# *'The barriers that only you can see': African Australian women thriving in tertiary education despite the odds*



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# 'The Barriers that only You Can See': African Australian Women Thriving in Tertiary Education Despite the Odds

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# 'The Barriers that only You Can See': African Australian Women Thriving in Tertiary Education Despite the Odds

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study argues the need to recognise the increasing numbers of new African women migrants who have come to Australia with tertiary qualifications, but who are not necessarily refugees. These women are enrolling in and successfully completing university study. At the same time, the study makes clear the limits of conceptualising African Australian women's experiences of education through a singular focus on struggle, disengagement and non-belonging. Rather, African Australian women's enrolment in higher education needs to be seen as enabling new forms of participation and belonging in resettlement, while simultaneously impacting in multiple and sometimes personally challenging ways on the women's more traditional cultural roles and identities. The article finishes by recognising that universities and other educational institutions can play a more active role in supporting migrant African women to thrive in tertiary educational contexts.

**Keywords:** african women, migrants and education, South Sudan, tertiary studies, qualitative research, CALDB persons


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# Las Barreras que sólo Tú Puedes Ver: Mujeres Africanas Australianas Avanzando en la Educación Terciaria a Pesar de las Dificultades

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**Abstract**

Este estudio cualitativo argumenta la necesidad de reconocer el creciente número de mujeres inmigrantes Africanas que han llegado a Australia con titulaciones de educación superior, pero que no son necesariamente refugiadas. Estas mujeres se están matriculando y terminando con éxito estudios universitarios. Al mismo tiempo, este estudio marca claramente los límites de la conceptualización de las experiencias de las mujeres Africanas Australianas de educación a través de un enfoque singular sobre lucha, desvinculación y desapego. Es más, la implicación de las mujeres Africanas Australianas en la educación superior tiene que ser vista como nuevas formas de permitir la participación y la pertenencia en el reasentamiento, mientras que simultáneamente impacten de forma múltiple y a veces con retos personales a los roles culturales tradicionales de las mujeres y sus identidades. El artículo termina reconociendo que las universidades y otras instituciones educativas pueden jugar un papel más activo en apoyar a las mujeres Africanas que avanzan en el contexto de educación terciaria.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres africanas, migrantes y educación, Sudán del Sur, estudios superiores, investigación cualitativa, personas CALDB


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The Australian Human Rights Commission (2010) published a literature review entitled, African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues. The section on education contains no reference to African Australian students who are not refugees. This can be read as reflecting the report's emphasis on the barriers to social inclusion experienced by this diverse group of new Australians. On the other hand, however, the collapsing of the category of African Australians into that of refugees supports the hypothesis that underpins this article: namely that in the Australian context, there is only one discourse about African Australians and education. Within this discourse, African Australians are refugees and when it comes to education, they experience a failure to thrive.

Implicitly supporting this construction of African Australians' participation in education, the research that does exist emphasises the challenges faced by Sudanese Australians (read as African Australians) in relation to primary and secondary education, language centres, tutoring and literacy. The gendered challenges faced by Sudanese women in particular have been noted (Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Levi, 2010). Following a widely-criticised series of events in 2007 in which the then-Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews and multiple media organisations (both print and televised) embarked on a campaign of vilification of Sudanese Australians, popular representations of "African Australians" became synonymous with Sudanese Australians, refugees and "black gangs" (Nunn, 2010). Suddenly, the only visible African Australian were dangerous or failing to integrate, socially and educationally. Despite the emergence of a more critical discussion in both popular and academic discourses about the multiple inaccuracies inherent in the propagation of such stereotypes, little remains published on the successful participation of African Australians in higher education (and other sectors). This paper adds to the small but growing body of literature (Ngum Chi, 2012) about emerging and thriving African Australian individuals, communities and 'visible' but 'invisible' migrants.

Addressing the paucity of material about African Australian women's involvement in higher education, the article provides a snapshot of some African Australian women in attendance at Australian universities. By

emphasising the diversity of the women respondents in this research, we seek to articulate the breadth and difference of African Australian women as these members of our migrant communities grow in numbers and contribute to the changing society and institutions of which they are a part.

In this paper we use the term African Australian purposefully, to highlight both its diversity and collective discursive power. Phillips (2011, p. 57) argues that the category of African Australian "homogenises their experiences and must be unpacked". While acknowledging this point, we suggest that African Australians can be considered as a constitutive category with some shared challenges at this particular historic moment. In using the term we do not wish to erase or diminish countless additional significant and numerous specific national and ethnic identities (Ngum Chi, 2012).

By discussing the diverse needs, experiences and backgrounds of African Australian women at university, the paper addresses a gap in the literature which at present reveals little sense that African Australians are part of our tertiary institutions at all. The failure to discuss the African Australian presence within Australian tertiary institutions only serves to confirm the notion that the education experiences of African Australians and women particularly can only ever be discussed in terms of poverty, trauma, marginalisation and discrimination. As Stevenson and Willott (2007) have argued in the British higher education context:

> homogenizing the support needs of young refugees along with those of other ethnic minority students is both inappropriate and insufficient and the continued failure to focus on them as a specific widening participation group will perpetuate their continued absence from the UK higher education system (p. 671).

As those concerned with Australia's multicultural universities know, African Australians do study, work, lecture and thrive in tertiary institutions. Moreover, while some of these African Australian students and staff have come to Australia as refugees and experienced significant school interruption, others have come here recruited as academics and professionals, from privileged backgrounds with private boarding school educations in countries such as Cameroon or Nigeria.

Highlighting five case studies for discussion, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of African Australians' involvement in tertiary education.

**Is it a matter of gender, class, or circumstance?**

There is some evidence to suggest that students from refugee backgrounds feel disadvantaged at university compared with Australian-born and international students (Earnest et al., 2010). This could be attributed to gender and the individual's cultural background. The role of 'culture' and how 'culture' shapes learning and knowledge acquisition of migrants and those who identify with a 'minority' group is visible in 'migration and minority theory' and literature (Geisen & Bekerman 2012, p. 2). Cox (2012, p.12), contends that "when educational provision is unable to respond effectively to needs outside of the monolithic education system settings, education may or may not lead to learning". Contrastingly, anecdotal evidence and as yet unpublished research conducted among African Australian students indicates that African Australians who are not refugees claim that they do not experience any problems when they attend university (Mphande, 2011). This may suggest that while marginalities of race and gender can be formidable, class determinants may in some cases provide compensatory privileges, access to educational possibilities and a greater sense of belonging. A comprehensive class analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is increasingly evident that the difficulties faced by some African-background refugees has more to do with their refugee experiences than ethnicity, a fact under-reported in both popular and scholarly writing.

Indeed, the challenges faced by non-refugee-background African Australians often bear similarities to non-African Australian students, including such things as transport issues or difficulty adjusting to university environments versus the more structured secondary school experience. Thus, the lack of problems reported by more privileged and non-refugee African Australians also indicates that class differences within this category are at least as pertinent to the analysis of their tertiary experience as ethnicity. While '[in]national data demonstrates that people from a low socio-economic background remain significantly

under-represented in Australian higher education' (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2006, as cited in Scull & Cuthill, 2010, p. 59). Not all African Australians in attendance at Australian universities can be categorised as socio-economically disadvantaged. Similarly, contrary to popular misrepresentations, not all African Australian tertiary students attending Australian universities come from non-English speaking backgrounds. As such, English as a Second Language (ESL) disadvantage is another category (see Coates and Krause 2005, cited in Scull & Cuthill, 2010) that has little to no relevance for a proportion of African Australian university students.

## The research method

Between March and December of 2011, the three authors of this paper and two Sudanese Australian research assistants conducted interviews with ten African Australian women living in Victoria. This research was approved by the human ethics committee at the University where the three authors were employed as academic staff at the time of the research. The research participants were aged between 18 and 38 years old. The majority had arrived in Australia in the last ten years and all but one were Australian citizens. Three of the ten were married and four of the ten had children. Half (5) came from Sudan, two from Zimbabwe, two from Nigeria and one from Gabon.

Each participant was asked a number of demographic questions in order to establish her age, length of time in Australia, education level, country of origin, marital status, number of children, and current living situation. The women then took part in semi-structured interviews that were recorded and transcribed for the purposes of analysis. The interviews included questions about family background and childhood, in relation to education and equity, as well as questions about whether participants had experienced discrimination at any of the various stages of their education. The participants were also encouraged to reflect on the meaning of tertiary education in their lives, for example, what they felt they had gained or lost as a consequence of their university education. The semi-structured nature of the interviews yielded detailed accounts of the women's perceptions of these matters. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between thirty minutes and an

hour. The transcripts were coded and analysed by the authors with particular attention paid to recurring themes.

This paper draws on five case studies collected as part of the study as a whole. In this instance, the case study approach was selected as the best method of presenting the data because of its capacity to yield significant and detailed insight into the women's experiences of tertiary education and the diversity of African Australian women in universities in Australia. The particular case studies discussed in this paper have been chosen because they yielded rich data and because of their difference from one another - the individual story each tells about African Australian women's involvement in tertiary education. To protect the women's privacy, pseudonyms are used and some identifying details have been changed or omitted.

To begin, we consider the tertiary education experiences of two women from Sudan. Fiduma and Nadifa have different stories to tell when it comes to their tertiary education experiences in Australia. Their accounts support macro data which shows that educated women are constrained by social and economic structures and gender roles and relations within the family and beyond (Jayaweera, 1997a & 1997b; Sales, 1999). At the same time, analysis of this qualitative data reveals something of the meaning of education in their lives, demonstrating that these women's participation in higher education, while by no means straightforward in terms of their roles in their families and communities, is simultaneously a means by which they gain increased confidence and a degree of freedom from these roles.

## Results

### Fiduma: education, a life-changing experience

Fiduma is a 28 year old woman of South Sudanese origin. She came to Australia as a refugee, sponsored by her husband's auntie. After arriving in Australia in 2007 she became an Australian citizen in 2010. Fiduma is married and has five children under the age of ten. She lives with her husband and children, two of her brothers and three brother-in-laws. Fiduma was married at the age of sixteen. When asked whether she had experienced discrimination on the basis of gender in her family of

origin, Fiduma mentioned being taken out of school in Uganda to get married because her family needed the dowry to pay for the education of two of her brothers. She says she questioned her father's decision at the time but was not in a position to disobey him.

While Fiduma sees her removal from school as evidence of gender discrimination she says the discrimination she experienced in school was to do with ethnic and 'tribal' differences, rather than gender. Fiduma attended primary school in South Sudan. She describes this as being very hard: 'you wake up at 4.30, in the morning, we just walk, no shoes, no lights no nothing and we stay there like from morning 'til 5.30 and go back from school to home which would take us three hours'. At this time and in the area where she lived, 'a different tribe' would 'abuse' and 'fight' them because of ethnic differences. Later, she attended a Catholic boarding school in Uganda for two years, until she was withdrawn from school in order to be married.

Fiduma is studying second year nursing. She reports no problems at university with gender at an institutional level saying the standards for men and women are the same in this context. Apart from concerns about the standard of her work compared with Australian-born students and jokes about problems with 'parking' she is positive about her university experiences.

When asked what change would most benefit Sudanese or African Australian women at university, Fiduma did not mention institutional or educational matters but spoke only about the need for greater unity among the Sudanese students, noting that they tend to gossip about women who are studying and 'pretend that they are not Sudanese'. Fiduma has Australian-born and African-born friends at university, including two Nigerians and one Kenyan, but says it is difficult to identify with the other Sudanese students she has met. She talked about the problem of people in the Sudanese community putting women down when they were involved in tertiary education, saying 'they don't want me to go to school, they want me to stay with them always'.

Fiduma's responses point toward intra-Sudanese conflict and possible jealousy around women's participation in higher education. She observed wryly that if she progresses with her education and gains employment, other Africans will tell her husband 'now she's working she will be just at your neck so let her just stay home to cook for us and

you have to work so that you will give her some money'. Clearly, women's participation in education (and subsequently employment) is perceived as threatening the status quo of male authority. Women who become educated are thus perceived as creating 'gender trouble' because they transcend conventional gender roles in which men go out and earn money and women do housework and have children. Fiduma also talks happily about her husband being away in Sudan for almost a year. He had gone for a three month visit but was still there ten months later. According to Fiduma, the husband being away had allowed her to study peacefully without being distracted by him and his friends.

Certainly, and as Fiduma's interview demonstrates, women's participation in education directly impacts on their self-concept. As Fiduma says: 'I'm very different now. I got knowledge, decision making and I can solve my own problems'. Elsewhere Fiduma mentioned the increased confidence education has given her on other areas of her life, saying that now she doesn't need an interpreter, 'I can just speak by myself' and 'when my children are sick I can just rush and see the doctor by myself'. Fiduma compared this with the time before she began her degree, saying that such engagements in the wider community were 'very hard.'

Attending university also gives Fiduma a break from the boredom and anxiety she experiences at home. 'If I'm at home I'm bored but if I go to school I will not even think of our people back home … I will just focus on what I am doing.' She enjoys the opportunity to learn and discuss 'cultural issues' and health and finds the lecturers helpful. Fiduma's perspective can be contrasted with the research findings of Earnest and colleagues (2010, p.169) who note that:

> The journey, from arriving in Australia, to resettling and completing tertiary education is a long, arduous process that challenges the ambition, motivation and resilience of students. … Many of the participants in this study expressed a sense of anxiety and emotional distress due to carrying the burden of their refugee background, as well as anxieties and frustrations about the university culture and academic system; all of this was often compounded by real and overwhelming financial pressures and by issues that threatened the maintenance of their psychosocial well-

being.

Without undermining the value of the above findings (Earnest et al., 2010), Fiduma's story suggests that there are also positive aspects to African Australian refugee women's participation in tertiary education. This does not contradict the call for more 'specific tailored programs of induction into the university and its services for students from refugee backgrounds' (Earnest et al., 2010, p. 169), but it does suggest the limits of conceptualising refugee African Australian students at university through a singular focus on struggle and alienation.

Turning now to an analysis of Nadifa's story, we note that despite Nadifa's considerable struggles she, like Fiduma, represents her involvement in higher education as one of the most enabling aspects of her life.

**Nadifa: 'it's impossible to be a typical Sudanese woman having this education'**

Nadifa was born in Ethiopia and spent much of her childhood in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. The daughter of a high-ranking military leader, she received a consistent education, the majority of which was at Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya. Nadifa arrived in Australia in 2005 at the age of seventeen and completed half year eleven and year twelve in this country. She became an Australian citizen in 2010, the year in which she also completed her first degree, a Bachelor of Arts, at a university in Victoria. She is not married and has no children, though as stated above, Nadifa considers her younger siblings to be her children. Until early 2011, Nadifa lived with her mother and siblings and played a major role in domestic and child-rearing duties. After completing her first degree, Nadifa applied to study law through a university's equity program. She gained entry and at the time of interview was coming to the end of the first year of her law degree. Her decision to move out of the family home was related to her desire to be more proximate to the university and to give herself the best chance of focusing on her studies. At 23 she occupies a prominent position in her community, highly unusual for a woman, let alone someone of her age.

We noted above that Fiduma constructs university as an escape from

the other aspects of her life and concomitantly, displays an absence of concern about her place as an African Australian within the institutional structures. In contrast, Nadifa is critically reflective about the ways in which she, as a Sudanese-Australian, exists outside the university system. Nadifa's answer to the question 'do you feel you belong at university?' was an emphatic no. She elaborated: 'you sit in this room and occupy this space that you don't have ownership of – that your heritage has not influenced, that your community has not participated in. You think am I participating, am I validating this process of invalidating myself? Who am I?'

Nadifa refers often to a sense of not being 'valid', a feeling that seems to come partly from her outsider status as a 'tall, black' woman in the white, middle-class world of law students at a prestigious university. At the same time however her sense of liminality has at least as much to do with her moving away from the roles typically occupied by Sudanese women as it does with her not being like other, Australian-born and international students:

> In Sudanese culture traditionally I would be home with my mum, I'd be helping her out with the kids and looking after my little brothers and sisters and giving her more assistance as she gets older, probably think about getting married, things like that. It's changing now of course but essentially the same. But I can't maintain that whilst being at uni which is different for a 23 year old, young Australian. This is what you should be doing … going to uni, getting out of the house, beginning to work. Getting out of the house is completely a bad thing in Sudanese culture that puts strains on your relationships, people start gossiping in the community, that puts more strain on the relationship with your family.

Ultimately, Nadifa's existence at the interstices of two cultures is unacknowledged in the university context which she says, is 'not equipped to deal with people with so much mess that is created by two conflicting cultures. It's not like you can write I need my marks or I'm having trouble because I come from too many cultures … my experiences are yet not captured as a Sudanese Australian by that system'. She says these are 'the barriers that only you can see'.

Nadifa's journey to studying law seems to embody the promise that refugee women's participation in education can bring. Yet paradoxically, far from being a panacea, education is precisely what produces the 'isolation' that Nadifa says is her biggest challenge at university. This isolation is partly a result of the fact that there are no other Sudanese students in her current program and thus no one who understands her situation or to 'have lunch with'. She says 'it's very difficult … going to university and not knowing anybody, not understanding anybody, not feeling part of that environment or that culture.' At the same time, Nadifa faces the 'intellectual and social isolation' that emerges in parallel with her forays into education because every step she takes towards academic development is simultaneously a step away from her community of origin. The pain, loss and identity struggle associated with this journey is difficult to capture, let alone to represent in a cultural context in which higher education tends to be unambiguously associated with the opportunity for personal development, career prospects and individual gain.

In the following section, we discuss Geraldine's uncomplicated experience at university. Geraldine's experience strongly contrasts with that of Nadifa and serves as a reminder of the diversity inherent in the category African Australian.

**Geraldine: 'there's more freedom!'**

Geraldine was born in Zimbabwe and arrived in Australia in 2004 at eleven years old. She came with her parents, both skilled migrants. She began Australian school in grade 6, and is now completing her first year of a Bachelor of Psychology at a University in Melbourne. Geraldine reported no gender problems in relation to her schooling, but spoke of 'other discriminations' she experienced at secondary school. Her experiences echo Fiduma's in that she represents other women as the enforcers of the normative gendered expectations, and discriminatory treatment (whether within cultural groups or cross-cultural) when not adhered to.

Geraldine's parents are both university-educated, and she expressed a recognition that this may have provided 'an advantage' in regard to her own education. She also links the more gender-neutral adaptations in

her family's behaviours to not having maids in this country, so having to 'take turns' at caretaking tasks. Geraldine contrasts her parents' educational views and gender values with those who are 'more into their culture and they're more old-fashioned' in addition to ingrained cultural gender attitudes towards females/ daughters (Ngum Chi Watts et al., 2013). This commonly-held view exemplifies the great tensions experienced by many African women who seek higher education in Australia: whether true or not, there is a perception that education is in conflict with maintaining cultural values.

For Geraldine, education is a means to 'more freedom…more independence, [and] being more secure', and in her university course men and women seem relatively equal. When asked what she might change at her university, she replied only that she would live closer, but that 'there's not much else I would change because it's a pretty good experience.' Yet reflecting on her educational journey from Harare to Melbourne, Geraldine noted differences - including more competition back home - which she felt created greater motivation; she also noted that transition into school here, and between grades, could be made more seamless.

At university, there are 'international students – people from all over the world. People of different ages as well….you can't really stand out too much because everyone's different.' Asked whether she felt any identification with other African Australian women from any nation (not just Zimbabwe), Geraldine replied, 'I do, because we have that same background and we know where we're coming from'. Geraldine values her family's support of her studies, and recognises that for lots of the other African young women she knows, 'it becomes too much pressure for them and they want to sort of break away from [parents' expectations] so move away from home as soon as possible.'

**Kamida: 'if they can do it, I can do it!'**

Kamida's story bears thematic similarities to Geraldine's regarding the overriding value of education for Zimbabwean women, but also highlights some aspects of the high personal price she has paid for this education. From the perspective of an older woman who has completed her education, Kamida's narrative provides a counterpoint to

Geraldine's forward-looking and seemingly problem-free account.

Kamida arrived in Australia in 2003 at the age of twenty-three, and she currently lives by herself. She is not married and has no children; her family of origin remain in Zimbabwe. She attended primary and secondary school in Zimbabwe, and studied an undergraduate degree in Commerce in both Zimbabwe and Australia, finally completing a Masters degree in Australia. Kamida was supported by friends to come to Australia, and then through university, but has continued working throughout to support herself and pay her education bills.

While Kamida reports gender inequities back home, she cites the egalitarian values of her family (in particular her father), who believed his daughters should be educated 'so that we could be strong women, and look after ourselves.' Kamida's views on gender equity in Australia contrast with Geraldine's, perhaps informed by the male-dominated industry in which she works. Having lived in Zimbabwe until her emigration as an adult, Kamida comments upon the progressive gender attitudes in Zimbabwe compared, in her view, to some other African countries. Yet she still highlights the ways in which Zimbabwean women are positioned as the family maintainers so that 'you feel guilty if you are successful in career focus. You feel like you're not giving your kids enough time.'

Hard-working and self-supporting Kamida found that she 'couldn't relate so much' to 'other African kids from wealthy backgrounds' at university, because 'some of them are at school because their parents want them to go but they're not really interested.' She did not have time to develop a social life, working multiple menial labour jobs to pay her bills. Kamida reports having enjoyed her tertiary experiences, but would like to see an increasing number of African women role models in Australian universities, in order to offer 'a good example of people who juggle their career and their family.' Kamida states that better communication between those African women who have completed study, and those who have not had the opportunity, would make a significant difference in academic achievements and motivation within African communities. She stresses that when '…you have no hero… you think there's nothing else to do.' Clearly, universities can play a role in establishing and supporting African women student mentor and support networks.

Like Nadifa, Kamida wants to help other people from her home country avoid the trial and error she has had to experience on her own. She would like to 'inspire other people as well, particularly people from Zimbabwe, to show them that… we can do this, even in a country that's not our own.' Kamida especially identifies the need for 'living examples. Because having an example and a role model is good because you look at someone and go 'if they could do it then I can do it."' The power of role models for young women is well-documented, internationally and in Australia. The painful isolation of being a family or community first in such endeavours clearly takes a toll, particularly for those like Kamida who have not been raised with such views, role models or resources:

> I've learned through my experiences that your confidence is what will take you to the next level and that is what will differentiate you… I was brought up where if you are a woman you hold back a little, you can't be the loudest person in the room. But to make it in my industry, or in any career, you need to step up and speak out for yourself as well. So I guess for a lot of African women I think this is the greatest challenge: having that confidence… to stand in front of a crowd, and, conduct a meeting or a seminar. It's too scary because women in Africa are not supposed to be like that.

In addition to the emotional cost of trail-blazing there can be high financial costs for international students like Kamida. When asked if she has any regrets about her educational and career accomplishments, Kamida reflected:

> Sometimes I look back at the amount of money I've spent… by the time I finished my Masters, I spent like $80,000 to study. I had to take out a loan and even up until now I'm still trying to pay off some of the loan. Particularly if you're an international student, your fees are paid upfront. Your life is a struggle.

While many students incur overwhelming debts in the course of their university educations, Kamida points out the additional obligations many African women must juggle:

> …if you have an African background you still have people to support. And if you are single, you're not married, you don't have the extra income. Sometimes I've looked back and I said, 'Is this really worth it? Ah maybe if I'd stayed in Africa I would have had no debt, maybe I would have been married.' But then I look at all the things that I've learned and got to know and the opportunities – I feel maybe it's worth it but it came at a price.

Clearly these challenges and complexities require further recognition in educational and migration discourses. Despite the high price of her education, Kamida values it immensely:

> …it's really changed my life. I've become a woman who's confident, a woman who believes in herself. I am this successful, independent young woman who is fearless! Who is strong as well and happy in myself. …I would do it all over again. I would not change a thing.

Kamida is considering returning to university to complete a PhD.

**Naomi: "it" (university) gives you options**

Naomi was born in Nigeria and arrived in 2003, at the age of 16. She attended international schools in Nigeria, Lagos, Israel and China before completing her secondary education in Australia. She has completed a medical radiation degree and is now working in her field of expertise. She lives with extended family in Melbourne.

Despite her class privilege and educational attainment, Naomi reports that in her family and Nigerian culture she as a woman is still primarily expected to get married and have children. She shares such goals but notes the ways in which the woman is 'supposed to be the one to sacrifice.' Yet she is clear that 'my family and my country will support and value education for women.' It's not 'all stigma' back home yet women are the ones expected to balance career, family maintenance and childcare. 'If not, then it's not considered a good thing unless you've sort of abandoned your way of life.' For her, as for several of the other participants, cultural expectations exist in tension with individual education and career goals; education is often seen as threatening a

woman's primary duties, while a man's education is framed as enhancing the family's opportunities. A woman's career is expendable, or – as Naomi says – 'it's more like a backup kind of thing'.

Regarding her university experience, Naomi does not think things need to change for African students in Australia, and did not struggle with race, gender, or integration issues. For such a well-travelled young woman, attending university in Australia was not substantially different from her earlier schooling, yet she prefers the directive nature of secondary school over the freedom and self-directed nature of university. She does not feel that anything was lost or compromised through her educational journey, culturally or personally.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that it is necessary to recognise the diversity of the emerging African Australian community, especially in relation to participation in higher education in Australia. Even within specific national and cultural communities such as 'the Sudanese' there is enormous diversity, including gender- and class-based differences based on background and forced or other conditions of migration, which need to be acknowledged. As scholars have noted (Kumsa, 2006; Marlowe, 2010; & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2010), these communities and individuals require a more nuanced and complex representation and self-expression within Australian and international contexts, particularly (but not only) those emerging from refugee pasts.

In particular, we have focused on higher education as one context in which African Australian women are thriving, despite increasingly restrictive labels like refugee (Zetter, 2007) and inaccurate homogenising of distinct African ethnicities in the Australian context and internationally. Within the tertiary sector, enrolments of African Australian women from many different backgrounds, classes and circumstances are rising. Yet along with this progress come gendered complexities of balancing personal, familial and cultural responsibilities and needs. The article suggests possible ways to support African-Australian women in higher education, including formalised schemes to support their enrolment and retention, such as mentoring programs, African and women student networks, study groups, and targeted

intercultural initiatives. Ngum Chi (Watts) (2012) suggests an Austrafrocentric model of education whereby the African student or person is at the center of the education model rather than at the fringes in contrast to the current Eurocentric model of education.

This small qualitative study opens the way for further research into the diverse needs, successes and challenges of recently emigrated African women in western higher education institutions. At the same time, it makes clear the limits of conceptualising African Australian women's experiences of education through a singular focus on struggle, disengagement and non-belonging. Rather, African Australian women's enrolment in higher education needs to be seen as enabling new forms of participation and belonging in Australian society while simultaneously impacting in multiple and sometimes personally challenging ways on the women's more traditional cultural roles and identities.

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