of four, two groups of educated, professional women in groups of four, and a mixed group of four educated, illiterate, and Islamic educated scholars. This mix had been a result of the dynamics of the power balance. The women were put in separate groups, putting the grass root level women by themselves so that they are not intimidated by the educated women, therefore creating for them, their own space to be able to express themselves freely and confidently.

The men were put by themselves so that the women would feel at ease and be free, relaxed and comfortable to talk about their experiences, their hopes and their fears without the ‘enforcers’ of patriarchy staring right at them. I selected eight more professional Muslim women, not only to give them more hearing space, but to be able to get a proper grasp and feel of the women’s voices through their personal narratives in a group, as I had already interviewed eight individuals from that category. The grass-root semi/non literate Muslim women are also an essential part and focus of the study, to be able to assess and link the effect of the new emerging social sub group of professional women to and on their lives, since they are the most vulnerable in the society in terms of education, job opportunities and empowerment. The main challenge of the whole research was for this group of women to experience empowerment and change of social attitudes towards them, using the new sub group of Muslim women who perceive themselves to already breaking the barriers. The focus group participants (Appendix 2) varied and ranged from:

Group 1: An Accountant, a Retired Army Midwife, a Senior Teacher and a Lawyer (Professional Muslim women).

Group 2: A Tailor, a Secretary, a Medical Chemist and a Police Officer (Professional Muslim women).

Group 3: A Fishmonger, a Fruits & Vegetables Farmer, a Housewife and a Domestic Help (Non/Semi Literate Muslim women).

Group 4: A Medical Doctor, an Engineer, a Businessman and a Tribal Chief (mix of Muslim men).

The discussions and their stories as autobiographic accounts, aimed to preserve the authenticity of their voices (Tonkin, Burke and Finnegan 1995). The focus group discussions allowed me to observe and record findings as a sample of the professional Muslim women being studied. With the discussion of relevant issues, this method helped me to identify and generate new ideas.

In investigating the effectiveness of the support groups, I identified the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL), an established support group, to see how these groups succeed in bringing significant positive change in the lives of the common Muslim woman. The aim of the federation, as described in chapter 1:12, is to be the umbrella body representing the voices of the silent mass of Muslim women and also, to create a communication network for these women countrywide. The purpose of using the group was to recognise and identify Muslim women's issues and problems through themselves and how they attempt to tackle the issues to improve their status and their economic conditions.

3.4:4 Interviews

In the quest for multidisciplinary contributions and opinions, I selected my interviewees from different professional backgrounds: a Government Minister, an Ambassador, a Supreme Court Judge, an Academic, a retired Central Bank Director, a Senior Civil Servant, a Gender Consultant and a Member of Parliament. As a qualitative approach, I utilised in-depth and face-to-face verbal interchange which, according to Silverman (2001) is the most prevalent form of interviewing. The interviews allowed me to explore the proposed issues in depth,

and served as an avenue to follow up issues, explanations and clarifications. The primary aim was to convey the experiences and meanings of the individuals interviewed (Silverman 2001).

Given the qualitative nature of the research, the interviews were semi and loosely structured so that they provide greater breadth of data. The interviewing process is viewed as a conversational setting and the interviewee was encouraged to be a 'story teller', given the opportunity to discuss and reflect upon their experiences and motivations (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). The interviews were conducted ahead of the focus group discussions, in order to allow more time for the planning of the group meetings. It was also a way to be able to include similar reactions from the proceeds of the interviews as a form of discussion, and to compare themes from Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984). This was a way to get the individual participant's authentic point of view regarding the emergence of professional Muslim women. It means that the interviewees did not have the opportunity to be able to discuss proceeds from the group discussions but they enjoyed the therapeutic experience of openly discussing their achievements and their commitment towards helping other Muslim women in their communities.

Autobiographical accounts as personal texts and observing participant demeanour are favoured in feminist research according to Robson (2002). He wrote that this strategy aims to gain close and intimate familiarity with the participants, and it also allows me as the researcher, to immerse myself in the study. It requires a documentary analysis of the stories that each of the participants tell and makes you

part of the group. With preset questions to start the process, the interview questions were left open ended and ‘free-response’, starting from small talk and leading to ‘full-on’ conversations as each interviewee gave their spontaneous personal opinions, providing rich ethnographic accounts of their situations. According to Barbour (2008), this technique allows maximum freedom of response from the interviewees and, the encounters with their personal narratives were open and fluid.

Each interview was taped and lasted for a minimum of one hour. They opened with a short introduction that provided context for each interviewee regarding personal empowerment and their achievements. Using an interviewing and question guide (Appendix 3) that outlined the main questions, topics and issues of the research, the participants were each asked to talk about themselves. They were encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings and actions associated with their stories. The interviews were not only a question-answer affair, but were also the exchanging of ideas and expression of opinions (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight 1996). This method allowed the interviewees to discuss their experiences, beliefs, values, and the social meaning they attach to any given phenomenon, in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) suggests that this method encouraged them to tell their personal stories, create their knowledge and introduce their unique strategies, materials and contents for disseminating their empowerment process. In the interviews, we focused on culture and tradition, emancipation, oppression, power, motherhood, education, health, self-reliance and politics among other issues (see Appendix 3).

According to Fontana and Frey (2000), interviewing is one of the most common and empowering ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings. The focus of interviews is, moving to encompass the 'hows' of people's lives as well as the traditional 'whats' of their lives. The research also showed how writing, speaking and memory join forces to restore a personal and collective past. In this way, the respondent was afforded the opportunity not simply to answer questions asked but also to raise issues and concerns that had not been foreseen (Wisker 2001).

During the whole process, I engaged with the participants in order to understand fully the flow of the discussions and I tape recorded the proceedings, wrote notes and took down feedbacks from the discussions. I listened supportively to their stories, while actively exploring their lived experiences by documenting personal stories from the participants and observed and interpreted their facial expressions, their body language, their use of words, feelings and all details that pertained to the 'here and now' (Devault 1999).

Using autobiographies and life stories is a mechanism to strengthen women's knowledge and solidarity and, according to Strauss and Corbin (1994), to promote the development of female discourse in academic studies. The study therefore enabled the women who told their own stories of empowerment, to consider how their knowledge as women who participate in empowerment programmes, contextualises and develops in the context of significant relationships. By speaking out, they are able to illuminate and shed light on their own process of

learning, their empowerment journey and the way they structure reality in view of that process. By doing so, they broke down the conventional boundaries between themselves, between the private and the public, and between the historical, religious, social and political contexts that confined their lives

3.4:5 Case Study

Mies (1995) wrote, "...because of women's personal experience with oppression, they are better equipped than their male counterparts to make a comprehensive study of the exploited groups" p225. It was on this basis that the rationale to use genealogy as one of my feminist research tools. This method enabled me to inquire into my history and trace origins and answers linked to the research study. As I cannot claim to have lived first hand some of the realities and struggles of the participants, my position as a Sierra Leonean, a professional, a wife, a mother, and a Muslim woman, enables me to better understand the difficulties, complexities and constraints that they encounter in their everyday lives. It gives me an insight into the context and provides me with first hand experience of the situation, likely showing an empathy with the participants' position. As the only Muslim female lecturer presently at the University of Sierra Leone, surrounded by a sparse number of other women colleagues in the male dominated environment, my personal experiences were therefore used as a case study, making the whole research process interactive and versatile and making the participants understand the concept of women in their context (Wisker 2001). Being part of the overall select sample of participants in this ethnographical study, I strove to maintain a degree of objective detachment and tried to be passive during the whole period of

research with the participants, even though empathising and relating with the experiences of the women remains very personal and 'close to home'. This is so that, my personal opinions are not directly represented or reflected in the outcome of the group discussions.

At the outset, the inevitable was accommodated to ensure the scientific validity of the study, as constructivist paradigm supports the inclusion of the researcher's personal story of achievement and success. This asserts that it is not possible to separate the researcher from the subjects and to study the phenomenon from an objective outlook (Bell 1993). As a researcher, I can draw from my own experiences and testify in order to shed light on certain aspects of the phenomenon and broaden an understanding of the researched phenomenon. From a feminist approach, being a woman investigating women involves a connection to the situation. This process helps to identify the influence factors and also contributes to the research credibility and the reader's ability to rely on the findings. The case study was conducted under the umbrella of participatory research, and it offered a way to openly demonstrate solidarity with the oppressed and disempowered women through the research work (Stanley 1992). The research describes and interprets the social realities, portraying the suggestion of change by the participants, envisaging the support beyond the bounds of this research, placing the women's self-determination, emancipation, personal and social transformation as part of the central routes to the goals in the research.

Using myself as a case study involved an in-depth examination of myself and my journey and I explored my background and my personal experiences in relation and as a reference point to the views and ideas discussed in the focus groups. It was an attempt and a way of providing answers to the research questions, using methods accepted in a feminist study (Reason and Bradbury 2001) and forcing me to reflect on attitudes and experiences that unconsciously precipitated this research. I took a short look at the Sierra Leone situation in terms of the development of Muslims and attempt to explore and understand the cause of the social development lag of Muslim women. This research strategy provides readers with a sharpened understanding of the subject matter and maintains the reliability of the research. Ojo-Ade (1989, p67) states, “Only women can best represent their interests in society”. Feminist researchers have defended this technique by insisting on the influence and the interaction that develops between the researcher and the researched.

As a Muslim woman, I felt very comfortable discussing the issues of oppression and emancipation with the participants of the research, and I was interested in bringing the voices of the women to the forefront of the public and, with more emphasis, in the academic arena. I anticipated that my experiences helped bring out the concept and quality of the positive national development that the participants craved, and it had made the research process interesting. Using myself as a case study had also enabled participants of the whole research process to understand ourselves better and to understand Sierra Leonean Muslim women in their context by virtue of the empathy surfacing in the case study and the topics

from the group discussions, based on my knowledge of gender, empowerment, women's writings, black women and African women's literature, the influence of a Masters degree in Women's Studies and my familiarity with the events of Muslim women's lives in Sierra Leone. These I believe were valuable and powerful tools in bringing out evidence and elaborating and elucidating the research questions.

As a case study, I had used and recorded my personal experiences up to present day: from my journey as a young, school-going Muslim girl, as a woman, a mother, a wife, a researcher and a professional, bringing the acquired knowledge of a person who is familiar with the contents and issues at the heart of this study and how these experiences have affected my own 'personal empowerment' through the enlightenment gained from an MA in Women's Studies. My deeply enmeshed position in the process, mixed with the knowledge gained from the Masters course and the exposure gained from travelling and living out of the Sierra Leonean society, enabled me to not only see the need to conduct the research but spurred me to care about it and attempt to find answers to the questions that arise. My personal experiences are described and analysed and even though some differ greatly from those of the participants, diverse perspectives and factors come into play to show the dynamics of the experiences of professional Muslim women in the Sierra Leone society. According to Steedman (1992), utilising this process based on the principles of feminist pedagogy, legitimises the use of personal experience in an intellectual study.

Women suffer from the non existence and inadequate representations of their voice in the public and academic arena. Patton (2002) writes that the use of autobiographies or women's stories of their own life journeys is to make their voices heard and thus consequently empower the women. The women participants were thus perceived as role models, who were laying and mapping out the road for other women.

Guided by participatory action research principles which reflect the attributes of the experiences of the participants (McIntyre 2007), in order to create knowledge of the group of professional Muslim women, both the interviews and the group discussions began by a short introduction of my-self and the purpose of the study, explaining the background, the objectives and their role in the research. I encouraged each participant to introduce themselves and share their individual details like occupation, marital status, education level and number, age and sex of their children. I also examined the issues that emerged from the first stage, that is, the individual interviews and those that surfaced from the second stage (the focus groups) from the various points of view. The interviews were conducted ahead of the focus group discussions because I found it easier to fix an appointment for individual one to one meetings whilst I had to check and cross check with focus group participants in order to arrive at a convenient time suitable for all participants in any one group. I also had to make arrangements for one of the participants to host the meeting. There were a few hindrances during the whole process when some appointments were unexpectedly cancelled, and some

disruptions and interruptions from secretaries, family members, phone calls and power cuts.

It was interesting to identify the similar issues and the different opinions and stances that were evident in the two research stages. Depending on the participants, the thrust and dynamics of each of the group sessions portrayed sincerity, openness, and the provision of valuable information, with the hope that the results of the research can play a role in the future to help change the issues discussed. There were new points raised, the sharing of findings to elicit input, suggestions and comments for improvements to their lives and enriched versions of some old points, therefore making a connection to the perspectives of the new genre or sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone. Analysis of interviews and the re-examination of the group discussion results, indicates that the gap in literature and academic knowledge about Muslim women in Sierra Leone (as an example of women in Africa) is beginning to be filled.

3.4:6 Literary Evidence/Text in Data Collection

Huddart (2008) noted that fiction offers an imaginative response to social and cultural situations which can act as a mirror to experience and a spur to the identifying of issues and themes. This is how a particular text has been singled out to act in this research, as a cultural and social imaginative reflection of similar issue to that experienced by the women, and to provide some themes in relation to which some of the ideas expressed might be grouped. Reading literature by African women initially helped me to identify themes and issues about

women's experiences and the contribution that educated women can make to equality and change, which some of the writers expressed in the creative socially responsive source. In carrying out this study, I initially carried out an extensive literature research and review on Islam and its dictates on women's issues. I accessed critical literature and works on Mariama Ba, a female Muslim writer from Senegal in West Africa, (Map of Africa) whose novel *So Long a Letter* (1984) is noted as an imaginative and creative statement. It is viewed as a personal testimony of the issues faced by Senegalese Muslim women. I have used themes emerging from the literature to underpin some of the theorising and the questioning of the participants. I particularly focused on one text as a complimentary source of data search, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984) which helped in the discussion of the situation of Muslim women in Africa. Her main themes were discussed during the interviews and focus group discussions, and similarities were drawn between the Sierra Leonean Muslim woman's experiences and those portrayed of Senegalese women in the novel. Ba's works focus on personal experiences and social customs in a patriarchal African culture. Her career as a writer was geared towards exposing the social inequities facing African women. Using her novel as a literary focus during the interviews and group discussions, participants recognised that African Muslim women are either subsumed under community standards, or they are ostracised if they do not adhere to such standards. According to her, Islamic African societies embody the principles of male dominance and female subordination (Ba 1994).

Issues to do with women's silencing, their education and their empowerment are expressed in a variety of sources which have been accessed for this research. This includes both factual sources such as statistics, and imaginative literary sources such as works by women novelists, not just for an interdisciplinary feel, but for the women to experience similarities and feel empathy with the characters and situations in a fictional novel.

With the lack of literature from Sierra Leone on these subject matters, I chose to use the above book as a guide for the interviews and the focus group discussions to acquire a Sierra Leonean perspective, drawing on the similarities and very familiar traditional occurrences affecting the women. Being a Muslim woman writer, she expresses the thoughts of African Muslim women and their experiences with the pull of tradition and culture. Because of the inter and multidisciplinary nature of the research as an accepted way of proceeding, this literary text, although not by a Sierra Leonean writer, establishes the case of Muslim women in Africa, from another West African's context and perspective and has much to offer for our understanding of the same difficulties that the women face and experience. The traditional African community plays an important role in the lives of members of the society and the community (Egejuru and Ketu 1997). Ba reinforces ideas of community and culture in her work, showing that some of the community roles can be advantageous whilst others can be crippling to women. Her work is used here as an expression of power and a revolutionary model for change, establishing self worth and self recognition among the women participants.

The use of a literary text *So Long a Letter* (1984) by Ba has helped to underpin, inform and augment discussions and arguments about the life and status of African Muslim women. This method of using a literary text as informative and a jumping off point to initiate discussions in terms of the themes and insights it offered, not only presented literary representations of African Muslim women and their empowerment process, but called to attention poignant issues that the participants related with, set against a background of under representation and disempowerment. The data gathered from the use of the text during the study forms part of the background to the study and features the imaginative reflection on the issues of professional Sierra Leonean Muslim women and their empowerment process. This data is interwoven with data collected from all participants using feminist social science based methods. According to Dunleavy (2003), this was in order to show both the experiences and perceptions of the sample itself, and the reflections of similar experiences, perceptions and imaginative visions about empowerment for other African Muslim women, as reflected in the literary text by the African Senegalese woman writer, Mariama Ba.

In proposing a social and literary mix and feel to the research, it developed a critical focus on the position of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. Using Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984) indicates an imaginative response as it is a documentary and literary evidence of the distinctive features of the 'new' Muslim women society and it created a creative reference point for the focus group discussions. This was

an interactive process with the participants as subjects and it allowed mutual feedback.

Ba's work is used as an expression of power and as a revolutionary model for change, in a creative form. Her writing describes her frustration and her desperation to ensure change in the lives of her fellow Muslim African women. She is a pioneer of the emancipation and liberation of African Muslim women and her work is a conscious criticism of the society, where she illuminates the need for social reform with regard to the position of women (Aluko 1987).

In 1982 she declared that:

The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice in the family, in the homes, in the institutions, in the streets, and in political organisations etc. Discrimination reigns supreme. As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it.

(Stratton 1991, p111)

She does not mince her words or point her finger away from her male counterparts instead she deals with oppressive issues like early and arranged marriage, polygamy and wife inheritance. Her work is a personal testimony and it allows her to establish her identity toward self-worth and self-recognition (Uraizee 2000). Her ideas on emancipation and stifling traditions in the novel will be compared to those of real life participants in the group.

In the novel *So Long a Letter* (1984), Ba portrays the life stories of women, and articulates their oppression, predicament and insecurity in order to draw attention to the egalitarian gender and class relations that cut across racial and geographical boundaries. She shows that women are the chief providers of family wealth and wellbeing and portrays them as strong and valued members of their society: outstanding as breadwinners, teachers, nurses, farmers and politicians (Green et al 1996). Ba frees the African Muslim woman from bondage and places her within the corridors of power by raising the consciousness of her readers to move toward “genuine power sharing between males and females so that living and loving together is fun and empowering rather than cruel and crippling” (Hooks 1993 p6). By advocating global feminism as a powerful form of resistance against sexism and racism, Ba constructs a liberating model for female solidarity and cultural transformations across differences through her multi-voiced characters (Newell 1997).

When the novel was published in 1984, Sierra Leonean Muslim women were becoming more aware of the plight of Muslim women in Africa. As preparations were being made to raise awareness for the Beijing Conference in 1985, the anxiety to reflect and change the future of Muslim women was imminent. It became very popular in Sierra Leone and it was incorporated in the West African Examinations Board (WAEC) literature syllabus for GCE O’ and A’ levels. It also made its way to the University’s reading list for both English and French literature. My educated participants had come across the novel at some point in their life and therefore knew the story and the themes perpetuated in the novel.

The non-literate participants had heard the story and arguments about the novel from their school going children, friends and neighbours.

The novel is not merely part of the data collection as such because of its merit as a literary text which engages with the imagination and perception. It was used as a reference point in the interviews and the focus group discussions to prompt responses and reactions from the participants (Maguire 2001). Giving them a synopsis on the novel and with an outline of a few specific questions (Appendix 3), I initiated an open ended discussion with the participants of both the interviews and the focus groups. They empathised with the epistolary or letter form diary technique used by Ba to express the feelings and thoughts of the main protagonist, Ramatoulaye. The participants confessed that they most times searched not only for someone to trust who they could talk to, complain to or confide in but also looked for an ideal way of expressing their thoughts, fears aspirations clearly. During the focus group discussions, a content analysis and discussion was made as I read excerpts from the novel and similar themes were identified and looked at how they relate to the Sierra Leonean culture.

Ba encompasses a society and a continent in transition. She portrays in *So Long a Letter* (1984), Senegalese customs in which women are sacrificed at the altar of a male-oriented society, and she exhibits evidence of traditional sexist male attitudes concerning women. She also exposes how men exploit the sex and gender system to maintain male dominance. Ba's vigorous voice of direct feminist protest expounds in her novel the theme of female oppression and portrays the archetypal African woman buried alive under the heavy yoke of traditional mores and customs (Modupe-Kolawole 1997).

This thesis attempts to find the essence and characteristics of the participants that make them unique and also tries to find and identify the connection between the female participants and their relationship with their communities. It aims to create knowledge of women about women for the sake of women as a means of achieving social promotion. This involved an observation of the social structures including the effects and influence they have on each individual woman's thinking. As the research was not only about women but for the progression of women, it was committed to portraying improvement on Muslim women's lives through the data from the participants, committed to listening to their voices, and committed to setting a standard or pace to better understand their position in the society.

3.5 Triangulation

Triangulation of these different data collection methods were carried out in order to achieve internal validity and check the consistency of the different data sources in this qualitative naturalist research (Olesen 2000). This synchronised, concurrent use of several methods provided the insights and the observation of reality from the participant's point of view (Silvermann 2001). This sequential use of several methods enabled a deeper understanding of the interviewing and focus group approach and provided an insight into perceived reality from their outcomes and from the participants' point of view. In these intensive processes, I played the role of the researcher, the organiser, an observer, a moderator and a participant (Maguire 1987). Because of my proximity to the participants, the close observation, the attention to their personal stories,

thoughts, reflections, body language and gestures, the discussion of my findings serve as a basis for a comprehensive feminist study (Reason and Bradbury 2001). This study focuses on the experiences perceptions and views of female participants, selected for their roles as educated women in Sierra Leone society, and on the views and perceptions of male participants. Each considers the status of Muslim women and the difference that education can make. As can be seen from the varieties of response produced by the educated women and the men in the different groups who formed the main part of this research, the men consulted all expressed traditional views about women's expected subsidiary roles, while the women recognised this traditional view, and criticised it not only as leading to repression and oppression of education and development for women but as hampering broader social development. The integration of methods and methodology in conducting this research with the combined use of one to one interviews, focus group discussions, observation and the case study of my own personal experiences has enabled me to produce the findings as presented. This triangulation of methods according to Patton (2002) has provided a complete and comprehensive outlook on the studied social sub group from various points, therefore promoting an understanding of the phenomenon. When analysing and coding the findings, I made several checks to ensure that the English text is an accurate and readable reflection of what the participants discussed especially the grass root level women. At the same time, I tried to keep the flavour of the original including literal translations like, "ooman wey go tinap pan u aid" which literarily means, 'a woman who might stand on your head' therefore signifying a dominant, stubborn, bossy woman who might

not heed anything you say. I also did a comparative analysis of the two research stages, where I compared the consistencies and inconsistencies of the results that emerged from both stages, bringing in the similar reactions and the links that surfaced from the two sets of participants.

3.6 Considerations

With regards to objectivity of the analysis of the data and proceeds from the research, I admit that there is every possibility of non-objectivity in the analysis as my own perspectives might have seeped their way through what I saw and what I heard from the participants, colouring what it really is or should be. The choice of the select sample as participants was also my prerogative, making the method of sample selection possibly unfair and biased because it was based on a selection of people I already knew and had access to even though faced with several problems of making reliable contacts with the participants, getting them to maintain appointment times, the usual shortage of basic amenities like electricity, water supply, petrol for transportation and sometimes unplanned and unforeseen circumstances which were some problems that I had to resolve during the whole research process. Being so passionate about the subject of research and with ever increasing respect for the new generation of Muslim women, without meaning to, there is a likelihood that my perceptions, opinions and views are part of the analysis of the study, especially in the conclusions chapter.

Using and complying with the University's code of ethics procedures, all appropriate paperwork and checklists were submitted to the University's Research

Ethics Committee for permission to ensure that the fieldwork fulfils all ethical considerations that needed to be taken. Credibility was established from participants with the provision of an information sheet explaining and giving full information about the fundamental aims and objectives of the research. They were informed about the whole process and guided as to how and when the information was to be gathered and disseminated. All the participants were issued a consent letter that they signed, accepting and agreeing to the terms of the process.

The issue of anonymity was discussed at the beginning of all interviews and focus group discussions. Most of the participants were happy to be identified as themselves because they saw it as an achievement in life and wanted their personal success to be seen and acknowledged as role models and pioneers for the development of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. But as this is an academic study, it was agreed that they would remain anonymous all throughout the research process and the alias names have been put in inverted commas during the write up. All the informants were given information sheets about the project and signed participant consent forms. Information on the women has been kept with due confidentiality under a password protected pc.

As social groups are represented through discourses that often adduce 'evidence' to secure legitimacy, the participants were assured that no misrepresentation and misuse of data will occur and that all data collected, interpreted and published will comply with the accepted rules. Analysis of the data collected was very time consuming and in analysing and writing up, I tried to retain as much information

about the participants as possible, whilst changing details that would render them individually identifiable. I offered to show them my findings before submitting them to get feedback, and after an hour's session of looking at the findings and their expressed opinions, there was an agreement and all round satisfaction that I had represented their views accurately.

The participants were also informed of counselling and support services provided by the support group, FOMWASAL. Since the interviews and the focus groups were based on sensitive personal issues about their lives and their experiences, I explained that they could use the counselling services if they found any issues discussed during the study distressing especially when they expressed their feelings, their fears and their reservations. At the end, in order to validate the findings through the respondent validation technique and as part of the participatory action research principles, I showed and discussed my analysis with the participants, incorporated the case study of myself and asked their opinions with regards to the analysis.

3.7 Choice and Justification

The choice in the present study of a qualitative-constructivist methodology, the use of interviews, discussions with the focus group, case study and reference to a literary text all serve as evidence that a study could build on feminist knowledge and outlook which sees the participants as subjects not objects and shares the research with them, and employ established methods and methodology to produce significant knowledge. According to Maynard and Parvis (1995), "Qualitative research methods allow those who are studied to speak for themselves and to

provide their perspectives in words and other actions” (p43). This therefore makes qualitative research an interactive process in which the persons studied enlighten and teach the researcher about their lives. As a qualitative researcher, I immersed myself in the setting, making the events adequately understood as they were seen in context. The contexts of inquiry are almost always natural, meaning that no context of study can be predefined and taken for granted (Charmaz 2000). The aim of qualitative research is therefore to understand the experience as unified, so that there is no one general method and that for the researcher, the process entails constant appraisal about what is studied.

My decision to follow a qualitative constructivist method was that it represented the paradigm that I believed in and this was derived from the ability of the method to capture as fully as possible the complexity of the phenomenon and the ability to understand these women’s experiences through their authentic stories. Through listening to the women I have been able to construct knowledge.

Qualitative research methodology is appropriate for the research undertaken here as it is built from illuminative and naturalistic research paradigms (Strauss and Corbin 1994). A survey (quantitative) could have produced statistical information about proportions of respondents’ views about a number of issues, but would not have provided in depth insights into perceptions, feelings and shared values in the same way as qualitative focus group interviewing can. The choice of using qualitative research methodology and methods was derived from the understanding that gender based inquiry is essentially an inquiry into

the complexity of the situation of women, and it therefore allows for meaning to be produced through interaction and interpretation (Spade and Valentine 2004). The process is naturalistic as it is conducted within the natural settings (Denzin and Lincoln 2000), and the goal is to understand the phenomenon of the emerging social sub group of professional Muslim from the perspectives of the participants, and to understand the meaning they give to their experiences.

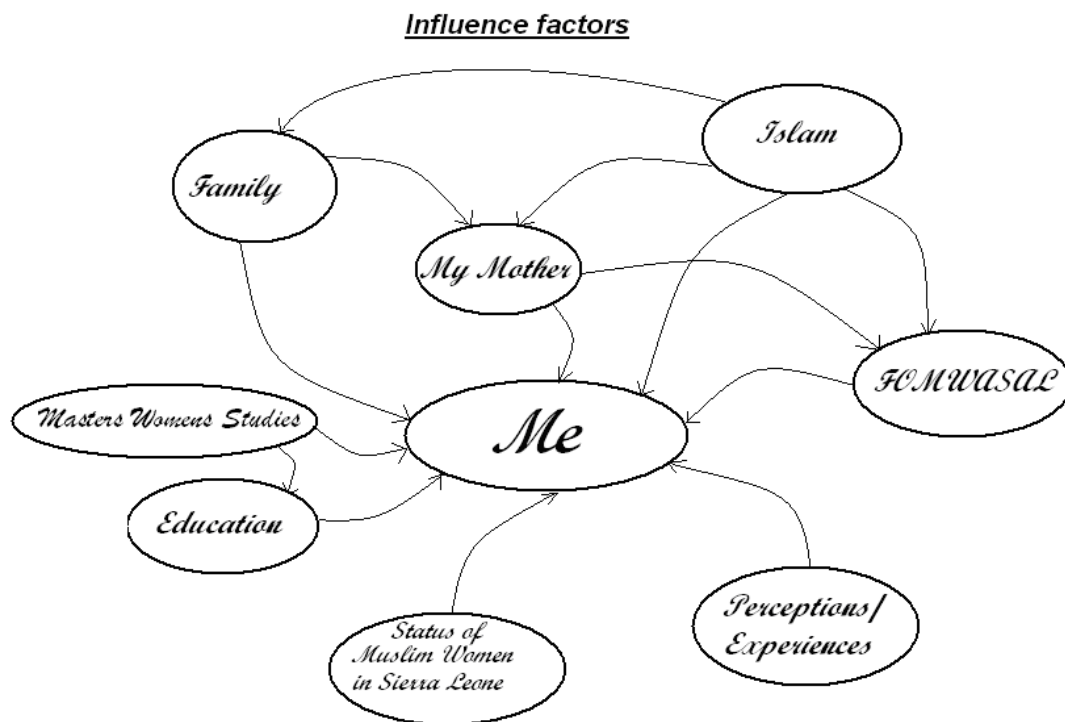
Chapter Four: Personal Case Study

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed reflection and description of my journey to embark on the study and pursue the urge to gain an insight into the emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone. It describes my unique experiences acquired through my exposure to feminist approaches from my Masters Degree in Women's Studies, the knowledge that I have gained by engaging with this new social sub group of professional Muslim women and the discovery of their perceptions towards self empowerment, traditional customs and change in the lives of Sierra Leonean Muslim women. Exposure to the Women's Studies course enabled me to theorise and my independent position fuelled the huge passion within me regarding the research process.

The research is about the voices of women previously oppressed and rendered speechless and 'dumb', exploring their views, experiences and strategies about their situations and anticipating the impact they feel they make in Sierra Leone and, especially in the lives of the bulk of Muslim illiterate women nationwide. I made use of my voice as well as the voices of the participants to show the world their personal experiences and their unique rebellious strategies for self-development and self-empowerment (Hollway and Jefferson 2000).

4.2 Influence Factors



The chapter also builds on my personal experiences and the influence factors represented in the above diagram that nurtured me and created the dynamics for an exploration into the lives of a majority yet invisible set of women in the Sierra Leone society. As the central figure of this chapter, the influence of my family life, my mother, the level of exposure and education I have attained and the status and perceived role of Sierra Leonean Muslim women have all played a role in the fruition of this study, illustrating some answers to the research questions. I grew up as a young Muslim girl in a Christian based society where to be more accepted, one made no claim or reference to being a non-Christian. This is as a result of colonialism and the influences of Western and Christian education in Missionary schools. The aim of the British colonialists was for

Sierra Leoneans to be trained to be as similar to the British as they possibly could in all that they did (Hogan 2000). Indigenous names were changed to British and Western sounding names in order to be admitted into missionary schools and to be given jobs, working for the colonialists. The natives and indigenes therefore had to be confirmed and baptised in one of the numerous churches in order to ‘fit’ into colonial specifications. To be a non-Christian and to practice indigenous traditional rites was seen as a daring action, not to follow in the footsteps of the colonialists and the missionaries. Jalloh and Skinner (1997) referenced that these non-Christian acts were discouraged and frowned at and one ran the risk of being intimidated, looked at with disdain and suspicion, and perceived as uncivilised and barbaric.

During the research process, I listened to the stories told by the participants in the interviews and focus group discussions and looked at texts from my personal journals as I journeyed through the days of the study. I explored the similarities and differences between the narratives and proceeds from the interviews, findings from the focus groups linked with themes evident in Ba’s novel, my own personal experiences and picked out themes and views that surfaced looking at their relevance to the conceptual framework of the study.

4.3 Background

My own story is introduced here as an example of an educated Sierra Leonean Muslim woman, who is a wife and a mother and who makes attempts to juggle

life as a professional in the face of a great deal of gender related difficulties. In comparison to the diverse experiences of the participants of the study, my own experiences have informed my desire to carry out the research, with insights into what to ask and how to ascertain my credibility with the participants.

I was born in the capital city Freetown in 1974, thirteen years after Sierra Leone gained independence from the United Kingdom. Being Creoles, both my parents were from strong Muslim families, my father, a successful businessman and my mother, an educationist with a postgraduate degree. I was therefore fortunate to have been born in an affluent and ‘upper class’ family, with both parents as educated professionals. My childhood was smooth and I was given all the privileges I could be afforded. As the eldest child, my mother instilled in me a spiritual awareness from an early age. My early memories are of stories from the Quran and adults discussing Islamic laws. I had my primary education in a very good government/public schools and my two younger siblings had theirs in one of the best private schools because by then, the chaotic ‘bad governance and extreme corruption’ reigning in the political arena was infiltrating into all public and essential services hence, my parents believed that standards had dropped in the government funded schools. My secondary education was also at the oldest and ‘best’ girls school (the first girls’ secondary school in West Africa which ironically was founded by English Anglican Christian missionaries) and my sixth form studies were at an exclusive private school. I started University (the first in West Africa also

founded by English Christian Missionaries) at seventeen, a year younger than the University's accepted age of eighteen. The concession was because I had very good GCE results and my parents' contacts and network of influential people within the system made it slightly easier. All established educational institutions were founded by Christian missionaries and like my parents and all the highly educated Muslims in the Sierra Leone society, we were all taught about Christianity, studied the Bible, hymns, prayers and how to relate to the world as Christians even though we were not.

At University, I was very active in social, sports and political events, but not as active in the Islamic student's group and mosque affairs simply because I related more with my Christian peers. This seems to be an ongoing cycle as the educated participants in the study, male as well as female, old and young, expressed these same thoughts and feelings during the discussions.

I graduated from university after four years with a Bachelor of Arts degree and even though my parents wanted me to further read law, I decided that another three years was too long a time to spend studying. How bizarre it is that fourteen years down the line, I am still a student! This is very unlikely for Muslim women, because the priority of being a wife and a mother was the norm.

As a result of my mother's influence, I always loved the concept of teaching and learning, helping other people and even being bossy although it was an open secret that teachers were not well paid. As a pupil, I used to have private tuition at home. I could recall my French teacher asking, "what do you want to be when you finish your schooling?" My prompt answer was, "I want to be a teacher". He just stared back at me and after the hour long class, I heard him tell my mum on his way out, "I don't think Fatmatta has much aim in life, she wants to be a teacher and be poor for the rest of her life". To this day, as a poorly paid university lecturer and as a doctorate student, I can still remember his stare and his exact words.

When I eventually opted for a one year Post Graduate Diploma in Education course, I suspected that not a lot of Muslim women ventured into that arena, to be qualified educationists and administrators. As a professional course, part of the assessment was to take practice placements in Primary and Secondary schools. I enjoyed every bit of my student teaching experience. The only teachers at this level who I met during this period that identified themselves as Muslims (after much prodding) were men, with a minority of unqualified and junior level female teachers. During the teaching placement experience, I spent a term of three months in an all girls Anglican secondary school, my Alma Mater. That experience was an eye opener for me because I gained more realization then that Muslim girls were quite disadvantaged as compared to their Christian schoolmates. The number of Muslim girls in the primary

schools drastically dwindled by the time they got into secondary schools (Koroma 1996) and for those who ventured into secondary schools, apart from the very few Muslim girls from affluent backgrounds, the teachers did not pay much attention to the rest because they assumed that much was not expected from them even after their schooling.

There were very minimal and unknown Muslim women as role models or sources of inspiration for the girls to emulate and in talking to some of them I found out that they too could not see a very bright future for themselves. They confessed that they therefore had no will to excel or make extra efforts in their schoolwork. I immediately sensed from the first day that I had become an involuntary kind of role model and an example for the girls because I was proudly introduced to the whole school by the Principal as their past student and the youngest qualified staff member. Amidst arguments and bets, I confirmed my religion during one of my lessons and this made me realise that the girls were filled with awe as they had never encountered a young qualified woman who was proud to say that she was a Muslim. Five years later, as a lecturer at the University (again my Alma Mater), I realised that I was the only Muslim female of that grade as a lecturer.

4.4 Education and Role Models

Christian schools had been established in Sierra Leone for over a century during colonialism and Islamic formal schools only came into existence in the

last thirty years (Alie 1990). They are therefore not considered a competition to the well established Christian missionary schools which had produced with excellent results, the cream of the Sierra Leone society. After teaching in an exclusively boys Methodist secondary school for a number of years, my mother was appointed the principal of the first all girls Islamic secondary school in Freetown. For more than twenty five years, she developed the school from a non qualifying vocational school to senior secondary school level and in the last decade, it was successfully competing with the established schools to produce students fit for admission into Universities, vocational colleges and tertiary institutions.

At the time, most educated men and women did not identify themselves as Muslims because the bulk of Muslims were illiterate, uneducated and associated with the poor and working class in the rural areas. Islam had developed more in the rural areas and grew side by side with tradition and culture. The urban area and capital city Freetown was dominated by the colonialists, their schools and the freed slaves who by then had had dealings with the white man and therefore could communicate and even copy their culture and way of life (Creoles). Western educated Muslim men and women who were professionals and who were rich and established, had been educated in Christian schools, with Christian friends and they had picked up the Western and non-African, non-Islamic ways and perceptions of looking at things.

By all standards, the rural indigenous people, even though Arabic educated, were still seen and considered as illiterates because they could neither read nor write or communicate in English. As a young girl in a Christian school, I was not very comfortable in identifying myself as a Muslim girl who had to use the veil to say her prayers and who had to read the Quran in Arabic because the whole concept of Arabic and Islam was looked down on and considered pagan because it was different from Christianity.

My mother took up the role of educating Muslim girls and women, giving them the chance to stand up and show pride in their religion and building a force to be reckoned with. She and a few other women were the pioneers and founders of FOMWASAL (Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone), an umbrella support group system with the main aim of educating and moulding Muslim women and girls to kick against social and traditional barriers and dispel the belief that Muslim women should be silent and invisible in the public arena. I was raised in the household of a very strong Muslim woman and I witnessed inspirational meetings and astute plans in our living room. Therefore, most of the participants in this research study were people that I had already met, knew or heard about from the network of people within my mother's circle of contacts.

Growing up in an influential and affluent family, I had the luxury of travelling to other countries and mingling with the 'cream' of different societies. I was

provided with all facilities for academic and social excellence, including parental support and strict monitoring of all activities I was involved in. My parents also made sure that our feet were well grounded in Islamic education and traditional customs. My mother made sure that even with house helps, maids, cooks and gardeners we knew how to take care of ourselves and our future homes. People hardly believed that my-self and my siblings were capable of washing up and cooking just because of our family status in terms of the education, profession and the output of our parents. ‘That is the African way’, my mother used to say ‘...and the Islamic way is when you can succeed in living in the midst of all class of people and surviving in whatever situation you find yourself in regardless of how you grew up, how much education you have and how much money you have’.

In 1996, my mother was appointed as an Ambassador and accredited to ten other countries around the Middle East and Asia region. She is the first Muslim woman to attain that level of position in Sierra Leone and she is the first and only woman to be accepted by the Islamic Republic of Iran as the head of a mission since their revolution in the 1970s. In 2007, she was awarded with the second highest national award (the highest being the Head of State’s) for excellence in her national service and her contribution toward national development, one of the first set of Muslim women and taking after her father who was awarded an MBE by the Queen before independence. Having found her way in the World’s Who’s Who in the World of Women since the eighties,

my mother has been very instrumental in shaping my character and inspiring my quest for change. As a firm believer in achievement through personal effort she led me to believe that I can succeed in doing anything that I want to regardless of traditional and cultural barriers.

4.5 Islamic and Family (group) Support Factor

My parents consider themselves as practising Muslims and they try to abide by the rules and regulations of the religion. They also try to instil in us what they believe are the rules and obligations of good Islamic citizens. They perform their five daily prayers, give alms and have been on hajj pilgrimage to Mecca as these are some of the responsibilities and obligations of being a Muslim.

Despite living in a patriarchal society, my father would help and assist my mother with some of her “prescribed” responsibilities. He would help us with our assignments from school and even prepared food for the family whenever he had to. This family structure was unique in our society especially among the Muslims because in perspective, I am tempted to believe that it was seen as ‘not African enough’ and that my father did not exert his ‘manly’ authority over my mother. Still yet, as a young girl growing up, I could sense that the world did not seem equal and that boys and girls were not treated equally as with women and men. I could see that most times, my father would be out with friends till late in the night whilst my mother always seemed to be with us after she came back from work and her many other commitments.

I used to eavesdrop and listen to Aunties, female friends and other family members complain bitterly and cry to my mother about their lives, their homes and their husbands and how unfulfilled they felt about themselves. I would listen to her console them and together they would sigh, 'This is the life of a woman. We have to be patient for the sake of our children'. During these sessions, I learnt that despite her education, my mother had experienced the sad misfortune of being pressured about fertility and son preference from her in-laws because she had me after three years of marriage (which was unacceptably long) and she had two girls, pressuring her into having a son.

It was from these moments that I became aware and sensitive of the gender gaps and differences in the society and I also got to know that empowerment and reason were valuable and powerful tools for making and taking informed steps towards one's aims and aspirations. My heart would rejoice every time a Muslim woman emerged from the shadows, whether through a job appointment or through an achievement. Because it is still a rare phenomenon to see Muslim women recognised and acclaimed through job appointments, one gets to realise that it was a great feat for these women to be so determined and inspired to achieve.

4.6 My Perceptions

I did not know about the concept of feminism until I was at university but I developed empathy very early in my life towards the unhappy women who

visited my home and who I came across. I later learnt about the connection between my beliefs about women, emancipation and empowerment and what I had experienced and felt for these women. With two years on the Women's Studies Course and making an acquaintance with lecturers and women who were so passionate about the ideologies and discourse presented on the course, I gained the interest to deal more with the issues that formed the purpose of the course from a personal and national view.

From a 'non-conventional' Muslim family where a lot of the issues that presented themselves during the study were unfamiliar, I knew and witnessed polygamy, wife inheritance, early, forced, arranged marriages and other religious and cultural traditions in the society around me. Because of the negative portrayals and vibes emanating from those who practiced these traditions, it was probably a conscious effort to look for a partner from a similar family background. I now have a family of my own and I am trying very hard to teach my two sons that women should be respected and given the chance and opportunity to resist the triple gender bias burden of culture, religion and empowerment. Before I got married, I knew that my parents wanted me to get a Muslim partner but they neither forced me, nor did they attempt to arrange a marriage on my behalf. They expressed their feelings that they would like me to settle down and marry someday but also encouraged me to do as much studies as I could possibly manage before taking that step. This

obviously was not the norm in the Sierra Leonean setting, and not even in the Diaspora as one of my distant cousins once said to me in London,

“Why do you keep acquiring all these degrees and qualifications? Don’t you want to get married? You’ll end up as a very single, over educated woman and then see where the qualifications take you in terms of respect in society. Men don’t want women who are so educated. All this time that you use in your studies could be better spent taking care of a husband and children”.

Within society, some men and women believe that women should not be highly educated because they see higher education as a way to postpone their self fulfilment (marriage and motherhood), not forgetting that there is a cultural stigma of unmarried women regardless of their education and career. From the studies, it is evident that with the new emerging sub group of professional Muslim women, perceptions and ideas are fast changing, especially with young people. Muslim women are now looking at the feminine mystique and asking themselves, ‘Does combining career and family life enable women to achieve true fulfilment and equality?’ If it does, they now wonder if and how they can cope with combining motherhood, domesticity and a career.

I have great respect for all the women who took part in the research, the majority of whom are educated Muslim women who show a great strength in working against the odds in a patriarchal society by attempting to change social perceptions and attitudes towards women, and the grass-root participants who are digesting and accepting the changes recommended by their sister Muslim women as role models. In trying to excel, they are trying to be very strong, assertive and forever determined to change the course of their lives and that of

other Muslim women in Sierra Leone. By making the informed decision to participate in the study, this engaged action has made them stronger and more aware of opportunities and chances to advance and achieve empowerment.

Using the concepts of feminism, African feminism and womanism, of which most of these women do not know about, they are making history for themselves and paving the way for the creation of a new and unfamiliar social sub group of Muslim women who are jumping the hurdles and barriers to make themselves better citizens, better mothers, better wives and better professionals/workers.

One thing that was demonstrated during this process was that the opportunity of having funds, an education and some exposure to the outside world plays a great role in one's perceptions and influences one's plans for their children and the next generation. My parents provided us with the best, making us quite unique from a lot of other Muslim families. With the conventional families, there was a lack of either the financial aspects of parents having the means to provide for their children, or a lack of insight, commitment and dedication for the parents to want to provide their children with the right tools to be able to stand up in society and be proud to be educated and successful Muslims. What resonated the most during the process was that the professional women had all felt pressured into being either successful and non-Muslims or being Muslims and mediocre, as a result of cultural expectations. As a Creole, I had some

cultural differences with some of the participants from different tribal background and from the rural areas but during the process, the participants learnt from each other, and shared similarities and differences in their experiences and their cultural perceptions and worked to embrace these differences for the common good of Muslim women countrywide especially discussing and empathising with characters and themes from Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984) which we had come across as a literature textbook either at school or at university.

Chapter Five: Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the analysis and discussion of the findings from the research conducted, exploring the phenomenon of the new emerging sub group or society of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The acquisition of data was expedited with a select sample of educated and professional Muslim women in Sierra Leonean who are members of FOMWASAL, an established support group. It is also reinforced by questioning a sample of illiterate grass-root level women and a sample of Muslim men as backup evidence and context to the findings. Discussing their lives, concerns and positions with grass root (uneducated and generally poor) women has enabled me to set in context the views and values expressed in the responses of the educated women who are the main focus of this research. Similarly getting views, from the men involved in the research in relation to the views of the educated women, in many ways provides context and corroboration about the kind of situations in which women find themselves in Sierra Leone. This also provides the context needed to find ways to empower themselves if they seek equality. The research process evidences below that many women in Sierra Leone experience marginalisation and oppression under patriarchal rules and values, as is the case for many women in Africa and in other international contexts.

My own experiences as an educated Muslim woman from Sierra Leone, and coming from a Women's Studies perspective alerted me both to this oppression and to the possibility of different experiences and social contributions from educated Muslim women in Sierra Leone. My reading of literature by African women, most specifically Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* (1984) as a piece of background evidence, also puts into perspective the range of issues which other educated women have expressed as important in the development of African women. Combining a Women's Studies critical feminist perspective and my personal experiences, the themes and issues suggested in this and other social science oriented literature were in order to develop a theorised background to the interview sessions and group discussions of selected Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

The study focuses on the established social sub group of professional and university educated Muslim women and for the purposes of the study, looks at a particular social support group. As a developmental support group, even though it seems like a limitation, it is further illustrated through the interviews and group discussions that they are changing previously held ideas and developing through the reflective ropes of being involved in the research. Through interviewing and focus group discussions with this selected sample, a number of themes emerged illustrating their awareness of the difference that their education can make, and their experiences as women in Sierra Leone.

The themes arising from the interviews are suggested as findings which might be used by others to feed into identifiable goals and further development for educated Muslim women in Sierra Leone so that their development, achievement and potential contribution toward social change can be identified and supported. Such developments are beyond the bounds of this thesis but could well arise from the impact they might have on its readership. Women's issues are studied worldwide in relation to children, health, family life, and contribution to self and national development. This research evidences to the reader how emerged perceptions and theoretical perspectives regarding power, gender, ethnicity, colonialism, culture, tradition and religion relate directly to patriarchy and the oppression of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. It also explores the impact they make on my primary focus, the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The status of women in society is neither a new issue nor is it a fully settled one. Jones and Palmer (1987) argue that it has to be increasingly understood that viable and sustainable development of any kind should be based on women as agents of change.

The research explores the issue of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone from a feminist approach. The participants of the focus groups and interviewees discussed empowerment, the learning process, self development and national development for Muslim women in relation to social, religious and cultural beliefs and practices. They simultaneously explored stocktaking and

mapping strategies for future empowerment projects and studied the effect or impact made by their support groups in the lives of the wider community of Muslim women. This was in effect reinforced by the use of Muslim illiterate grass-root level women (Group 3) and an all male Muslim group (Group 4) to support the evidence of empowerment and change in Muslim women nationwide. Because the support group was the focus of the research, and because we engaged in reflective discussion during the interviewing process, it is certainly the case that the women in the group could be heard to clarify, firm up and articulate their sense of empowerment with all necessary changes. Thus, the qualitative study captured perceptions and changes in perceptions as a vital process rather than a steady state, not unusual in qualitative studies, which work closely with the participants and engage them in reflection through the data gathering.

The research process produced evidence that there is an awareness that Muslim women are oppressed by a range of practices derived from patriarchal customs and traditions. Similar customs and traditions were portrayed in the novel used as a literary base during the discussions, Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984). These include the issues of arranged marriage, wife inheritance, polygamy, child betrothal, bride price, fertility, treating women as baby machines, son preference, the prioritising of boys at the expense of girls, and domestic violence. It was seen and acknowledged by the female participants and some male participants that these are all practices that virtually guarantee men's

dominance over women (Umeh 1996) and they emerged as some of the burning reasons brought forward by the participants as deterrents to the development of Muslim women in the Sierra Leone society.

Participants raised both critiques of patriarchy and examples of positive female action which have helped to move the position of women forward in society. In terms of the research, the themes were initially highlighted in the literature including the fictional representation of African women's experiences in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984). The issues of education, independence, sisterhood bonding, self reliance and professionalism, combined with other positive themes highlighted in Ba's novel, also appeared as key themes and issues in the responses from participants in the research. These were explored during the research process, and seen as determinants for self confidence, self development, liberation and emancipation.

Mama (1995) recommends that any meaningful analysis of the influences of the factors and paradigms that emerged from the study must be based on information about traditional norms, habits, behaviour, attitudes and other culture related attributes of the society. The research topics are therefore studied from the women's individual outlooks as I believed that they represent in the most authentic way, the women, their emotions, thoughts and the complexity of their lives as Muslim women in the Sierra Leone society. The research topics are also underpinned by the desire and intentions to legitimise

and voice the women's opinions in the way that they choose to tell their own stories of empowerment, in order to shed light and increase awareness of this on an academic as well as applied level.

The interviews and focus group discussions I conducted reflect significant aspects of what Sierra Leonean Muslim women think about themselves and about their contribution to the wider community especially in relation to the emerged themes from *So Long a Letter* (1984) as backup evidence. Their views help us understand better and appreciate further Sierra Leonean Muslim women's roles in national development. This is because the target group participants in the research are all working women, who raise their children and cope with their daily household tasks and family commitments both in and out of their homes. Interviewing these women proved to be a very pleasant and rewarding experience and the interest and cooperation of the participants was stimulating and helped to provide focused discoveries of the study of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The significance of conducting the interviews and the focus group discussions was, as suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2005), to give the women an opportunity to air their opinions, to give them a voice, to express their feelings and their thoughts, and to make known their aspirations and their hopes. Their responses displayed a gradual change of perceptions and their quest for change in attitudes and policies towards Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

The women, particularly the interviewees and members of Groups 1 and 2 (professional Muslim women) have undergone the unique and privileged experience of university education. In proclaiming to advocate 'social change', they stand as a source of power to strengthen and provide empowerment for individual Muslim women and groups. Through the support groups, the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women aspire to self reliance, economic independence, self confidence, healthy ambition, positive aggression and moral stature in their quest to impact self development and self empowerment to Muslim women nationwide. Being seen as role models by the 'not so fortunate' majority of Muslim women, and the aspiring generation of young girls, they seem to present a powerful form of resistance against age old beliefs and practices and oppressive cultural traditions. As theorised according to the arguments of Newell (1997), she constructs a liberating model for female solidarity and cultural transformations across differences. According to their views, the participants recognise themselves as historical agents, by taking part in this and consequent research processes relating to Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The professional women participants extricated themselves from the idea that their lives are prescribed for them from outside themselves, whether by nature, divine order or historical necessity. Their main aim is to assert difference with dignity and prestige and generate ideas to make their own (her)story (Meyer 1989).

This chapter and its sub-sections as categories consist of the analysis of the interviews and the focus group discussions conducted. It also includes the presentation of discussions and parts of responses and statements made by participants whilst maintaining confidentiality of data according to the University's ethics guidelines. Furthermore, to provide a coherent explanation of the proceeds, I have included quotations based on the reaction of participants in either agreeing or disagreeing with several points discussed, bringing out their attitudes, based on observation. The subtitles and themes are presented in the order they emerged during the interviews and the focus group discussions, using the themes presented in Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984) as background support.

5.2 Data Analysis of Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Analysis was carried out by using transcripts of interviews and focus groups, listening to tapes and re reading them several times, identifying emerging themes and labelling and coding the transcripts in relation to these themes. The interpretation of the data is underpinned by the theoretical perspectives driving the research, that is, the concepts of power, gender and ethnicity, from which flow the concepts of patriarchy, Western colonial controls, and religious controls, set against feminism and empowerment.

In utilising the framework of concepts, ideas and theories mentioned in the contextual diagram (Chapter 1.5) as underpinning the research, I confirm from

the analysis of data that these concepts are the driving force of the study. The women were very much aware of these issues playing a role in their lives and new concepts such as economic and financial consequences emerged during the study. As professional Muslim women, most of the female participants had experienced or had been exposed to the experience of expressing their views, hearing their own voices and having their opinions solicited (public speaking), especially amongst other women. My aim was, in identifying with Hollway and Jefferson (2000), to uncover the hidden and create an avenue for the voices of these women to go beyond the limits of the 'feminine world' and into the patriarchal sexist cultural system that had never before seen or heard Sierra Leonean Muslim women so compellingly vocal. The research questions were,

Why is there a new phenomenon of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone?

How do these women fit in the Sierra Leonean social and cultural society?

What are they doing to improve self development and self empowerment to Muslim women nationwide?

The research process brought together diverse people in a relaxed atmosphere, giving the women a chance to express themselves in a secure environment. This encouraged the participants to individually and collectively reflect on their lives and values, and they were able to discover things like expectations, family values and satisfaction about themselves and about others of which they were previously unaware. During the one to one interviews, I was hosted by the participants and I was entertained with juice and fresh fruits. On three

occasions, I was offered a proper lunch and two dinner meals, making the process friendly and enjoyable.

During the study, the women participants were interested in making decisions about themselves, identifying the exact elements in their near environments which serve as obstacles and those that serve as facilitators with specific reference to the knowledge and skills that they gained from the process. They recognised the need to give a name to their experiences, speak in the language they understand best and the process encouraged them to speak in their own voice about their feelings and perceptions of the society and the world. The participants were eager to participate, positive in their response and eager with raised expectations to provide information about the situation of Muslim women in the country, about the impact they feel they are making in the society and about their own personal journeys toward self actualisation in spite of patriarchal power. Having looked at the attitude of the women and the men as participants in the research in relation to their religious beliefs, oppression and the new emerging group of professional Muslim women in their midst, there is a hint of pride and appreciation from all the women participants, and I could sense some unhappiness and discomfort from the male participants. From the interviews and the focus group discussions, the women seem very happy and grateful as a result of the emergence of the support group structure like that of FOMWASAL, introduced by a group of professional Muslim women. The negative reactions from the participants, as quoted further on in the chapter,

were their expressions of unhappiness with regards Muslim women's relations with development programmes, cultural belief about masculine and feminine roles and most importantly, the lack of formal and Islamic education facilities which they perceived as being the key factors in the oppression of women. The female participants were quite vocal in airing out their views, but I sometimes sensed some caution of 'holding back' in their voices when intimate and sensitive topics like marriage and fertility were discussed.

Each participant showed an eagerness to be part of the research process. After an initial introduction and explanation about the essence and the value of the study, participants anticipated the sessions to be considered as social events because not only would they be allowed to examine the rules, beliefs and doctrines that govern their existence, but they would analyse the basis of their knowledge about them. During and after the focus group discussions, several of the participants claimed to have obtained important information and insights from others with whom they previously had little or no personal contact. Mrs 'Sama', a vegetable farmer in group 3 (semi/illiterate) expressed her feelings to the rest of her group,

"This feels very cosy and nice and I feel I am already taking little strides that I see as development, education and empowerment strides. It gives the feeling of working in a team and with that team spirit, we are listening to each other and even offer support to ourselves and our views. I have now made new friends and increased my network of people, especially those who have similar ideas and experiences. I am sure that we would not feel this comfortable if we were being interviewed by a man or a non-Muslim woman who might not truly understand what this means to us".

Mrs ‘Bintu’, a lawyer in group 1 (professional) also commented that,

“Listening to us all, I find these discussions very thrilling. We all seem to be relaxed, not putting up any airs and we all understand each other perfectly. I normally think about the issues we are discussing and how to bring about the changes needed for the good of Muslim women countrywide. There is less than a handful of practising Muslim female lawyers around and we don’t necessarily muster the support from our non-Muslim and male colleagues. This makes me hope that we would succeed in having more and more educated Muslim women who will continue to alleviate oppression for all Muslim women countrywide”.

Mrs ‘Adama’, a fishmonger in the semi/illiterate group (3) intimated that,

“This group has given me the confidence to talk and address people in a ‘civilised’ manner. I am used to either being too scared of speaking in public, not expressing myself well enough to be heard or shouting at the top of my voice when selling my wares. When I try to talk about burning issues, people ignore me because they do not think that I have anything substantial to contribute not only because I am not educated, but as a woman in my community, it is almost a sealed agreement that I cannot make sense and therefore my opinion does not matter. I already feel the power within me not to be easily intimidated, to overcome stage fright and to express my stance boldly, clearly and confidently whenever I have to”.

The other women in her group readily agreed to Mrs ‘Adama’'s comment. Mrs

‘Umu’, a housewife further said,

“Imagine the look on my husband’s face when I go back after this meeting to tell him what was discussed. I am guessing that he won’t be happy for me to take part in any more events involving educated Muslim women. He would definitely see them as bad influence”.

The female participants are involved in a variety of activities as mothers, wives, career or business people and are faced with many constraints and hindrances. They therefore had to examine their personal outlooks and reflect upon how to implement and integrate the new found knowledge of empowerment possibilities in their lifestyles. This puts some form of pressure

on them, with the society looking on to see how far they would succeed in their quest for breaking the barriers and advocating change from traditional customs.

Mrs 'Shineh' a Supreme Court Judge observed during our discussion that,

"Many of us professional women try to merge our dual roles successfully but not without personal sacrifice and inner conflict and struggle".

Bringing this matter up with focus groups 1 and 2 (professional Muslim women), the women agreed and reiterated that modern, younger women feel a lot of tension and experience stress as they sought to balance their work inside and outside the home, something traditional older women never encountered because they typically quit their jobs when they got married or never worked outside their homes. In her interview, Haja Mrs 'Asim', a Civil Servant, defends the stance of professional Muslim women that,

"I feel that our men don't realise that we are neither trying to take over their lives nor are we opposed to them, nor take total control of them. We only believe that we are complements of men and therefore advocate for equality between the sexes in terms of access to education, high level jobs and political openings".

The key themes, my understanding of the themes and my analysis of the themes have been subtitled below, and they have emerged from the interviews and focus group discussions. They were extracted from the proceeds of the discussions, the participants' views about the topics and their reactions to voicing their acceptance or rejection of poignant subjects that they are so passionate about. In my analysis from an application of the framework of the new set of themes emerging from the discussions, the various topics discussed from the interviews and the group discussions were put in identical and similar

group forms, and an explanation and analysis ensued, with direct quotations of the participants' views.

5.3 Emerging Themes:

5.3:1 Culture and Tradition

In every society there are age old customs and traditions. Culture as defined by Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, p66) is, "...the total self expression of a people in the two relations between generic man and nature and the relations between person and person in that society". With time and with the introduction of alien or foreign cultures, tradition and customs become contaminated and they are influenced by the new ones, bringing and resulting in change (Mirza 1997). Some of these changes to tradition and customs steeped in "maleness" are considered repressive and oppressive to women. Mixed with these changes, are a number of misconceptions regarding the status of women according to Islamic law, which the participants believe are a result of a lack of proper understanding of Quranic teachings. Dr (Mrs) 'Nema', a gender programmes co-ordinator and consultant, highlighted in her interview,

"We have to take the proper Islam to our people, talk to them about the teachings and how they can be tailored to meet present day demands and some of our cultural values. In my community, there is an executive committee that oversees the running of the Islamic, social events and all facilities of the community and the Mosque. I realised that in spite of the number of elderly and learned women playing an active role in the community, none of them have been appointed as a member to the executive committee. I asked the head of the committee the reason behind the decision and the only reason that he could come up with was that tradition did not permit the women to be part of an august group with men and that women can rule and oversee the affairs of other women and not men. I surely do not agree with him, so I summoned a meeting with all the women in the community to hear their views. Nowadays,

we cannot just accept what is portioned to us and turn a blind eye to the wrongdoings of our men”.

The participants of Group 1 (professional group) emphasized that the teachings of the religion recommend that women should be treated with compassion and gentleness, yet at the same time, they need to recognise their eligibility to exercise the same rights and duties as men. From the findings of the research fieldwork, it comes out that the women who took part in the study, view culture and tradition in both a positive and a negative light. They see it as a life giving force, as well as a restriction on their rights. Several themes were captured under ‘culture and tradition’ and the everyday dealings in their respective lives are testimonies to unjust social and personal experiences. For example, Wilentz (1992) takes note that extended families on one hand can be positively viewed to serve as help hands. This is because the African is brought up to have an intense pride and loyalty to the family and all relatives. On the other hand, they can be seen as a burden. This is as a result of the individualism and looseness of family ties and obligations that came with the Western ideology, Western education, Christianity and the Western way of life. Haja (Mrs) ‘Riatu’, a Business Consultant lamented on this during our discussion,

“This is especially for us the educated. Our parents prided themselves in their close family ties with grandmothers, aunties, uncles, cousins, family friends, distant relatives and all in the community. With the belief that one person cannot successfully rear a child, they depended on various relations and extended family members for support and to instil discipline in their children. You therefore find out that morals and good behaviour were popular in the past years, I mean, during our time as young girls growing up. This generation now, with the exposure to Western values and education prefers to have nuclear families, concentrating on just their spouses and their children. Children are now taken to paid day-care services instead of having an elderly

relation to care for them. With the absence of these social relationships, children have lost the upbringing that we had and there is now a rampant display of hooliganism, immorality and unsocial behaviours among them”.

The negative effects of several of the cultural traditions and customs portray that major changes need to be made to the entire culture of the society.

Patriarchal control, blended with some traditions and customs of the society, have as a result, made women's lives socially constructed (Campbell 1997). Their ideas, actions and identities are shaped and modified by the social contexts in which they have been positioned. From childhood, a girl is conditioned into thinking that as a girl, she must do all the housework, help in the kitchen, cook, wash up, clean, fetch water, and help look after her younger siblings. If she complains or shows any signs of reluctance, she is sharply reminded that, “You are a girl! Going to be a woman!” (Emecheta 1986, p179). These mechanisms manifest a repressed desire to challenge the social order in which they feel inadequate. Educated Muslim women are sometimes put on the spot when they exercise their ‘empowering skills’ and show self confidence and assertion. Women with these abilities according to Chukukere (1995), are normally referred to as ‘militant, unfeminine, warriors and male wannabes’. From all indications, the question arises, ‘Is it worth continuing to practise customs that rob women of their social rights’?

According to Friedman (1983), women are caught in a trap. Expressing power contradicts the feminine image but at the same time, it is a central component

in emotional adjustment and positive self image. There is a catch in the situation in that, a woman who expresses power and emancipation is seen as unwomanly whilst, when she denies and conceals that power, she is considered to have low self esteem (Barrett 1993). If a woman is expected to either exercise power or symbolise power in her own right, she is not allowed to hold the status of a wife, the reason being that the role of wife implies low status. When a woman moves into an extra domestic status of high prestige, such as a political leader or a diviner, she takes on the social role of male and becomes a 'female husband' to head the community or household. This phenomenon of 'female husbands' explains itself that the combination of high power and wifehood is anomalous proving that acceptance of a woman into a man's world involves 'reclassification' for them to be acknowledged as 'men' (Uraizee 2000). To further explain this phenomenon Dr (Mrs) 'Say', an academic enlightened me by saying that,

"The idea that a leader cannot be labelled as a wife is not only limited to Africa, take Britain as an example. The word 'queen' in England often denotes the wife of a king and it can also refer to a woman who rules in her own right. When 'queen' refers to a woman who actually rules, the husband is not called a 'king' but is referred to as a 'prince' or 'prince consort'. This play of words and titles prevents the ruler from being a 'wife' by making her partner 'the prince' rather than a 'husband'".

With this enlightenment summed up so nicely, I introduced this topic of leadership and power to the groups for discussion. The participants realised that at a deeper level, it is women's roles as wives, a subordinate position in marriage that relates to the secondary status in the culture and not their roles as

mothers (Loflin 1998). Mrs 'Umu' from semi/illiterate group (3) reacted, seemingly convinced and absolute when she said,

“Women are not allowed to rule or hold any position of power over men in Islam. I have been taught from a very young age that Islam does not permit a woman to lead prayers, nor can she be a head of state or president. The men in my community are adamant that women should not go into politics because it is considered that they are entering a man’s world, inevitably breaking the religious and social code of interacting with men that are not close family members”.

A completely different reaction of this statement was aired in groups (1) & (2) (professional group) when the late Benazir Bhutto, Khalida Zia and Sukarnoputri Megawati were used as examples of Muslim women leaders in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia respectively, three of the world’s prolific Islamic countries. I also brought to their attention, the controversial Islamic feminist Amina Wadud in the United States, who leads prayers and writes books on reforms on women in Islam. Not having heard of her, the stunned reaction from all the participants alerted me to a possible subject of research to be explored beyond this thesis. The women therefore became more aware that logically, through marriage, mothers become wives and this basic element of kinship system places men in control of women. So aptly spotted, the women then wondered whether this might be one reason why the concept of menopause is revered in the traditional Sierra Leonean setting.

Stratton (1994) wrote that old age implies spiritual prowess, mystical powers and secret knowledge in the African society. Old women therefore achieve a certain degree of social independence in their communities. They are relieved

of their exalted social duties of subservient wifedom and motherhood, and they move outside direct male control, because they are past childbearing age. This could be seen as an analogy of their transition from colonised to post colonial because they are able to move around with relative freedom, participate in meetings and sacred traditions attended only by men and traditional elders, allowed to enter sacred places like the shrines and even play roles usually monopolised by men. Mammy 'Jatu', a domestic help (group 3 semi/illiterate) said,

"Because I am now like a man and can no longer conceive. I am accepted as a 'mammy queen' in my village community. I sit, hold discussions and debate with the chiefs and other male elders to make decisions for the whole community. Having experienced it, I know that younger women feel oppressed by the traditions that don't allow them to express themselves freely wherever and whenever they feel like it".

With the innate presence of control that rides the society, even educated younger women who are supposed to be 'emancipated' and 'postcolonial' fall victim to patriarchal discrimination, capturing the traditional image of women as often indeterminate humans, dependent, gullible and voiceless. Mrs 'Kroma', a government minister testifies in her interview session,

"I am a qualified insurance expert. In my previous job as an insurance broker, despite my qualifications, I was always asked by my male colleagues to get them tea or coffee and requested by my boss to do secretarial and administrative duties, organise refreshments for meetings, and oversee the cleaning and tidying up of the office. For many years I was never allowed to complete a job or case by myself, nor given any decision making opportunities even though my job description asked for these. With a change of management, I was then promoted to a managerial position based on my qualifications, length of service and overall performance within the new system. Some of my male colleagues made it plain that they found it very difficult, untraditional and uncalled for to work under a female boss. One of

my most active previous tormentors left the job and explained that he was not ready to answer to or comply with any rules made by a woman”.

Muslim women in Sierra Leone have had to accept over decades that they were seen as minors and people who were incapable of doing or acting upon anything according to their own individual initiatives. Like Diez and El-Shohoumi (2005) highlighted, patriarchal attitudes of oppression and possessiveness are reproduced in the family structure and these have hindered and prevented young girls as well as women from reaching a sense of self worth and self definition. They are denied access to the expressive rituals and traditions of the society and they seem to be in search of an identity from birth as they are continually under the tutelage and guardianship of their fathers and their husbands, or as subjects and an appendage attached to a male, either as the daughter of, the sister of, the wife of or the mother of, gaining multiple social identities from being a daughter to being a wife, and then being a mother (Holloway 1992). As ‘Mrs Turay’ a tailor (group 2 professional) claimed,

“A woman is always recognised by the men in her family. Our self identities are stripped and erased from birth and actually it is like we cannot have an identity for ourselves. We are made to believe that we cannot possibly be independent autonomous beings, who are capable to speak for ourselves, make decisions for ourselves and act on our own behalf and I have found out that most times our men would generally ignore what a woman suggests and blame her later if anything goes wrong”.

“My husband never asks my opinion on anything. I am never given the chance to exercise responsibility and autonomy because all the decisions are made for me. He bosses me around and treats me like I do not matter. With my fragmented identity issues, I have come to accept this as normal since I believe myself to be inferior and I cannot do anything without his permission. It is hard for me to overcome this rejection. He once said to me that he would not allow me to take any paid job because I am not a pet in his house and that I

was married to do all the house chores, look after the children and take care of him and not breeze in and out of the home”

explained Mrs ‘Umu’ a housewife (group 3 semi/illiterate). This is a reflection of the society’s demands and their difficulty to internalise the well defined and predetermined social roles, accentuating the boundaries drawn between male and female (the colonizer and the colonised). The traditional social structure is such that women are judged by the society according to the ‘four cardinal virtues’ of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity (Nnaemeka 1997). This reliance on traditional laws reinforces man’s ultimate control and authority within the family. The analytical framework suggests that some of the underlying determinants of the current situation of Sierra Leonean Muslim women are culture based and can be traced back to traditional attitudes and role stereotyping ascribed by society.

5.3:2 Perceptions on Marriage and Partnerships

During the interviews and focus group discussions, majority of the participants empathise with Ba’s characters and the customs and traditions that oppress and traumatise Muslim women in the society that she portrays. At the onset of the novel, which was used as a literary backup for the themes emerging during the discussions, most of her female protagonists are bullied and controlled by their male counterparts, resulting in the women seeing men as predators. The wives were viewed and considered to be semi humans, and the culture dictates that they can be punished by their husbands when they are found wanting for any

wrong. Even jealousy is sometimes used as a euphemism for domestic violence and to be considered a good wife, one has to accept any beatings, violence or abuse meted out by the husband without complaining. Two of my interviewees and five of the female participants in the focus groups confided that they accept violence and beatings from their husbands because the society compels them to believe that it is their duty to accept the will of their husbands. One of the male participants, a medical doctor, Dr 'Duya' (group 4) confessed to beating his wife. He declared,

"I beat my wife whenever I am not happy or I feel dissatisfied with something. I do not beat my children but I see it as my right and my duty to beat my wife so that she realises that I love her. I expect her to wait on me hand and foot for all my needs and I frankly do not believe that a woman is capable of handling any form of responsibility on her own without a man to guide her because they are limited in their thinking. As a man, I always have to have the final say and advise my friends to always show their dominance otherwise they would encounter problems".

Mrs 'Adama', a fishmonger (group semi/illiterate 3) said,

"In the East where I come from, showing an ounce of independent thinking or even making a decision by yourself most times leads to beatings, molestations, public disgrace and even annulment of marriages by the husbands".

She gave us an account of what she experienced two years ago:

"I had tried several times to convince my husband to go with me to a family planning clinic so that we are counselled and taught about family planning methods. This suggestion always leads to arguments and my husband refuses outright. Once he gave me a good beating and told me that he did not want the topic mentioned again because he saw it that it was my duty to have as many children as God saw fit for me. He reaffirmed his role as the man of the house, and as my husband who has complete control over me. He could not understand why I was taking steps to make suggestions in the relationship and as a woman I am not supposed to show that I was capable of independent thinking. I had already had ten pregnancies of which I had had four miscarriages. This was due to lack of medical care and the fact that everyday, whether pregnant or not, I had to wake up from about 3am, collect water, cook

breakfast for the family and get ready to go market hunting at 5am so that I can get good bargains to enable me to make good profit margins. I sell at the market till 6pm, walk home, collect water and prepare dinner for the family. I get to bed at 11pm after washing up and making sure the children are all in bed. My duties do not end there because my husband expects me to fulfil my wifely duties in bed. I have had this schedule for twelve years since I got married at the age of fifteen. He has threatened me with divorce if I make an attempt to use family planning”.

With a glint of pride in her eyes, she disclosed that,

“After I discussed the issue with some of my friends and market colleagues who had had similar experiences, I went ahead on my own and had a contraceptive fitted in my womb without the knowledge of my husband. I know that I should have told him and I do not like the idea that I have deceived him, but this could have cost me my life if I had continued to live like that. I was always tired and weak and if it were not for my children, I don’t know how I would have found the strength to carry on and make such a decision”.

The traditional African community plays an important role in the lives of members of the society or community (Adebayo 1996). Ba reinforces ideas of community and culture in her novel and exposes oppressive relationships that are sanctioned by myths and customs, like rigid sex-role socialisation practices which can be both advantageous and crippling to the women. Like my female participants, her protagonists attempt to achieve a sense of self worth in communities where they are viewed as men’s pliable possessions (Ba 1984). In the African Muslim woman’s experience according to Emenyonu (1990), fate is the collective will of the community and it is prescribed by the community. In a subjective and more crucial sense, the fate of each woman is ultimately determined by the extent to which she accepts or rejects that collective will; therefore the role of the support groups has been to make the collective will positive towards the women. Haja (Mrs) ‘Bah’, an honourable

Member of Parliament had this to say when I asked her how she saw the way forward for Muslim women in the country,

“It is only when and where the mobilisation of Muslim women is ‘politically’ required for the success of national development, will measures for the advancement of women succeed broadly. When that occurs, emancipation of women will be forwarded and hope and dignity will be restored therefore, mobilisation of women in the political process is the key to the advancement of women”.

5.3:3 Marriage: Arranged, Polygamy and Wife Inheritance

As one of the key themes that emerged during the study process, the participants all had strong views about marriage, as playing a vital role in the state of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. With a popular/notorious view that marriage as an institution has imposed a lot of limitations on the Sierra Leonean Muslim woman, a lot of women are profound critics of it being a cultural obligation of every adult woman. Even though against the norm and social prescription, Mrs ‘Bintu’, a divorced lawyer (group professional 1) insists,

“I don’t see marriage as a chain or something that can be forced to work. I believe that it is a mutual agreement over a lifetime. And if one of the partners is no longer satisfied and happy with the union, why should he or she remain? I am a lawyer and regardless of what people think, I let women know, especially my Muslim sisters that they have the right to initiate a break in the union if they feel that they are no longer comfortable in the marriage. What is the point in sticking in an unpleasant marriage? Even though considered extreme, I believe that the only female chance of independence and happiness is to reject marriage and motherhood”.

It was evident that the reasoning of Mrs 'Bintu' made her fellow participants visibly uncomfortable. In trying to bridge the difference in opinions, Capt. Mrs 'Fajor' addressed Mrs 'Bintu',

"I know that marriage is a personal thing and can sometimes be controversial by all standards but, I am from the generation of women that tries to make it work regardless of the odds against you. It has to be really extreme for any acceptance that the union can be annulled. So, one way of me dealing with this is to ask our sisters to persevere and make changes to their husbands where possible".

This is a 'normal' point of view and reaction amongst Sierra Leoneans, just as Abrahams (1978) confirmed that a Sierra Leonean woman is considered a social failure and a nonentity if she is not married. Marriage is seen as a cultural and moral obligation, and a wage for respectability, viewing unmarried women as 'loose with no self respect'. In typical patriarchal Sierra Leonean marriages, the wives are expected to be obedient and submissive mates, and to adhere to the total submission of her husband's authority. This in essence can be seen as an attempt to deny the woman all forms of power and autonomy.

According to Sierra Leonean Islamic customs, marriage is a relationship between two groups or families and not just two people. Even though the Islamic law dictates that women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent, patriarchal customary mores emphasize that a woman's consent in marriage is not generally thought to be necessary. She is obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents and the elders in the society and receive her husband from them even though he might be a complete stranger to her. In

present day Sierra Leone, this is still the norm with some families and ethnic tribes and the choice of a partner is exercised by parents on behalf of their daughters and sometimes their sons (Jackson 2004).

This often makes the women suppress their normal self expression and in the process, deny their humanity. Half of my participants who took part in the research study did not experience arranged or early marriage. They believed that this was as a result of their education and its influence on their parents and the elders of their families. They chose their partners themselves and got married in their own time. The other half of the participants had their marriages arranged for them by the elders in their families. They explained to me that they had mixed feelings about it. Some were happily married as they got to understand their spouses and start a family, whilst others thought that they would have made better choices for themselves. Mrs 'Ka', a civil servant (group 2 professional) explained that,

"Life is all about risks. It is sometimes better to marry a partner that your parents and elders choose for you as they would have done background checks on the man and his family to see that they are 'good people' and that there are no illnesses or curses that might affect their genes. But it is still a risk, as one can choose her own spouse who she thinks or believes is good for her but who ends up being a disappointment when they are married".

Mr 'Kama', an engineer (group 4) also confirmed that,

"I got married to my wife whilst I was a student abroad. My parents had arranged everything on my behalf and I met my wife for the first time when I picked her up from the airport when she came to join me. We had only seen photographs of ourselves. I guess my folks made the right choice for me because we have been married now for eighteen years, we have three kids and I think we are a happy family. I help with household chores whenever I can

and support her in looking after the children. Mutual respect and compromise has to be in existence for any partnership to be successful. I respect her as my wife and not my servant or nanny”.

In discussing marriage, the cultural pressures were continuously brought forward and highlighted by the participants. For example, the basis of marriage among Sierra Leoneans implies the transfer of a woman's fertility to the husband's family group. This is because there is a high premium placed on children and the continuity of lineage and as Fyle (1988) noted, it is one reason that has reduced the status of women, for them to be seen most times, as instruments for reproduction.

For some Sierra Leonean tribes like the Mendes, death or separation does not invalidate a marriage union and this rule therefore permits the inheritance of wives (Little 1967). A member of a man's family can inherit his wife or wives in the case of his death and if a wife dies, the husband can go back to her family and ask for another wife. Some of this is done without the knowledge or the consent of the wife or wives. This is because polygamy is a common phenomenon in the rural traditional Sierra Leonean society, and allows a man as many wives as he sees fit. Alie (1990) wrote that a man's wealth, possessions and social status are measured by the amount of wives, cattle, land and children that he owns.

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2002), polygamy is the practice of having more than one wife or husband at the same time. In the case of the prevailing

social practice of polygamy, the intention of Islamic law was not to condone, but to limit the practice, allowing it only in exceptional circumstances where it can prove to be in the best interest of the women involved (Jaward 1998). Polygamy was a prevalent practice before the emergence of Islam among many peoples: particularly among the Hebraic and the Arabs, the Slovak peoples from the areas of present day Russia, Estonia, Poland and the Czech Republic and also in pre-Islamic times by some Germanic and Saxonian peoples from Germany, England, Switzerland, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden (Radwan 2005).

The claim that Islam founded this trend is therefore groundless and polygamy continues to be practiced among a number of non-Muslim peoples in Africa and in Asia. Marriage in pre-Islam in the fifth and sixth centuries was permissible in boundless numbers, as it was in the Old Testament in the Bible (Gorgi and Ebtekar 1995). It is therefore believed that polygamy was one of the issues that Islam addressed through a graded legislation entailed by a set of conditions that eventually rendered it permissible on an exceptional basis or as a justifiable necessity at the time. Examination of Quranic verses shows that restriction to one wife is the guiding principle, whereas permissible polygamy is merely an exception in some necessary cases (Quran 4:3).

Looking at what Islam requires of matrimonial relation in the first place will clarify the stance of Islam in regards to polygamy. Islam sought to narrow

polygamy to the utmost and makes it restricted to a few cases; for example, if a wife is sterile and the spouse desires children or, if a wife is ill and afflicted by a disease that renders her unable to fulfil her matrimonial duties but still desires to pursue life with her husband. The husband in turn should not only be financially able, but should provide psychological and pedagogical care and show equity in his treatment of the wives. The Quran settles the issue of emotional justice as,

‘Ye are never able to be fair and just
As between women, even if it is
Your ardent desire; but turn not away
(From a woman) altogether’.
(Sura Al Nisaa Quran 4:129)

To justify polygamy from a cultural and traditional point of view, the principle of polygamy also made it possible for women to be legally married instead of being kept as mistresses, which was a taboo. Traditional laws inspired good morality, therefore widows and women who lost their husbands during wars were offered a respectable status in the community (Turabi 1991). In order therefore to find a protector for the wives and the children, the surviving men had to take more than one wife in order to protect and preserve the respectability of the women. The laws also provided the opportunity for their children to enjoy familial care, warmth, security and welfare, something they would have been otherwise deprived of. This provides a future for the families that were being threatened by poverty, misery and depravity to be safeguarded

under the shelter provided by a man, who is considered as the sole protector of the woman and the child (Radwan 2005).

Being seen logically as an insult to women, since not a single woman can accept sharing her husband with another woman, the Shariah or Islamic law sees it as absolutely necessary that the first wife consents to polygamy (Holy Quran 4:6). Justice demanded by Islam has diverse dimensions that relate to the most sensitive matters of marital life and some reservations from the Holy Quran state,

‘Lest ye decline to do justice
One is suffice’.
(Sura Al Nisaa: Quran 4:66)

In the traditional society, men take several wives and father many children for mainly economic reasons. Wives and children were necessary as helping hands and a form of support labour source to manage, sow and harvest the many fields and acres of farms (Fyfe 1979). The several wives of chiefs and traditional leaders also have the task of being hostesses to the many guests that visit the chiefs on a daily basis. As the quantum of work and expectations turn out to be very high, it is seen that one wife cannot successfully cope with the tasks.

In the Sierra Leonean setting, the Muslim women in the study have recognised equality in many aspects of marriage. Even though some women see polygamy as intolerable and dehumanising, some ‘victims’ of this phenomenon now view

it as being liberating rather than inhibiting (Katrak-Ketu 1987). Dr Mrs 'Jah', a medical chemist (group professional 2) justifies that,

"Since my husband took two other wives, I can now get involved in other things. I travel to different places for conferences and seminars. I have a lot of free time for myself as my children are now grown up and quite independent. I feel that this 'strange' situation has empowered me because I now have more free time, my career prospects have improved and basically, I value myself more as a woman, a mother and a professional".

A reason like this is why some women find polygamy as a blessing and a form of emancipation. It is seen that if their husbands marry other wives, they become a lot more independent, making in-roads of improvement in their lives, and embarking on business schemes, education and even travelling. This is made possible as a result of having co-wives who take care of the husband and all his needs. These all have implications on the research questions of the study, prompting answers and evidence to justify the study.

5.3:4 Bride Price

The bride price, dowry or mahr is a gift that is presented to a bride and her family by the prospective husband and his family when asking for her hand in marriage. It should be offered out of good will and with the conviction that it is her right (Sarwar 1984). This is seen as a kind of provision for her financial protection at the time of marriage. She has full right over this gift and it is neither transferable to her father nor her husband. Islam establishes the woman's right to ownership on anything she owns, whether she obtained it as a gift, through inheritance, through work or through investment.

In the Sierra Leonean Islamic custom, the dowry could be in the form of money, gold, cola nuts and even cattle, depending on the financial ability and status of the groom and the social status of the intended bride's family (Jalloh and Skinner 1997). The bride is given part of the dowry to start planning for family life. The concept of mahr and dowry is not an actual or symbolic price for the woman nor does it reflect the value of the woman, but it is a gift symbolising love and affection (Sultan 1995). In traditional Africa, it is based upon mutual agreement between the man and his bride, usually through her father or guardian. Islam emphasises the necessity of the dowry without stipulating its material value (Shariati 1991).

Because the male members of a bride's family gain benefits from these gifts, the worth of the gifts are haggled depending on the woman's background, her chastity, her beauty and her education, as these constitute her father's and her husband's patriarchal pride and wealth (Rafiee 2004). This is most times misconceived as an auction or the sale of the intended bride. This commercialisation of the process has made the dowry or bride price become a hurdle for the freedom of women as it is then perceived to give exclusive rights, including sexual rights, to the intending husband which essentially is a means of social control over the wife and the children she bears in marriage (Haddad and Esposito 2004). As 'Mammy Jatu' confirmed,

"My husband's family are sometimes just ridiculous in the way they see things. They claim an exclusive right to me, my children, and all that I own, despite working so hard to gain what I now have. The most reason that I am given is that, 'we own you, we paid for you, and everything in this house is our son's'".

I don't have too much say in important decisions regarding the children's schooling or welfare. Things definitely need to change as I cannot bear to imagine this same struggle for my children and grandchildren".

As was discussed by participants during the group sessions, because of the importance and emphasis on fertility and the preservation of lineage, a dowry must be paid. Otherwise, in the case where the dowry has not been paid, no matter how long or strong the relationship, the children are considered to belong to the wife's family and they carry her name. If a man dies after paying dowry and the woman later enters another relationship, the children will continue to belong to the deceased husband's family. 'Mr Kana' further explained,

"This is a reason why most times the family of the deceased is anxious that the young widow is taken over by the deceased's brother or his close relation, in order to keep the children within the family (socially and biologically)".

According to Islamic rules, a man is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, his children, and in some cases of his needy relatives, especially the females. This responsibility is neither waived nor reduced because of his wife's wealth or because of her access to any personal income gained from work, rent, profit or any legal means (Ibrahim 1997). Badawi (1980) also reiterates that a woman on the other hand, should be far more secure financially and far less burdened with any claims on her possessions. Her possessions before marriage do not transfer to her husband and she can even keep her maiden name if she chooses to. She has no obligation to spend on her family out of such properties or out of her income after marriage.

5.3:5 Motherhood and Fertility

With the sequential process of the payment of the bride-price followed by marriage, motherhood is the next ‘logical’ order expected in the Sierra Leone society. Motherhood is a very important and powerful institution in the Sierra Leonean society and like marriage, it is mainly an institution for the control of procreation. According to Steady (1975), Sierra Leonean families desire high fertility for ‘human capital’ and ‘social security’. This all important need for children has led to the institutionalisation of motherhood through fertility rites, taboos and beliefs. This is so because, as James (1991, p45) puts it, “Women can only validate their existence and prove their womanhood by bearing a child, as her power and social status is reflected in her children”. The institution of motherhood has responded to society’s needs, and ideologies have developed to support societal values.

Every Sierra Leonean Muslim woman is encouraged to marry and have children in order to express her womanhood in full. This is because African womanhood has been characterised as, “...that glorified niche carved out of the birth pangs that constitute every mother’s lasting joy” (Ojo-Ade 1989, p57). Motherhood has also acquired some religious significance, adding a significant amount of pressure on a man’s sacred duty towards his whole lineage. Oyewumi (2005) opines that failure to immortalise a man’s ancestors is a taboo and a shame that he cannot bear in society. As a result, infertility is associated only with women because the alternative is unthinkable. Being such a sensitive

subject, it was not a surprise that Corporal Mrs 'Sankoh', a police officer (group professional 2) broke down,

"I see myself as a victim of this unfair expectation. There is no worse misfortune than being childless. There is immense pressure on what is expected of women because a 'proper' woman is supposed to be a wife and then a mother. People believe that childbirth proves womanhood and that motherhood is a symbol of self fulfilment, just like physical prowess justifies manhood. There is therefore no worse misfortune for a Sierra Leonean woman than to be childless. I get pitied even by strangers when they get to know that I have no children and from my husband's family, I get blames of failure and inadequacy because they think that motherhood comes naturally to all 'good' women. I have even been warned by my in-laws that they would find another wife for my husband if I don't conceive very soon".

Barrenness and infertility are unaccepted in the Sierra Leonean society. The similarity of this trait is also seen in Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984), where because of the intolerance to infertility it is assumed that any woman can have children. The inability to produce children most times provokes physical assaults, verbal insults, repression and contempt in the husband, his family and society in general. Stratton (1994) also confirms that a woman's life is made a misery because, by social and cultural standards, she can only achieve some status through marriage and she can only become fulfilled through motherhood.

With the already founded and unfair pressures of fertility and motherhood, son preference is slotted in, making life more difficult for Sierra Leonean Muslim women. According to Jalloh and Skinner (1997), son preference has been a pan-cultural and international trait within strong patrilineal family systems. For Sierra Leonean Muslim women, not only are they pressured into having children, the birth of a son enhances their status and their authority in the

family. This is because it is seen that the mother has shown her ability to ensure the continuity of her husband's lineage.

Boys are generally considered to be more valuable than girls in the Sierra Leone society because they are believed to portray the virility of the father. They are also believed to infinitise the family lineage and this, according to Abraham (1978) is because of their potential roles in the economic and social support of the parents, inevitably leading to the success of the family line. Therefore without sons, any meaningful status evades the mother. Dated to pre-Islamic times, it was especially important to have sons because they were expected to defend their tribe, earn a living and support the other dependants of the tribe (Milton-Edwards 2004). Because they are considered to be more important than girls, boys are encouraged to get an education, to enrol into schools and to use their education to search for jobs, while the girls are being trained to be housewives and good mothers. Sons are expected to grow up as leaders in society and bring pride and fame to the family name (Katrak-Ketu 1987) while baby girls, usually not welcome, are seen as an economic liability and an honour risk in a society where honour is a prime concern.

The society limits knowledge and education for women beyond a narrow confine, making obstacles for them to broaden their horizons. This traditional system can be so patriarchal that in some communities, a wife's body is returned to her family on her death because she has no sons who would

immortalise her husband's family (Owusu 2000). According to Emenyonu (1990, p131),

“The female character is a facile lack-lustre human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she is not part of decision making neither as a daughter, nor a wife nor a mother even when the decisions directly affect her. Docility and complete sublimation of will is demanded and enacted from her”.

Umeh (1996, p175) predicted,

“The African woman, more so than the African man, is caught in a bind. In order to be liberated and fulfilled as a woman, she must renounce her African identity because of the inherent sexism of many traditional African societies. Or, if she wishes to cherish and affirm her ‘Africanness’ she must renounce her claims to feminine independence and self determination. Either way she stands to lose; either way she finds herself diminished, impoverished”.

This is saying that the African woman has to carry the burden of a ‘double yoke’: traditional and submissive wife and modern with a job to support the family, a permanent transition state between modernity and tradition.

5.3:6 Women's Status

With the analysis of traditions and cultures, mixed with a look at the interpretations of Islamic teachings regarding women, a discussion emerged on the status of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. As a consensus of the reactions of the interviewees and the participants of the group discussions, it is a known fact that typically, Sierra Leonean Muslim women, whether educated or not, are bullied by men who use tradition and cultural demands to stifle their growth (Alie 1990). With the agreement that Muslim women were not fairly treated,

was the litany of, *'If only I was a boy or a man...'* which often preceded the participants' reflections on the disadvantages of being a woman because even the modern educated Sierra Leonean man wants the ideal image of a wife, who is innocent, chaste and above all submissive. It also emerged from the proceeds that most times, men looked for women who are educated, but at a lesser and lower scale to them. It was aptly revealed during the study by the male participants in group (4) that the most desirable quality looked for in a traditional Sierra Leonean Muslim woman is passivity, and also expected to be quiet and submissive, a good cook, a good worker and a good mother who never disputes her husband's superiority (Skinner 1976). Sheikh 'Salim', a businessman (group 4) addressed his all male focus group,

"I have three wives. None of them are as educated as I am because if they are, there is a likelihood of them challenging my authority at some point. The second wife is the most educated of the three. She has a degree in Economics and she works in one of the local banks. The other two are in the provinces with their children, taking care of my other businesses. I don't expect that working or an education is an excuse not to function properly in the home. She is expected to cook my meals, care for the children and the home, and entertain when I have guests. I think I give her a lot of support, but that is mostly in finances as I don't see myself doing household chores. I consider that very unmanly".

'Mrs Noh', a teacher from Northern Sierra Leone (group professional1) recalled that,

"My uncle was the chief of the village and he always said that educating girls and women is a bad thing. Therefore, no girl was sent to school in the village until his death in the early eighties. He saw it that pursuing any form of study or holding a job will erode their traditional customs and affect the way girls carry out their essential social and sexual functions in their families. It was sheer luck for me to make an acquaintance with a catholic missionary nun who convinced my parents to send me to school and she promised to take care of all expenses. That was when I first stepped into a classroom at the age of twelve".

Subjection is seen as a cardinal principle and it is believed that women must be held by their protectors in a state of dependence. Even when Western educated, the Sierra Leonean Muslim woman is still expected to find a place in society by being docile, allowing herself to be trampled on and accepting traditional prescriptions on her way of life. The Sierra Leonean Muslim woman is therefore never free but is controlled throughout her life as a daughter, as a wife and then as a mother. This is because the culture dictates that at birth, a girl is owned by her father, and she changes masters when she moves from her father's life to be married off to her husband. This leads to the marginalisation of women in their husband's homes, where they are valued mainly as breeders and treated as minors. A wife loses her individuality completely when married and as a mother, her status is reflected from her children, giving reason for Emecheta's (1986) question, "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage..."? (p236)

5.3:7 Education as the Defining Force

As discussed in the theoretical chapter (2:7), the acquisition of education can be viewed as a defining perspective on the life of the Sierra Leonean Muslim woman. Throughout the process, one of the most suggested reasons for the peril of Muslim women in Sierra Leone is their lack of education. With the nationwide 70% illiteracy rate (Census Report 2004) of which Muslim women

form the bulk, all the participants in the interviews and group discussions expressed that the level of female education is an important indicator not only for raising the status of women in the society but also for increasing the ability of a country to use its human resources effectively for national development.

Haja (Mrs) 'Lari', a diplomat said during her interview,

"I think a major problem that we all face is the fact that culturally, our people see education for women and girls as a privilege and not as a right. Our women also have to believe in the struggle to go against these norms and strive to educate themselves and their girl children both in Islamic teachings and formal Western schooling for change to begin to happen. Sierra Leonean Muslim women would forever be dependent, downtrodden and invisible if the cycle is not broken. If we do not properly nurture our women who are the basis of education and upbringing, how can they foster a worthy and decent generation? I believe that the first issue that needs to be addressed in changing the norm and the culture is the education of the women".

Haja Mrs 'Abdai' an accountant from Group 1 insists that,

"Female education can contribute a lot to the building of a nation and it has a long term positive impact on development both at the family and national levels. An educated mother can herself show the light of education to her child, and thus contribute in alleviating illiteracy from the society. The government should put in place policies in order to eradicate this disease of illiteracy among our people".

Believing that religion is tied to education as well as to the mind and to reasoning, this emerging group of educated and enlightened women explained during the research process that education is obligatory to all Muslim men and women because Islam frowns on ignorance and illiteracy. *"Ignorant men will never be equal to the learned"* quoted Dr (Mrs) Nema from the Holy Quran. Because these women aspire to be wholly rounded in their education and

empowerment journey, their education in Islamic teachings enables them to see things as they should be.

“The Quran states education as a high priority for men as well as for women. It recommends an education based in Islam and on the dignity of what opens the mind to the realities of life, the exigencies of the universe and the relationship of man to the world and all things in it”,

quoted Haja (Mrs) ‘Lari’, a diplomat, from the Holy Quran during her interview. She insists that,

“If we want a generation which is scholarly, highly cultured, dynamic, active, healthy and intellectual, then serious work must be done on the parents, especially the women of the society, to train them and lift the limitations so that the next generation which they influence turns out a desirable one. On the other hand, the extent to which the targeted Muslim women can play their constructive role in the society is heavily dependent upon the prevailing socio-economic, political, educational and cultural conditions that they live under”.

An examination of the reasons and misconceptions about Islam’s attitude to women reveals not only justice but also an abundance of compassion for women. But how come Sierra Leonean Muslim women like many other women in different parts of the world are overworked and thrive so hard in looking after their husbands and children, all in the name of her responsibility? This was a question asked by the women themselves during the discussions. The situation of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, therefore buttress the fact that there are lots of mis-representations of Islamic laws and because of the lack of knowledge on the part of women, everything is twisted to the advantage of men. With the support group of educated professional Muslim women, members of the group are exploring the possibilities of making Muslim women, especially the uneducated, illiterate and grass root level women to

believe that it is their right to make decisions for themselves, that they have a right to some form of education and that they have a right to live a comfortable life with their children. Mrs 'Kroma', a government minister in her interview said,

"Illiteracy is what we need to fight, not just to empower Muslim women, but to combat social prejudices against them because the present day exigencies require that women take their places beside their men".

Another general consensus among all the participants of the research was that Muslim women constitute the bulk of the population that are on the lowest rung of the development ladder in Sierra Leone. This they believe is due to the fact that there is a high percentage of illiteracy among the Muslim population and women form the majority of this percentage (Census Report 2004). This uneven ratio disadvantages the women and makes them prone to poverty, abuse and eventually, unhappiness and dissatisfaction. The numerous tasks and burdens of the fifteen year civil war now show its toil on them, perpetuating the burdens of household responsibilities and the generation of income to upkeep their families had put them under great physical and mental stress thereby adversely affecting their output and performance toward self and national development.

With education and a will for change, the participants emphasise that if Muslim women want change, they need to be more adventurous and should be prepared to take chances to compete with men and their non-Muslim counterparts. (Haja) Mrs 'Riatu' expressed during her interview that,

“Our most important challenge is our self perception because we have to define our own freedom and our own autonomy. The impetus for change in Muslim women’s status has to come from Muslim women themselves. The group is helping them to be creative, not only in making babies and cakes but to increasingly find the confidence and strength to express the richness of their lives as women and as people”.

The participants agreed that Muslim women must be prepared to work as hard as any job requires and to act not only as role models but also as mentors who are willing to pull other women up with them as they climb the development ladder. They stressed the benefits of an education provided for illiterate women, how it augments their status and also expands their chances of getting office jobs, acquiring business skills, the ability to function well in society and the most important, according to Ahmed (1993), how it serves as a social security to lean back on when all else fails.

Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This thesis considers the experiences of an emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone, how they ‘fit’ into society and the impact they perceive that they are making in their society, in relation to religion, culture, education and the status of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. In the process, it considers how their roles as professional Muslim women are perceived by themselves and the bulk of uneducated Muslim women nationwide, and their potential to effect and impact social change in Muslim women’s lives in Sierra Leone. The thesis is built in the first instance upon the researcher’s first hand experience as an educated and professional Sierra Leonean Muslim woman. It considers the emerging phenomenon of educated Muslim women and explores how they perceive their personal empowerment and their views and experiences in identifying and attempting to tackle and overcome the burdens of social, cultural and religious patriarchy, oppression and exploitation. The thesis focuses on the women’s own perceptions of their development and potential impact, rather than seeking empirical data external to their perceptions and stories. Further research needs to focus on identifying such empirical data as any real impact becomes clearer and more possible to evidence in the future. Concentrating on the women’s stories and their awareness of the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women, this final chapter of the dissertation aims to provide answers to the

research questions and concludes with suggestions for further related research.

The main research questions have been,

Why is there a new phenomenon of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone?

How do these women fit in the Sierra Leonean social and cultural society?

What are they doing to impact and improve self development and self empowerment for Muslim women nationwide?

While the first two questions can be explored with a mixture of contextual, historical and cultural information as well as the perceptions of the research participants, the third question in particular relies upon the women's accounts of their development and their intentions to impact on broader change. To begin my research and to answer the above research questions, I took account of the possible milestones of this new phenomenon that could bridge the overall gap for Muslim women in Sierra Leone, and extensively consulted with books and research materials on the concepts of empowerment, feminism, women in Africa and the role of women in Islam. The focus of the study has been the phenomenon of the new emerging social sub group of educated and professional Muslim women, which has developed in the last thirty years as a result of access to Western education and schooling, and the adoption of Western cultures has played a great role in the emergence of the upcoming and fast growing society of highly educated professional, independent and assertive Muslim women in the last thirty years, who celebrate their religion and gender in the face of patriarchy. During the research, I looked at the transition that a sample of professional Muslim women have been making within the past three

decades, from obscure and invisible women to professionals in their own right. A group of these women consider themselves to be and aspire to be pioneers in advocating for social change, self empowerment and self development opportunities which will affect the lives more generally of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, and they intend to act as models and advocates using their educational, academic and professional success. Their intention to encourage improvement for the lives and achievements of Muslim women is focused on the uneducated, grass root level Muslim women who make up approximately fifty-sixty percent (50-60%) of the seventy-one percent (71%) total illiterate female population in Sierra Leone (Census Report 2004).

My research concerns the roles and expectations of successful educated professional Muslim women, who are few in number and who represent an almost invisible handful of Muslim women in high-placed, decision-making positions. These women have been selected because they are Muslims and because of their success in different spheres of the professional world as academics, lawyers, business people and government officials. The selection is made in the context of a higher representation of non-Muslim women in professional roles, and my awareness of the potential of qualified and capable Muslim women available for appointments. The potential of others to benefit from their example and the success of this minority of educated professional Muslim women gave me the inspiration and the impetus to make the research process successful.

This is a qualitative study which focuses on the perceptions and narrated experiences of the selected participants. Future research could collect empirical data, statistics and documentary evidence to add to the qualitative data collected from the participants acquired during the one to one interviews and the focus group discussions. The data collected through one to one discussions and focus groups is rich, personal and professional and has been possible to acquire because of the trust established between myself as researcher and the participants themselves, partly due to my own position of similarity to theirs, as an educated professional Muslim woman.

This is of significance to the originality of the study for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, the possession of the ability to demonstrate empathy with the participants, has likely made them more open in their response and contributions than they otherwise would have been (Barbour 2008), and secondly, the experience of being a professional Muslim woman myself has made it possible to be able to interpret and contextualise the research material from a unique perspective (Kleinman 2007). Using my personal perceptions and knowledge, mixed with the sharing of experiences, has created the information and awareness in the present study and this has resulted in the study having a greater tapestry of richness to its findings, than may have occurred in previous studies, where the research team had not directly experienced the lifestyles of the participants (Devault 1999).

In a bid to acknowledge and investigate the ways in which the new social sub group of professional Muslim women make an impact and improve self empowerment and self development by potentially bridging social gaps between the uneducated and the educated, the process of the research has resulted in my first hand experiences with the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL), the support group organisation which is an umbrella body for over fifty Muslim women's associations nationwide, with a diverse membership of over a thousand women of all age, ethnicity and social and educational background. Founded in 1993 by a group of professional Muslim women as a civil, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, it seemed the perfect entity to use because it was a representation of the entire cross section of Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

Through the conduct of interviews and focus group discussions with participants who are members of the group, I investigated their quest to impact and improve self development and self empowerment initially for their own achievements and, in relation to their acting as models and having the power to impact change, which might eventually feed into upward social mobility and an improved style of life for Muslim women nationwide. The research objective was to investigate why there was the emerging phenomenon, how they fit in the social and cultural Sierra Leonean society and what they are doing to impact and improve self development and self empowerment for themselves as

Muslim women and ultimately, it is hoped, Muslim women both professional and educated, and those who are uneducated nationwide, anticipating that this new trend grows, matures and develops into the emergence of more educated and professional Muslim women in the public arena.

In exploring these issues, I asked about and looked at the perceptions of the breakthrough strategies used by the emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women. These strategies derive from their experiences of being in transition from being oppressed and helpless to being liberated and independent. The first situation arises because of repressive customs and traditions like early marriage, polygamy, preference and prioritising of boys over girls etc, which dictate that women should be seen and not heard, their only role and purpose in life is to be domestic as a wife and a mother and that they should be subservient, submissive and passive. They have transitioned to being liberated, independent and empowered as a result of their advancement following the acquisition of higher education, and their use of this in gaining and retaining professional roles and the rights and power which accompany these roles. The study systematically analyses their perception of what they feel is needed to carry out such a developmental change.

In order to capture the substance of the emerging new social sub group of professional Muslim women and their support group system, I decided to involve myself with them, listen to their stories and observe their reactions as

they reflect on their personal journeys. It was evident through the responses and reactions of the interviews and focus groups that these ventures seem to be aspiring and attempting to eliminate inequalities and diminish the gap between men, non-Muslims and Muslim women in terms of high placed job opportunities and a significant acknowledgement of their opinions and views. The more I worked with these women, the more convinced I was that enquiring and investigating into issues related to gender and especially the changing positions of Sierra Leonean Muslim women was a useful contribution to knowledge as this information was not in the public domain..

To follow this agenda, I utilised a qualitative-constructivist and post positivist research methodology, based on the interpretation of data derived from inductive, qualitative research methods. Harding (1991) viewed that although a feminist study represents an independent body of knowledge, it can still use the traditional research tools in order to get the knowledge that it seeks. I was not testing a hypothesis but asking a research question. This involved exploring a set of perceptions and experiences. Experimental methods were clearly inappropriate in such an exploration of perceptions, and a large scale survey was also not possible, given the small numbers of the population who represent successful educated Muslim women. It was more appropriate and richer to engage in depth with the stories these women tell, and with their perceptions of their own experiences and impact. In order to ask about and gain information about the perceptions of the sub group of educated professional Sierra Leonean

Muslim women, I therefore decided that the inductive method using qualitative methods of interviews and focus groups would best serve my need to acquire and gain the knowledge that I seek.

According to Fernstermaker and West (2002), the qualitative method as evidenced in the study, is the most appropriate method to learn about the explicit as well as implicit outlooks of subjects. The conclusion therefore was that the qualitative-constructivist method was the most suitable as it allowed me to gain knowledge, find the truth as perceived by the participants and eventually share this with others in order to provide examples and models of success that others might benefit (Reinharz 1992). During the study, the process of interviews and focus groups became empowering facilities for the participants and myself and we became increasingly empowered and determined through appreciation, as the often harrowing as well as hilarious experiences that we could relate and empathise with, were narrated about personal journeys of enlightenment, emancipation and liberation. This overwhelming positive experience was expressed during the feedback sessions held, where each individual got to appreciate each other's story of their experiences and personal quest for change. These responses were evidenced in the reaction and expression of participants toward each other, praising each other's bravery and commitment in their attempt to clarify and focus on the experiences of educated professional Muslim women in their context in Sierra Leone.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) suggest that the creation of knowledge for women by women is a central element of feminist ideologies. The women in my sample share their stories and so build confidence and enrich each others' experiences. This has been a positive and rich outcome from the research project. What they report is not only their own stories but the ways in which they are beginning to work to impact change on the lives of others, some of which is done through the support group and the organisation of literacy and skills acquisition classes. With the support group strategy as a forum for instigating self empowerment and attempting to provide tools for self development change in the lives of fellow Muslim women, professional Muslim women through FOMWASAL attempt to produce knowledge and provide learning opportunities as a means of attaining sustainable personal and ultimately national growth. They provide adult literacy and numeracy classes for illiterate women and young adults who are not enrolled in any educational institutions, Quranic classes to improve and enhance their knowledge on the dictates of Islam, and organise workshops and seminars for dialogue and the dissemination of information on diverse subjects ranging from the expectations of Islam, to salient life issues of infant and maternal health, violence toward women and cultural restrictions faced by women in their communities.

The participants have suggested that it was seen that the unfortunate lack of knowledge on the part of many Muslim women has inhibited them to maximise

their potential in self empowerment and self development and the women involved are therefore using the educational facilities as key factor vehicles of social and economic change. These facilities were open locally to all Muslim women nationwide, who were interested and there is further evidence beyond the testimony of the participants that this happens because there were women in the 3rd support group (grassroots) who made use of these facilities and participated in these programmes.

Future research could document the existence of such classes and the perceived usefulness and effectiveness. In the current context this is not yet possible as there is a fundamental problem which is that, these records are not checked and archived. There is a big void and total absence of written and printed information with statistics. For future research some of this information can be found in the minutes of the organisations, but that is as far as it goes and the absence of formal data is a limitation on research. Additionally, it is important to remember that this is a largely oral culture, not least because of the illiteracy of the uneducated Muslim women, but also because of the African and Sierra Leonean heritage of oral culture more generally. There is a lot of emphasis put on oral and verbal mode of communication and the passing of information verbally but in an academic work or even with dealing with international organisations this does not suffice to help measure engagement and effectiveness. Hard evidence needs to be there and future research could collect this if and when accurate records exist. Future research could consult

FOMWASAL's programme of events, and concentrate on producing data of attendance related to religion in order to identify the participation rates and numbers of Muslim and Christian women.

To my knowledge this is the first piece of research to be carried out with professional educated Muslim women in Sierra Leone and focusing on their perceptions and the perceived impact on the lives of other Muslim women in present and future Sierra Leone. These women through FOMWASAL try to identify empowerment tools of knowledge and self development in a friendly and supportive atmosphere so as not only to reduce and eliminate poverty and oppression, but to promote economic independence and social progress. In portraying 'How' they fit in the Sierra Leonean social and cultural society, this was highlighted with the focus groups where a unique atmosphere developed within the groups, creating the evident promotion of knowledge through the narration of life experiences and the expression of emotions, thoughts, ideas and desires. It is evidenced by the contributions made by the participants in the study that there was an opportunity to improve on their self development and self empowerment strategies within the group and they made attempts to achieve insights and an empowered position regarding their encounters of struggles and frustrations as Muslim women in various spheres of their life.

Being with the participants and recording their views, I felt the need to reflect on my own personal journey by using myself as a case study and reliving and

expressing past experiences by writing, documenting and including personal experiences in the process (Murray 2002). This 'collage' (Chapter 4) aims to portray my life experiences as compared to what has obtained and has been evidenced in the proceeds of the research study (chapter 5), in the views of the participants. It made me recognise the special place that female researchers have in their research process and I believe that the case study can shed light on the research study by the expression of different experiences and give meaning to the fundamental views and experiences of the women studied.

As a woman conducting and investigating women through a feminist approach, based on a qualitative enquiry and on the other hand, my position as a Women's Studies graduate, a Muslim, a professional, a wife and mother, I built on my own views and outlook using a critical theoretical perspective. I made a commitment to focus on the women's points of view and their perceptions, which have been tirelessly revealed in the findings chapter. Smith and Smith (1981) observed that the responses were essential in order to surface, understand and reflect on dialogues so as to extend their empowerment knowledge in their bid to change the general views and perceptions about Muslim women in the Sierra Leone society.

The process was powerful and stimulating and became a 'personal reality check' which taught me to acknowledge the ever increasing pressure and the apparent unfairness of unequal opportunities in the job market and in their

social life faced by these women on a daily and regular basis. This is portrayed in the responses of participants during the interviews and the focus group discussions in chapter 5. It was also a confirmation that some traditions and cultures were better left unpractised because the acts, their interpretations and their implementations were the perceived causes of much distress, and consequently resulting in creating the feeling of 'unfulfillment' to Muslim women in Sierra Leone. Considering the strength and determination of the group of women who participated in this study, I had looked at the aims and objectives of their particular support group and noted the slow but apparent visible steady progress being made in terms of their 'visibility' and 'voice', partly enabled through participation and dialogue. As a result of doing this research, my ideas of the issues facing Muslim women in Sierra Leone have been challenged by the awareness and the reflective and constructive responses of the participants. This slightly diminished the overwhelming pessimism I felt before the start of the study, faced with the lack of organised data and published information on Sierra Leone and on Muslim women in Sierra Leone,

From my findings, it appears that the new emerging group of professional Muslim women is fast becoming a major agent of change for other professional women and the mass of uneducated grass-root Muslim women within Sierra Leonean society. Based on the responses of the participants of the focus group discussions, especially the third group which comprised of the illiterate and semi-literate grass-root Muslim women, professional Muslim women are

considered as role models who are mapping out a public identity and championing change, empowerment and development for a better life for Muslim women nationwide. As seen from the responses of the participants, the emerging social sub group is seen to advocate and provide empowerment and development opportunities and options for Muslim women nationwide, imploring them to realise their rights and explore fully their individual autonomies, referring to Haja Mrs 'Asim', a civil servant on page 188, advocating for equal opportunities to access education, high level jobs and political openings. As a result, this new phenomenon of Muslim women seem to demonstrate that the Islamic revival of educated Muslim women is a phenomenon that can contribute to new forms of women's agency in the public sphere, as an impact to improve self development and self empowerment for all Muslim women. Support groups are considered central to this effectiveness and the research found that the centre of the active responsiveness of the female participants to take part in the activities of the support groups is the urgent and strong need, drive and desire for change. The urgent need to make a 'positive' change in their lives motivated and inspired the will to move from one point to a better place or position with a higher status, providing an opportunity to be part of a social re-levelling process. This demonstrated the spirit to fight with the help and support of the women's established support group. The sisterhood and the collectivity of the support groups helps to resolve issues by connecting with factors that advance and elevate their status and avoiding those that halt their progress. The women who participated in the

research expressed that being members of support groups was an opportunity to make a transition to upgrade their lifestyle and thus make a statement of power.

Culley and Portuges (1985) insist that women can initiate change but real social change can occur in this situation when men change their attitude toward women and more importantly, they insist that it occurs when women change their attitude of passivity and carry the belief that their situation is not ordained to be that way, therefore implementing change in their lives. As a recommendation based on the conclusions drawn from the process of conducting the research and interpreting the data, I should like to argue that Muslim women in Sierra Leone have to work for and towards the desired change, and not rely on men to implement any change on their behalf. From the all male focus group (group 4), based on the mix of opinions and ideas regarding women, it is evidenced that the desired change can be effected with the help of men who are sympathetic to the cause of the women, and who give the women the necessary support that they need in terms of moral, financial and policy making aids, referring to Mr 'Kama' an engineer, (page 201) as opposed to the opinions of Dr 'Duya', a medical doctor on page 197.

From the dynamics of the study with the participants as sample, I deduced that the most important challenge to the Sierra Leonean Muslim woman, more than outside structures, is her own self-perceptions and the way she herself has to define her own freedom in perpetuating change. The contest was highlighted

in the research that some women play an indirect role in maintaining and perpetuating sexism in the shackles of their own negative outlook and self image, enhancing their lack of self determination and self confidence when they see and accept their roles as submissive and secondary to that of men in society. This seems to have been caused by centuries of the interiorisation of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy, and this makes her own reaction to objective problems self-defeating and self-crippling (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). As argued by the participants, most Muslim women educated or not, will normally hide behind men and 'take the back seat' in their households and not only that, they settle for insignificant job positions and are unlikely to chase decision-making jobs and they avoid proving their empowerment skills. They normally back out of these situations and positions on the pretext of 'too much work and family commitments' instead of taking hold of opportunities presented to them to anchor jobs and decision making positions, in order to implement change in attitudes, focus and life in general.

Mariama Ba like many other African women writers encourages women to change their social positions. This begins with a changed self image and sense of agency. In her novel *So Long a Letter* (1984), she calls upon women to see themselves as individuals with their own desires and ambitions that should be fulfilled, rather than as ciphers that sublimate personal needs and achieve social recognition or approval through the reflected achievements or status of their spouses, or their male offspring (Makuchi and Abbenyi 1997). Any such call

to change would need to be seen in context before it could begin to be realised. In the context of this research, there are clearly many barriers to change, but equally clearly a will that emerged and surfaced from the participants during the study was to develop a sense of self worth and agency.

My evidence is that the new emerging social sub group of Muslim women are attempting to make ground through education opportunities and sensitization, in influencing women nationwide to regain their political power, lost during colonial penetration, and to regain their autonomy to be able to retain discretion, make their own judgements and exercise choice between the options that come their way, emphasised by Haja Mrs 'Lari', a diplomat (page 215) and Haja Mrs 'Abdai', an accountant (page 215). Using Ba's novel as a relevant tool in the study emphasised to the participants that their experiences were not unique to them. The use of the novel was metamorphosed into a source of inspiration to encourage the women to be committed to changing the experiences of Sierra Leonean Muslim women from since the 1980s when the novel was published to a more recent, modern post millennium era.

It is not the function of the thesis to make recommendations, but to bring out and present findings from the study that can feed into recommendations and suggestions for change, some of which are sketched below. The active presence and participation of Muslim women in Sierra Leone, individually and collectively in the framework of non-governmental organisations (NGOS) and

grass-root organisations is required in order for active change to occur in terms of policy-making and planning for women's affairs. This ultimately leads to social development and national development because it makes women more aware to see and acknowledge their right to participate in decisions affecting themselves, their children and their livelihood.

From Holloway's (1992) point of view, the presence of the support groups also raises their awareness to contemplate, learn more and join in everyday issues and religious activities as a responsibility alongside men in the society. In other words, this can encourage Muslim women to be resistant to patriarchy and male dominated power by not compromising moral values and by not allowing themselves to be used by men. Because of the ways in which the study encouraged sisterhood and reflection in the focus groups on issues of identity, power and the position of Muslim women in Sierra Leonean society, the research study through feedback therefore enhanced and augmented the attempts made by the group of professional Muslim women to imagine and then pursue change. This change and intention to change is to provide the opportunity for the majority of grass-root and middle level, semi and uneducated Muslim women to make a transition and experience an upgrade in their status and position in society, illuminating a mechanism to empower disadvantaged Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

My conclusions, based on the present study, the findings that emerged from the discussions and analysis chapter and the personal case study, is that the new emerging group of professional Muslim women possess the energies and possibilities to engage a personal and interpersonal dynamics to effect social change that is recognised through self development and self empowerment missions. This is an emotionally complicated process which involves a variety of thoughts, hopes and aspirations, integrating the factors to facilitate and to turn or return the empowering process to the participating women. As of now there is an ongoing battle and quest to be heard about and known of in all the nooks and crannies of Sierra Leone, especially in the very remote rural areas where patriarchal traditional stifling practices are still so rife.

6.2 Influence of Professional Muslim Women & Lessons Learned

From the study, there are indications, as evidenced in the analysis chapter, that the support groups are making an impact on the lives of Muslim women and society as a whole. They are a group that people are gradually being made aware of through the publicity of their organised programmes, workshops and seminars through word of mouth, visual, audio and written media on the roles and obligations of Muslim women in society. From the reaction of participants in the study, this emerging social sub group are viewed by some men as troublemakers, while seen by women as an inspiration to Muslim women nationwide. For the purpose of the study, within the dynamics of the specific support group, there is a general consensus to ameliorate the status and

condition of Muslim women nationwide. The professional Muslim women perceive that by providing and giving their unfortunate and disadvantaged uneducated 'sisters' access to quality education which they have been deprived of, through scholarship bursaries and subsidised fees, it will be the tool according to Wadud (2006) which they need to help increase their earning capacity and make salient decisions in their everyday life. Major decisions like the determination of their family size and the improvement of their overall health and that of their family play a significant role in helping them to overcome traditional norms that currently prevent them from fully participating in the public life of their communities.

Education is the cornerstone and base of any society (Moghadam 2007) and because of its lasting influence, its results take years to manifest. It is an important and comprehensive element in the growth and development of any country. Literacy on the other hand according to Elliot (2007) is a powerful determinant of an individual's life choices and opportunities. The support groups of professional Muslim women are attempting to succeed in actioning the philosophy of Smith (1980) who wrote, "...turn your attention to knowledge and improvement; for knowledge is power and it is a significant symbol and cornerstone for development" (p4). The support group membership of the minority educated Muslim women encourage their uneducated majority counterparts to see education as providing a unique leadership that can give them the opportunity for self enhancement, the

opportunity to explore the world, learn new things and improve on their self development skills as individuals, mothers and wives and members of their communities. The group of professional Muslim women are advocating for Muslim women to have access to all social gifts of life within the framework of law, so that they can freely participate in social, economic and cultural activities. They are making attempts to manifest to women in remote and rural areas especially through a network of other women groups, by word of mouth, and by some media services, that with a greater access to education and with a more advanced knowledge and skills, they can elevate themselves and their status within their communities and within their families, giving them the opportunity and chance to economically enhance their businesses in agriculture and related works. The social sub group of educated professional Muslim women insist in their attempt to convince Muslim women nationwide that cooking and raising children are no longer the appropriate yardsticks to measure the status of women, but that they should view the saving grace for the liberation of Muslim women as the big 'E' of education, be it Islamic, historical or social. "Enough of the silence, enough of being somebody's appendage. It is time to find a voice, to claim space for ourselves, and to render ourselves visible. Let us vigorously go in search of education and be individuals in our own right" (Emecheta 1986, p98).

The consequences are seen during the study that Muslim women are gradually slowly beginning to claim and fulfil many of the roles and functions previously

held by men as politicians, Members of Parliament, diplomats, high level legal positions, directors, academics, principals and heads of institutions, bankers and army and police personnel. This is evident in the group of professional participants in my study, even though a small amount, who explained that they are thinking of themselves as individuals with a role to play in the development of their families, kinship groups and their communities, all of the places where men normally play the leading role. During the period of the research, the newly elected government of September 2007 appointed only seven (7) female Cabinet Ministers out of a total of forty five (45) positions with three (3) of the female ministers being Muslims as compared to the previous government (1996-2007) who had six (6) women as Cabinet Ministers out of a total of forty positions, and two (2) of these women were Muslims. This shows a 0.6% in total representation but a 9.5% increase in Muslim women's representation amongst the women ministers. Also, there were only sixteen (16) women who made it as Members of Parliament (MPs) out of one hundred and twenty-two (122) seats, with five (5) of these women being Muslims (Sierra Leone Government Gazette Statistics 2008 vol. 27).

From the findings, professional Muslim women are trying to find fulfilment both within and outside of their homes and their communities and they are trying to develop their own defences against male exploitation through equipping and maintaining the formation and development of a learned and lettered force of Muslim women, suggested Mrs 'Kroma', a government

minister on page 217. As a result of the gradual influences of the professional Muslim women's groups, there have been a significant number of women who are breaking away from customary patriarchal repressive laws and attempting to discover a self empowering and self developing life through education for themselves, their daughters, their sisters and their friends. My sample of female participants for the interviews and focus groups research are a guide to the group of women who advocate social change and attempts to breaking barriers. This new phenomenon of women who are 'discovering through education' is allowing them to 'find a voice', 'claim space for themselves' and 'render themselves visible' (Emenyonu 1987), advocating all the more to be seen as examples and role models for young Muslim girls and boys.

In advocating for a changed portrayal of Muslim women, the group of professional Muslim women believe that an accurate and just picture would recognise the labour that women put into the economy of their societies and their efforts in nurturing and educating their children. A self-defining image for Sierra Leonean Muslim women requires that they are given the chance and opportunity to prove to successfully combine motherhood, domesticity and career/professional life regardless of cultural and traditional barriers of just being homemakers and breeders. The group of women are advocating for their work as mothers and as wives in their homes and in their daily lives to be acknowledged as an impact and used as a tool to improve self empowerment and self development in their households (as nature's first teachers of morality,

knowledge, culture and tradition) to gradually change how men and children perceive gender roles, especially as they are crippling to women.

With the introduction of more adult education programmes and other viable vocational and technical alternatives in Freetown and in some of the rural towns and cities aimed at Muslim women, through the Ministry of Education in conjunction with and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like FOMWASAL, professional Sierra Leonean Muslim women are urging the uneducated mass of Muslim women to defy the odds and re-adapt themselves to make the best of an unfortunate situation. This is unfortunate in the sense that if there was the initial provision of these facilities, the status of Muslim women in Sierra Leone would not be in such a dire state. During the study, I could sense an admiration and a strong aspiration from the third focus group of illiterate/semi-literate women for the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women. As it emerged during the study, there is a vivid expression of emulation, which clarifies that there is a lot of pressure put on this new social sub group of professional Muslim women to effectively help change the lives of their fellow Muslim women, and even highly utopic suggestions to facilitate and breed a new society altogether of Muslim women who are marketable in terms of job and employment, and who are geared towards autonomy and economic progression. With these in mind, FOMWASAL, the support group of the study organises basic education classes for women and girls within the different associations that form its nationwide

membership and advocates through seminars and the media for the government to integrate Islamic and Quranic studies into mainstream education same as Christian and Bible religious knowledge. Quranic and Islamic studies have gradually formed part of the WAEC (West African Examinations Council) school curriculum and students who opt for these subjects are now examined for a formal qualification. These subjects have also been encompassed in teacher training colleges and there were proposals to include them in the curriculum of the two universities (University of Sierra Leone and Njala University) and to develop a department of Quranic and Islamic studies. FOMWASAL also gives sponsorship to the women associations for the organisation of any development programmes for their members and other Muslim women, writes proposals for the funding of more Islamic schools and colleges, and donates scholarship grants to girls and women to aid financial constraints in their search for education and empowerment.

6.3 Development of Sierra Leonean Muslim Women

Even though the participants in the study face many social limitations as portrayed in the research, they showed their determination to aim and slowly rise above most of the social and cultural structures imposed upon them by the male dominated society with the help of support systems like counselling and sisterhood support provided the support groups formed by professional Muslim women. Viewing themselves as strong, effective and successful individuals with an ongoing arduous task for aspiring change, the transition is seen as a

challenge of tradition and subjugation versus modernity and emancipation, and ignorance and illiteracy versus knowledge and education in the bid to lift the majority of Muslim women from their state of powerlessness to one of independence, autonomy and self-fulfilment (Gardiner 2002). This challenge and transition can promise success if the women exercise their collective power as daughters, wives and mothers through the help of the liberating force of education and economic activities.

Western ideologies introduced by colonialism have in a paradoxical manner grossly affected the female position in Africa today. Modernisation has weakened pre-colonial and traditional bonds while Western education has emancipated the African woman, giving her some power of choices and initiatives (Hogan 2000). Western education has also enabled the African woman to widen her knowledge, which inevitably enhances opportunities for jobs and which makes her therefore become less dependent on the male members of her family (Chukukere 1995). The emergence of the new social sub group of professional Muslim women shows that the acquisition of education deeply affects and influences the growth and progress of culture through the personal changes it brings about. In fact, through the extent of participation in economical, social, cultural and political activities, its influence on beneficiaries play a fundamental role in the transformation of the society they live in.

In the socio-economic context of Sierra Leone, basic literary and numeracy education for women is more than necessary to enable them to be aware of options open to them in order to empower themselves to fight against social injustices. The establishment of more elementary, primary and secondary education systems, local colleges and universities and adult education institutions for vocational and technical education, make it possible for more women and girls to receive some form of Western education (Adebayo 1996). With the ongoing proposals from support groups of professional Muslim women like FOMWASAL in lobbying with the government of the day to provide free and easy access to these institutions through Government subsidies and private bursaries, Sierra Leonean women especially Muslim women are more likely to hold professional jobs, giving them economic power and some form of autonomy and independence, shaping an alternative course to a future society. Using Aissatou, one of the protagonists in Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1984) is a fine example of the calibre of educated women, who are independent and assertive intellectuals, and whose ideas about women's roles transcend the age old prescribed gender roles of child breeding, child rearing and being a good passive wife.

In order to survive in the patriarchal environment that they live in, professional Sierra Leonean Muslim women are trying to be courageous, independent, self determined, ambitious and assertive as their success and liberation depend on these qualities. The emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women

want to believe that they are aspiring to be in the process of nurturing competent generations and they are attempting to encourage and motivate their husbands to the forefront of acknowledgement and respectful acts.

According to government statistics, in the past decade, there has been significant increase in the number of girls enrolled in primary and secondary schools with a gross enrolment ratio of 93.3/111.1 - girls/boys per 100 (S/L Govt. Gazette 2008). It is believed to be the effect and result of an increasing vibrant awareness of the advantages of education rallied by various women's groups. Income generating activities like petty trading and fast food 'cooking' stalls have become widespread and popular among grass-root level semi/non-literate women, effectively showing the advantages of adult education literacy and numeracy classes. This supports the idea that young Muslim women are preparing to use opportunities open to them to solve their ongoing struggles for financial independence, as a strategy for self reliance and independence. They have become realists and now have no illusions about the sheer necessity for survival in a fast competitive global market. This motivation is not just to be interpreted in Western feminist terms, but as a fact derived from the outcome of the study.

As a result of the initiatives brought forward by the groups of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone, Muslim women are beginning to see the need to engage themselves in training, self and interpersonal skills development

programmes and adult education programmes. They now take steps to encourage their young daughters, sisters and friends to enrol into institutions which provide these services. It also surfaced during the study that with the limited resources available to them, the support groups of professional Muslim women try to provide some funding and scholarships for school going Muslim girls through various partnerships with some local and international organisations, to provide funding for orphans, needy and very poor children, by merit both in the Western Area and in the provinces, divided for primary, secondary and tertiary education. In their perseverance to change the status of Muslim women, the groups also make available micro-credit facilities in the form of loans, as a form of financial support scheme to enable grass-root uneducated women to start their own small businesses. This serves as a source of strength and a means by which the women are able to realise their dream of elevation.

“The curtain separating the worlds of men and women is slowly opening throughout the traditional and more so Muslim world, a gradual process brought by necessities of survival and the intrusion of external cultural influences”

(Ali 2008).

As a cue from the above statement, the research concludes and shows evidences that Sierra Leonean Muslim women want to gain strength and hope to gradually triumph in the uneven playing field, and achieve things in their lives not only because they are the wives of men or the mothers of sons, but because they are valued members of their society, outstanding as breadwinners,

teachers, farmers, nurses and politicians. Women are the nation's primary fundamental root from which all grows and blossoms and, Sierra Leonean Muslim women want to be reborn to make decisions through reason and choice. Through the emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women, they are encouraging Muslim women to take a keener interest in the future of their girl children and in the destiny of their country. The new strides against the background that held them back suggests a gradual realisation and deep seated awareness that these women are not weak, passive and in need of male protection, but they want to be the opposite; they aspire to be a force to be reckoned with, building strength and courage for requiring a greater counterforce to suppress their capacity for resistance.

Women are the pillars for any sustainable development process in Sierra Leone (Steady 2001) and since they are in the majority, they can make a very significant economic and social contribution towards the development of the country. Theoretically, it is therefore a precondition for the overall social and economic development of the country to be contributed by the women side by side with the men. In light of the study it became evident that Muslim women need to come forward more willingly to occupy and to support those in decision making positions in the public arena in order for them to make a greater impact. More needs to be done to get discriminatory laws amended and to influence the modification and change of cultural and religious traditions and customs that hold women back from achieving their full potential as free

human beings. This would make them more visible and audible elements in the society, forcing the government to integrate them into development at every level so that they have the chance and opportunity to show what they can offer.

It is my belief that black, African and especially Muslim women need to reunite and re-examine the way history has portrayed them. In fighting against all patriarchal forces and striving for the absence of oppression, they should adhere to one another and share a common culture, heritage and experience while fostering relations of equality and reciprocity of understanding. Women are the conveyors and transformers of the values acknowledged by society and the professional Sierra Leonean Muslim women want to make it their role to shape the social and political destiny of their fellow Muslim 'sisters', endeavouring to enhance self development and self empowerment strategies with the full participation of Muslim women, which would eventually result in the national development process as contributors and as beneficiaries.

Because of this, their voices as individuals and as members of women's organisations are beginning to be heard. One of their greatest contributions discovered during the study has been to insist that their values, opinions and objectives be respected and used as the basis for development initiatives. My quest was to be able to extract and bring out the feelings, opinions and issues of these phenomenal and unique women, their journey of learning, self empowerment, self development and liberation, and their ongoing battle to

institute the process of change and choice for the thousands of Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

At the end of the study, conceptualising and putting into perspective the proceeds of the research, I suggest that as a result of their continuing empowerment process, many Sierra Leonean Muslim women now aim to acquire the best of both worlds where they play the primary accepted role as traditional mother and wife, and have a successful career or vocation outside their home. It is hoped that the information acquired from the interviews and focus group discussions will be used to help bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern. This is so that traditionally skilled women can be helped and taught to integrate new and modern ideas and techniques into their lives to make life easier and more fulfilling and also complement the formal education system with traditional based education so as not to lose some of the cultures and customs. .

The research process has discovered or uncovered the quest of some Sierra Leonean Muslim women to want equality, respect and the right to participate in all development activities so as to be able to live their lives productively and with dignity. They voice out through the support groups and their organised programmes, imploring the government to be committed to the provision of all necessary means, including appropriate legislation to enhance their scientific, educational, social and political capacities in order to enable them to have an

intellectual, logical and moral participation in the progress of the Sierra Leonean society. Expanding educational opportunities, the labour market, economic opportunities, the making and enforcing of women centred legislations and promoting an understanding of the needs and assertions to women's rights and development of life skills are all attributes recommended by the new social sub group of professional Muslim women for the changed status of the bulk of disadvantaged Muslim women in Sierra Leone..

From the findings of the interviews and focus group discussions, the support groups have formulated strategies to combat the unequal balance between the status of men and that of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. The provision of adult literacy and numeracy classes as a complement to academic institutions and the provision of vocational schools as viable alternatives now play a major role in transforming would-be dependents into useful and highly productive members of society and also make the bulk of the Muslim womenfolk susceptible for progress.

6.4 Research Limitations, Further Research and Possible Extension

It has been outside the scope of this doctoral dissertation to fully investigate the situation and experiences of a wide range of Muslim women in Sierra Leone and explore possible and plausible options that could be adopted. All throughout this research journey, I encountered many difficulties in accessing

proper, authentic and up to date data on Sierra Leone. The lack of organised and accurate data and sometimes non-existence of formal information and written or printed data on and about Sierra Leone was one of the reasons that inspired me to conduct a research study on Muslim women. Researchers and writers hold the view that writing about women's aspects and perspectives, increases public awareness and more women are encouraged to join the process of writing, and thereby help produce a meaningful knowledge for other women and the society as a whole (Evans, Davies and Lorber 2006).

During the ten year civil war, libraries and the archive storage centres were burnt down and destroyed with no replacement to lost data and information. There is also the culture of verbal/oral communication that seems to take precedence over written/printed information and the preservation of keeping records, where there is no documentation to substantiate or back any statistics, data or information. Some of the information acquired have been anecdotal and also have also been acquired through the research process of interviews and the focus group discussions. Being so passionate about the study and the emergence of the new social sub group of professional Muslim women and their impact on the Muslim populace nationwide, and being so involved and in close contact with the participants of the study, I believe that some lapse of objectivity might weave its way in my portrayal and expression of my judgements, where my own perspectives might colour what I see or say. There is a fertile space and a huge void for research on Sierra Leone, from all angles

and spheres: social, religious, historical, political, economical/financial and cultural. The economic situation makes it dire and extremely difficult for academics in Sierra Leone to embark on research because of logistic and financial hurdles, very large classes with little or no infrastructural provisions for teaching and assessments, no electricity supply, lack of local or national printers and publishers, are being some salient reasons for the backward state of formal/printed information in the country. With the recent fifteen year civil war, recently published as well as obsolete materials were destroyed when libraries, ministries, archives, and even the law court were burnt down. In present day Sierra Leone, instead of research and publishing, there is a stronger sense of survival reigning in everyone's mind, especially the academics. I was only able to deal with a select sample of the group due to restrictions but I am hoping that the situation improves so that ample research and consultancies get underway for Sierra Leone to reclaim its past glories and impact upon self development and self empowerment of women in Sierra Leone, especially Muslim women.

In the changing context of Sierra Leone, the potential agency and change among educated Muslim women is very real. This study has managed to identify and explore some of the issues and developments of a group of educated Muslim women who themselves are a focus of this study and whose perceptions and stories form the qualitative data. Combined with an involvement in support groups, the educated professional women in this sample

are trying to develop a positive self image and agency mapping the ways forward and leading to positive change, which affects not only their own lives but also the lives of disadvantaged women and men, which change can help move toward the path of breaking gender and power barriers in Sierra Leone society. This could lead towards further empowerment and equality for the majority of Muslim women, making an avenue to find their voice and claim their space within society. There is much opportunity for future research identifying and clarifying changes and improvements in the lives of Muslim women in Sierra Leone. It is hoped that this study can contribute towards information sharing of positive examples, successful stories and strategies for the support, change and future success of both professional educated and as yet uneducated Muslim women in Sierra Leone society.

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Appendix 1

Chronological Chain of Important Events in Sierra Leone's History

1462 – Pedro Da Cintra founded Sierra Leone.

1787 – British founded the Province of Freedom (Freetown) as home to freed slaves.

1804 - Arrival of Protestant Missionaries.

1808 - Freetown became a British Crown Colony.

1827 – Establishment of Fourah Bay College, the first European styled university in West Africa.

1896 – Interior gained British Protectorate Status.

1961 – Sierra Leone gained independence.

2002 – Declaration of the official end of the ten year civil war.

Appendix 2

Profiles of Research Participants

Interviews

- 1) Ambassador Haja (Mrs) 'Lari': Sierra Leone's first and only Muslim female Head of Mission. Late 50's, married with three children, post graduates. She is an educationist and has been in the education/academic arena for over thirty five years. She is a member of different boards of education and social institutions and has been the First Muslim female Deputy Mayor of the Freetown Municipality. Awarded by the American Trust, the World's Who's Who in the world of women and education in the early 1990's. Degree, professional qualifications. Founding member and former Secretary-General of FOMWASAL. Creole.

- 2) Dr (Mrs) 'Say': Academic and former Government Minister, late 50s, widowed with three children, qualified professionals. First Chairperson of the Sierra Leone Advisory Council, responsible for democracy and nationalism, former Faculty Dean and Head of Department in the University. PhD holder. Temne.

- 3) Dr (Mrs) 'Nema': Business Executive and Gender Consultant. Founder and Coordinator of a women's group. Late 50s, PhD holder, divorced with two children, qualified professionals. Former Civil servant and teacher. PhD holder. Creole.

- 4) Haja (Mrs) 'Riat': Retired Senior Central Bank personnel and Business Consultant, married with two children, graduates, Degree and professional qualifications. Founding member and former Amira (President) of FOMWASAL. Mid 60s. Temne.
- 5) Mrs 'Shineh': Supreme Court Judge, widow with one child, postgraduate, professional. Postgraduate and professional qualified. early 60s. Lebanese/Temne.
- 6) Mrs 'Kroma': Government Minister, Former Insurance Broker, married with six children, qualified professionals. Early 60s, professional qualified, Limba.
- 7) Haja (Mrs) 'Asim': Senior Civil Servant, married with three children, qualified professionals, mid 60s. Degree holder, Founding member and Public Relations Officer, FOMWASAL. Creole.
- 8) Haja (Mrs) 'Bah': Member of Parliament, married with three children, graduate and university level, early 50s. Former Insurance Broker, former Government Minister. Founding member FOMWASAL, Vocational and Technical Qualifications. Creole.

Focus Groups

Group 1:

Mrs ‘Ablah’ (Haja): Accountant, married with three children, qualified professionals, early 60s, Founding member and Social Secretary FOMWASAL, Degree and professional qualified. Creole.

Mrs ‘Bintu’: Lawyer, divorced with three children, graduate and school level. Mid 40s, Postgraduate, Creole.

Capt. Haja (Mrs) ‘Fajor’: Retired Army Midwife, married with four children, professionals. Early 60s, Professional qualified, only Muslim woman at that rank, Temne.

Mrs ‘Noh’: Senior Teacher, married with no child, late 30s, degree and professional qualified, Mende.

Group 2:

Dr (Mrs) ‘Jah’: Medical Chemist and Consultant. Married with four children, graduate and university level. Runs biggest medical laboratory in Freetown as family business. PhD holder, professional qualifications. Early 50s. Madingo

Mrs ‘Turay’: Seamstress/Tailor, unmarried with one child, postgraduate. Late 50s, graduate and professional qualified, Madingo.

Miss 'Kadie': Secretary in Engineering Company, unmarried with no child, late 30s, professional qualified, Temne.

Corporal Officer (Mrs) 'Sankoh': Police Officer, married with two children (university and college level). Early 40s, graduate and professional qualified, Temne.

Group 3:

Mrs 'Umu': Housewife, married with five children, school going. Late 40s, no formal schooling, Temne.

Mrs 'Sama': Vegetable and Fruits Farmer/Seller, married with six children, school going and apprenticeship. Early 50s, junior secondary school level, Limba.

Mrs 'Adama': Fishmonger, divorced with six children, school going. Late 20s, no formal schooling, Limba from East.

Mammy 'Jatu': Domestic Help, married with nine children, apprenticeship and college level. Late 60s, primary school level, Temne.

Group 4:

Mr 'Kana' (Alhaji): Engineer, married with four children, school and university level. Degree holder and professional qualified, late 50s, Creole.

Dr 'Duya': Medical Doctor (GP), married with two children, college and university level. Late 50s, Limba.

Chief 'Rann': Tribal Chief (Community and Religious Leader), married with four wives and seventeen children, school, college and university level. Primary school education, mid 60s, Temne.

Sheikh 'Salim': Businessman, married with three wives and twelve children, school, graduate and university level. Post graduate, late 60s, Fulani.

Appendix 3

Question Schedule and Sample Questions for Interviews and Focus Groups

- 1) Please introduce your-self, giving details of your name, age, educational background, profession, marital status, number of children, their age and education, tribe/ethnic group and any other relevant details.
- 2) What does it mean for you to be a Muslim? Do you understand the concepts and teachings of Islam?
- 3) Do they feel restricted because of Islam in terms of what you can or cannot do?
- 4) What do you make of life as a(n) (educated) Muslim wo(man) in Sierra Leone?
- 5) How do you see the status on Muslim women in Sierra Leone in terms of literacy, health, economic independence, social standing, discrimination and domestic violence?
- 6) Do you think you are personally making an impact in the lives of the grass-root women of whom more than half are Muslims? Do you think that as members of support groups that you are being positive and successful role models to these women especially the young girls, spurring them to go against the odds and succeed in education as qualified professionals, as wives and as mothers?

- 7) What is your opinion about Sierra Leonean culture and tradition? How do you relate to customs like polygamy, wife inheritance, fertility, son preference and so on?
- 8) Do you think that you enjoy equal rights, opportunities and freedom same as with your (fe)male counterparts or do you feel that there is discrimination against (wo)men and more specifically, Muslim (wo)men?
- 9) As a professional who works outside the home how do you cope with domestic and household chores and what arrangements do you make for caring and supervising your children?
- 10) With the mixing of cultural beliefs and religion, do you think that Muslim women should be more educated and especially in Islamic jurisprudence so that they know their roles and their rights?
- 11) How do you envisage the situation of Muslim women in the next decade or so?
- 12) Is there a possibility that Sierra Leone can have a Muslim woman as Head of State or as Vice-President?
- 13) What do you see as the way forward? What suggestions or ideas can you put forward to implement change?
- 14) Do you relate at all with characters in Mariam Ba's *So Long a Letter*?

As the interviews and focus groups unfolded, questions were changed or added accordingly. These questions served primarily to inform the direction and purpose of the interviews and group discussions.

Appendix 4

FOMWASAL CONSTITUTION

PREAMBLE

The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL) is an Islamic Women's Association serving as an umbrella organization for Muslim women's 'jamaats', organizations and groups in Sierra Leone, was established in January 1994 in response to the need for collective initiatives and actions for the overall advancement of Muslim women.

VISION

The vision of **FOMWASAL** is the empowerment of Muslim women spiritually, economically and socially through education.

MISSION

To support **FOMWASAL** members through resource mobilization, education, awareness creation and information.

ARTICLE 1 - NAME AND STATUS OF ORGANISATION

This Association shall be called '**THE FEDERATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS IN SIERRA LEONE (FOMWASAL)**'.

FOMWASAL is an Islamic Women's Association serving as an umbrella organization for Muslim Women's Jamaats, Organizations and Groups in Sierra Leone. It is non-political, voluntary, charitable and non-profit making.

The Association shall be independent and will acquire funds and assets for its operations and shall not be for the personal benefit of its members, provided however that this does not prevent the Association from paying such individuals reasonable compensation for services rendered or expenses incurred on its behalf.

HEADQUARTER

The Headquarter shall be in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

ARTICLE 2 - AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- a. To educate Muslim women of their rights, duties and privileges in practising their religion.
- b. To create an awareness amongst Muslim women to improve on various facets of deprivation.

- c. To promote and propagate the cause of Islam and spread the 'message of the Holy Quran'.
- d. To initiate the involvement of Muslim women in income generation activities while at the same time maintaining and upholding the ideas, principles and virtues of Islam.
- e. To initiate programmes designed to improve both the health of women and children from infancy.
- f. To establish a common forum for all Muslim women for their social interactions.
- g. To co-operate with other National or International and non Islamic Associations or Organizations in all legitimate activities.
- h. To assist in coordinating the activities of other Muslim Women's Associations or Organizations or groups in pursuance of the aims and objectives of this Federation.

ARTICLE 3 – MEMBERSHIP

The membership of this Federation shall be of three categories and shall be opened to all Muslim Women's Associations and Organizations in Sierra Leone as well as all Muslim women who have attained the age of 18 years.

To become a member, the individual forwards a letter of application to the National/Branch Executive who in turn refers the matter to a Branch general meeting where recommendations are made for selection of the proposed member.

a. FOUNDER MEMBERS

These are the Muslim women who actively and effectively participated in the initiation and formation of this Federation and they are the life members of the National Executive Body of the Federation.

A founder member shall not, in any way, be prejudiced by the fact that she is a member of the National Executive Body from holding any office in that Body if duly elected or properly appointed to the office. All Founder Members shall be liable to pay the prescribed annual subscriptions as and when due to the Federation.

b. ORDINARY MEMBERS:

This category shall be opened to all Muslim Women's Associations and Organizations as well as all Muslim Women in Sierra Leone after approval by the National Executive Body of application for membership and on payment of the prescribed enrollment fees and the initial annual subscription per member. All subsequent subscriptions shall be paid as and when due the federation.

c. ASSOCIATE MEMBERS:

This category shall be bestowed on Muslim women and men that have contributed outstandingly towards the overall development of the Federation. They shall not be liable to pay either the enrolment fees or annual subscription. Such members shall have the right to attend general meetings, but not to vote or be voted for.

ARTICLE 4 FEES AND SUBSCRIPTIONS:

Fees and subscription shall be determined by the National Executive body and reviewed at the Bi-annual General Meetings.

Individuals and Organizations wishing to join FOMWASAL shall pay the prescribed registration fee after approval of application of members by the National Executive Body.

Individual members and organizations shall also pay yearly/monthly subscriptions. Members whose subscriptions are one year in arrears shall have their rights to speak, vote and be voted at meetings suspended until they have made good their arrears. Only paid up members will enjoy the full benefit of the association as prescribed by the constitution.

ARTICLE 5 - ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE FEDERATION

- A. i. The Federation shall be established throughout the Republic of Sierra Leone, which for the purposes of the Federation, shall be divided into District Branches.
- ii. In each District there shall be a DISTRICT branch, which shall be named after the Federation with additional words describing the particular District, for example, "FEDERATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS IN SIERRA LEONE ("FOMWASAL"), Bo District Branch".
- B. The Federation shall be structured as follows:
 - a. General Assembly
 - b. The National Executive Body
 - c. The National Secretariat
 - d. The Regional and District Branches

ARTICLE 6 - THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE BODY

Composition: This body shall be the governing arm of the Federation and shall consist of not less than 3 and not more than 13 members, and shall include:

- a. The Amira (i.e. the Leader)
- b. Four (4) Regional Naibatu Amiras (i.e. four deputy leaders)
- c. National General Secretary

- d. National Treasurer
- e. 3 Life Members at any one time
- f. Advisers (not more than 3 such members)

ARTICLE 7 - POWERS AND FUNCTIONS OF THE NATIONAL EXECUTIVE BODY

This Body shall have the following powers and functions:

NATIONAL AMIRA

1. Serves as Leader of the Federation.
2. Works with other members of the National Executive to set up policy and to do strategic planning.
3. Chairs meetings of the General Assembly and National Executive after developing the agenda with the General Secretary.
4. Appoints and oversees the Chairpersons of committees in consultations with other members of the National Executive.
5. Organizes as and when necessary the formation and work of the District Branches in consultations with the Naibatu Amiras of the various Regions.
6. Monitors financial planning and financial reports and oversees the preparation of annual budgets.
7. Plays a leading role in resource mobilization and fund raising activities.
8. Ensures linkages and networking between the Federation and other organizations/associations with similar mission as FOMWASAL.
9. Liaises between FOMWASAL and the public.
10. Enforces and protects the constitution of the Federation.
11. Evaluates annually the performance of the Federation in achieving its mission in consultations with other members of the National Executive.

NAIBAUT AMIRAS

1. Perform the functions of the National Amira at Regional level.
2. The Western Region Naibatu Amira deputizes the National Amira in her absence.
3. Coordinate the work of the Branches and monitor Provincial and Branch projects including the preparation of annual budgets and financial statements.
4. Ensure the regular submission of Branch reports and financial statements to the National General Secretary and National Treasurer respectively for onward transmission to the National Amira.
5. Perform other functions as assigned by the National Amira.

THE NATIONAL SECRETARY

1. Maintains and ensures effective management of records (reports, minutes, etc.) of the National Executive and the Federation as a whole.

2. Manages minutes of National Executive meetings and ensures that minutes are distributed to members shortly after each meeting.
3. Is sufficiently familiar with legal documents (constitution and any other).
4. Summons meetings with the directive of the Amira.
5. Custodian of all FOMWASAL properties (real ad personal)
6. Coordinates resource mobilization activities and other outreach programmes.
7. Receives action plans, quarterly reports and meeting schedule from branches, out of which a national action plan and report are prepared.
8. Supervises the secretariat and performs other functions that may be required by the National Amira.

THE NATIONAL TREASURER

1. Manages the finances of the Federation and prepares annual budget and financial reports with the approval of the National Executive.
2. Ensures development and National Executive review of financial policies and procedures which will be approved by the National Executive.
3. Receives financial reports from Branch Treasurers and discusses such reports with the National Executive at its quarterly meetings for onward transmission to the General Assembly.
4. Takes a lead in all fundraising activities with the assistance of branch treasurers and chairpersons of fund raising committees.

FOUNDER MEMBERS

1. Assist the National Executive in policy making, outreach programmes, networking/linkages and information sharing.
2. Provide support to the National Executive
3. Ensures that National Executive members perform their individual roles effectively and efficiently in line with the Mission of FOMWASAL.

ADVISERS

1. Advisers to the National Executive
2. Assist the National Executive in resource mobilization and monitoring of projects.
3. Can mediate in times of conflict.

ARTICLE 8 - MEETINGS OF NATIONAL EXECUTIVE BODY

- a. *Ordinary Meetings*: This Body shall ordinarily meet at least once every six months at the National Secretarial Office or at such other place and date as may be decided by the Amira and/or Naibatu Amiras. Not less than fifteen clear days written notice of such a meeting together with the agenda, prior to the date fixed for the meeting, will be circulated to members at their last known address by the National

General Secretary even if the date was already fixed at the previous meeting.

- b. **Emergency Meetings:** This Body shall convene an emergency meeting as and when thought fit to do so by the Amira and/or Naibatu Amiras or upon a resolution endorsed by at least four (4) of its members.
The National General Secretary will circulate not less than five clear days written notice together with the agenda prior to the date fixed for such a meeting to members at their last known address.
- c. At all meetings of National Executive Body, the Amira shall be the chairperson but in the absence of the Amira one of her deputies shall be selected by the members present to act as chairperson.
- d. It shall be the duty of the National General Secretary to fully record the proceedings of all meetings of the National Executive Body in a proper Minute Book. In the absence of the National General Secretary another member shall be selected by the members present at the meeting to act as secretary.
- e. At any meeting of the National Executive Body, whenever a vote is taken on an ordinary resolution, the simple majority rule applies, and on a special resolution the two-thirds majority rule applies.
- f. One third of the membership of the National Executive Body shall constitute a quorum.

ARTICLE 9 - GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- a. The federation shall convene a general meeting of all its members once every two years at the office of the National Secretariat or at such other place and date as the General Assembly may decide.
- b. Ninety clear days prior notice of such a meeting shall be given in writing before the date is fixed for such a meeting.
- c. The Agenda of such a meeting will be dispatched to the General Secretary of the Executive Body of each and every Region and District, and in addition, the agenda shall be posted on the Notice Board at the National Secretariat of the Federation.
- d. A member/official who wishes to table a resolution at the Annual General Meeting shall be obliged to comply with the provision of ARTICLE 10 (a), (b) and (c) of this Constitution.
- e. At the General Assembly, the "DELEGATES" who are entitled to vote at such meetings shall elect the National Executive Body.
- f. At the General Assembly, the Secretary at the meeting shall be the National General Secretary of the Federation and shall perform all duties of a Secretary and the Chairperson shall be the Amira or one of her Deputies.
- g. No Branch shall be permitted to hold their elections at the General Assembly.
- h. One-third of the delegates of the Federation shall constitute a quorum.

ARTICLE 10 - ELECTION OF OFFICERS:

- The Federation shall hold elections for all its officers in the National Executive Body at the General Assembly.
- At the time of any election and before it is conducted, a candidate shall be nominated by one member and seconded by another member. When nomination is closed, the Returning Officer shall conduct the election in a free and fair manner and subsequently announce the results of the election.
- Members whose annual subscriptions are one year in arrears, and who have not attended at least six (6) meetings in the preceding year, shall not be allowed or permitted to nominate a candidate or speak or vote at any meeting of the Federation. All branches shall ensure that their delegates are paid up members.
- The Returning Officer shall be a fit and proper person and not a member of the Federation.
- Once appointed, the Returning Officer, in turn, shall have the power to appoint or select an assistant who shall be as fit and proper as he or herself and also not a member of the Federation.
- For each and every election, the simple majority rule applies.
- Subject only to the provision of ARTICLE 13, the decision of the Returning Officer in an election conducted by him/her, is final.
- One-third of the delegates of the Federation shall form a quorum.

ARTICLE 11 - RESOLUTIONS

- a. A Resolution may be ordinary or special
- b. At the General Assembly, an ordinary resolution shall require the member proposing it to give 21(twenty-one) clear days written notice and a copy of her proposed resolution to the National General Secretary, prior to the date fixed for such a meeting.
- c. At the General Assembly, a special resolution shall require the member proposing it, to give 30(thirty) clear days written notice and a copy of her proposed resolution to the National General Secretary, prior to the date fixed for such a meeting.
- d. Notwithstanding, the generality of paragraphs (b) and (c) of this Article, an ordinary or special resolution shall require a member of the National Executive Body, who is proposing it to do one of the following:
 - i. At an ordinary meeting of the National Executive Body, to give seven (7) clear days written notice and a copy her proposed resolution to the National General Secretary, prior to the date fixed for such a meeting.
 - ii. At an emergency meeting of the National Executive Body, to give five clear days written notice and a copy of her proposed resolution to the National General Secretary, prior to the date fixed for such a meeting.

- e. Whenever voting is on an ordinary resolution, the simple majority rule applies, whereas, on a special resolution, the two-thirds majority rule applies.
- f. The provisions of paragraphs (b) and (c) of this Article shall be operative at the General Assembly of the Federation but not at the meetings of the National Executive Body.

ARTICLE 12 - THE NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

- a. The National Secretariat of the Federation shall consist of the following offices.
 - i. The office of the National Executive Body
 - ii. The Finance office.
 - iii. The Information, Publications and International Affairs office.
 - iv. The Education office.
- b. The administration and day-to-day functioning of the National Secretariat shall be the responsibility of the National General Secretary who shall at all times be accountable and answerable in her official capacity only to the National Executive Body of the Federation.
- c. The National General Secretary shall be largely responsible to enforce discipline, industry, diligence, politeness and punctuality at work on all clerical and other workers/employees of the National Executive Body.
- d. The National General Secretary shall be the sole custodian of all properties (both real and personal) of the Federation.

ARTICLE 13 - ALTERATIONS/AMENDMENTS OF THE CONSTITUTION

Subject only to the provision of Article 8 (a), (b), and (c) and Article 10 hereof, this Constitution shall be altered or amended at the General Assembly of the Federation and in any other meeting of the National Executive Body by a special resolution passed at such a meeting. For any proposed alteration or amendment of this constitution, it shall be the responsibility of the member or official proposing such an alteration or amendment to fully comply with the provisions of Article 10 hereof.

ARTICLE 14 - DISTRICT BRANCHES

- a. A District Branch of the Federation shall be established in each of the twelve Districts in the country with an office in the District Headquarter Towns and the Western Area.
- b. The Executive Body of the District Branch shall consist not less than 11 and not more than 19 members and shall include:

- i. The Branch Amira
- ii. Branch Deputy Amira
- iii. Branch Secretary
- iv. Branch Treasurer
- v. Branch Financial Secretary
- vi. Branch Public Relation Officer
- vii. Branch Internal Auditor
- viii. Ex-Officio Members
- ix. Associated Members (not more than seven in number)

ARTICLE 15 - POWERS AND FUNCTIONS OF DISTRICT BRANCH EXECUTIVE BODY

- a. The District Branch Executive Body shall be responsible for the day-to-day administration and welfare of the Federation in the District.
- b. Organize implement and co-ordinate the programmes and policies of the Federation in the District.
- c. Consider the organizational reports and statements of account presented by the District Treasurer respectively.
- d. Determine its own rules of procedure
- e. Elect its own officials once every two years at a special meeting to be convened for that purpose.

ARTICLE 16 - MEETINGS OF DISTRICT BRANCHES

- Each District Branch Executive shall meet at least three times a year at such places and times as the District Branch Amira shall direct.
- In the event of any failure to hold meetings then not less than 50 percent of the District Branch Executive Body shall convene and hold meetings.
- One-third of the District Branch Executive Body shall form a quorum.

ARTICLE 17 - RULES AND REGULATIONS

The Executive Body of the District Branches shall adopt its own rules and regulations provided they are not inconsistent with the provisions of the Constitution or any other rules, regulations, byelaws and standing orders made by the NATIONAL Executive Body under the authority of this Constitution.

Whenever such a rule or regulation is inconsistent or in conflict with any other provision of this Constitution or any other rule, regulation, byelaw or standing order made by the National Executive Body it shall be void only to the extent to which it is inconsistent or in conflict therewith.

ARTICLE 18 - DISCIPLINE

- a. The National Executive Body of the Federation shall enforce discipline among all its members.
- b. The National Executive Body shall set up a Sub-Committee, which shall hear and determine all complaints against a member by another member.
- c. Upon a complaint being lodged, the Sub-Committee shall summon all parties concerned to appear before it on a fixed date, place and time for the hearing of the complaint.
- d. The intentional absence of a party to appear before the subcommittee shall not preclude it from hearing the complaint and thereafter pronounce its decision accordingly.
- e. Any untoward behaviour demonstrated privately or publicly by any member, shall give rise to a disciplinary action or proceedings being brought against her on the complaint of another member.
- f. Such untoward behaviours shall include serious misconduct and serious criminal offences involving dishonesty and violence under the general law but shall to include offences under Road Traffic Act, 1960 as amended.
- g. A member, who shall be found guilty in a disciplinary action or proceedings, shall be liable to a fine equivalent to the annual Membership Fee, or a suspension for a fixed period, or an expulsion from the Federation membership.
- h. Quite apart from paragraph (g) of this Article, a member who is convicted of any serious criminal offences involving dishonesty or violence by any Court of Law as constituted by the Courts Act, 1965 (i.e. Act o. 31 of 1965) and the Local Courts Act, 1963 (i.e. Act o. 20 of 1963), shall cease to be a member of the Federation as from the date of her conviction.
- i. A member, who ceases to be a member of the Federation by reason of an expulsion or a conviction, shall forfeit all benefits that maybe due her from the Federation.

ARTICLE 19 - TERMINATION OF MEMBERSHIP

A membership shall be terminated in the following manners:

- i. Upon the death of a member.
- ii. Upon the resignation of a member.
- iii. Upon the expulsion or conviction of a member in a court of law.

ARTICLE 20 - MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS

- a. The Federation shall have power to do the following acts as and when necessary in order to carry out its aims and objectives:-

- b. To acquire or buy any real or personal property and to dispose, sell, rent, lease or mortgage the same.
- c. To employ clerical and other employees and to dismiss or declare any such employee redundant.
- d. To rent any office or building for its activities.
- e. To invest in Government and other securities such as companies shares.
- f. To open both current and savings accounts at any Commercial Bank.
- g. The Federation shall be registered with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Planning and Development to acquire NGO status.

All assets of the Federation belong to the Federation and not its members.

ARTICLE 21 - DISSOLUTION

In the event of dissolution of the Federation, the Receiver/Liquidator shall have powers to harness and marshal all the assets of the Federation and dispose of or distribute the same by applying the "CYPRESS DOCTRINE".

ARTICLE 22 - INTERPRETATION

Under the Constitution, unless the context otherwise requires:

"Amira"	means the Leader of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL)
"Association"	means the group of persons, united and organized, generally under the terms of this Constitution and acting together for some specific purpose, in furtherance of common aims and objectives, of a philanthropic character.
"District"	means a Provincial District within the meaning of CAP. 122.
"Election"	means any election for and office in the Federation or any of its constituent Association or Organization.
"Federation"	means the "Federation or any of its constituent associations in Sierra Leone (FOMWASAL)".
"Member"	means a member of the Federation or any of its constituent association or organization.
"Month"	means calendar month.

“Cyress Doctrine”	means the principle which a receiver or a Liquidator shall apply in disposing or distributing the assets of this Federation whenever it shall cease to exist, to other charitable organizations which are as near as possible to this Federation in their aims and objectives.
“Naibatu Amira”	means Deputy Amiras (i.e. Deputy Leaders and Deputy Chairpersons of the Federation).
“Organization”	means the same as association and vice versa.
“Muslim Women”	means the women followers of the Religion of Islam and NOT of Mohammed (Peace and Blessing be upon him).
“Singular Word”	shall include plural words and vice versa.
“Zone”	means any area within the Western Area which is carved out as a branch to establish an association or Organization of the Federation.
“Zonal”	means the same as Zone and vice versa.
“Delegates”	mean members of the Federation who are entitled to vote at the election of officials of the National Executive body of the Federation at General Assembly.

Appendix 5

THIS FORM MUST BE ON ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY HEADED NOTEBOOK WITH FULL CONTACT DETAILS

SUGGESTED FORMAT FOR A PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

Title of the project: Breaking Barriers: Women in Transition (An investigation into the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone.

Main investigator and contact details: F.B. Cole (fa2cole@yahoo.com)

Members of the research team: Prof. Bronwen Walter
Prof. Gina Wisker

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet which is attached to this form. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
3. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.
4. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.
5. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.

Data Protection: I agree to the University¹ processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me*

***Note to researchers: please amend or add to this clause as necessary to ensure that it conforms with the relevant data protection legislation in your country**

Name of participant (print).....Signed.....Date.....

Name of witness (print).....Signed.....Date.....

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

¹ "The University" includes Anglia Ruskin University and its partner colleges

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to the main investigator named above.

Title of Project:

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 6

FORM MUST BE ON ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY HEADED NOTEPAPER WITH FULL CONTACT DETAILS

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Note to researchers:

- *PLEASE KEEP TO THE POINT*
- *USE CLEAR AND ACCESSIBLE LANGUAGE*
- *USE ONLY THE MOST NECESSARY TECHNICAL TERMS*

Section A: The Research Project

1. Title of project: Breaking Barriers- Women in Transition. (An investigation into the new emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone).
2. Purpose and value of study: For academic research, looking at the role of professional Muslim women in self development and self empowerment in society.
3. Invitation to participate: Yes
4. Who is organising the research: Fatmatta B. Cole-PhD research student at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.
5. What will happen to the results of the study: Publication of results to enable reference for academic and research purposes.
6. Source of funding for the research: Self funding
7. Contact for further information: FA2COLE@YAHOO.COM

Section B: Your Participation in the Research Project

1. Why you have been invited to take part: Your contribution to serious academic investigation on the role of emerging social sub group of professional Muslim women in Sierra Leone and their perception and role on self development and self empowerment.
2. Whether you can refuse to take part: You have all right to refuse to take part in the study.
3. Whether you can withdraw at any time, and how: You are free to withdraw from the study at any time by informing researcher.

4. What will happen if you agree to take part (brief description of procedures/tests): In agreeing to take part in the study, there will be one to one interview sessions (questions and answers). There will also be focus group discussion units (questions and general discussion) on relevant issues pertaining to research title.
5. Whether there are any risks involved (e.g. side effects from taking part) and if so what will be done to ensure your wellbeing/safety: No side effects as this is not a clinical trial/study.
6. Agreement to participate in this research should not compromise your legal rights should something go wrong: N/A
7. Whether there are any special precautions you must take before, during or after taking part in the study: N/A
8. What will happen to any information/data/samples that are collected from you: All data will be analysed and used in disseminating knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of Muslim women in breaking barriers of change for other Muslim women nationwide.
9. Whether there are any benefits from taking part: Your significant contribution to the world knowledge of academia and you will aid a proper understanding of the points of view of women who are seen as role models to the rest of the women population in impacting change towards self and national development.
10. How your participation in the project will be kept confidential: All data are kept confidential according to ethics requirements of the University, safely kept on tapes and discs.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS TO KEEP,
TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM