“She can learn and become someone”: Women from the Developing World Discuss Girls’ Education

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Abstract

The purpose of my research is to better understand how women and girls from developing countries experience education—its quality, value, availability, and opportunities—by collecting and examining first-hand accounts. My research is informed by the methods of global and transnational feminisms and intends to contribute to the ongoing conversation on women’s education by elevating the voices of the very subjects it discusses. I have collected first-hand accounts of educational experiences from women from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Burma, and Pakistan who currently reside in Illinois, as well as accounts in memoirs written by women from these countries. These women’s experiences in their home countries also inform their educational experiences in the United States as adults. Across various cultures and political regimes, different forces destabilize girls’ educational opportunities, among them inadequate finances, corporal discipline, and distance from schools. While these challenges are consistently nuanced by gender inequality, girls associate the opportunity for success with a higher degree.
Introduction

*Let me tell you the story of how I was once like a bird who leaves the nest very early and only comes back late in the evening* (Bognomo 1). So begins the fictional story of *Madoulina: A Girl Who Wanted to Go to School* by Joël Eboueme Bognomo. Madoulina, like many girls in the developing world, watches her brother go to school every morning while she stays home (Bognomo 1). But fortunately, Madoulina’s story ends differently. Meant to inspire and educate girls across Africa, this picture book communicates girls’ equal right to education. Though *Madoulina* is not authored by an African girl, the book has potential to play a socially active role in an adolescent girl’s life. It’s stories like Madoulina’s—stories about a girl’s educational aspirations and desires—that inspired me to research girls’ education in the developing world.

Critical literature on this subject tends to focus on a Western author or speaker’s perspective rather than introducing the viewpoints of women in the countries under investigation. The purpose of my research is to better understand how women and girls from developing countries experience education—its quality, value, availability, and opportunities—from first-hand accounts. My research employs cultural relativism, is informed by the methods of global and transnational feminisms, and questions the role of Western influences on global education. Across various cultures and political regimes, different forces destabilize girls’ educational opportunities, among them inadequate finances, corporal discipline and distance from schools—but these forces are consistently nuanced by gender inequality. Despite these serious challenges, women communicate that they will seek out equal opportunities because they enjoy school and they feel it will lead to a successful future.
Literature Review

Girls’ education in the developing world is an undeniably complex and multi-faceted issue. While understanding girls’ education from the girls’ perspectives provides critical insight into the issue, additional information regarding cultural nuances, government policies, and economic realities is necessary to fully comprehend its complexity. Western research supplies this information. Given my research purpose to incorporate the voices of women in the developing world, addressing Western research is frustrating but inevitable. While I attempt to remove Western bias from this project, the state of girls’ education and its terminology and statistics—critical information for understanding the subject—are defined by Western research and thus inescapable. This overview of girls’ education in the developing world is simply that—an overview; it attempts to provide a general understanding of existing knowledge on the challenges and benefits of equal education.

In this project, I narrow my focus to cisgender girls. With additional time and resources, a study outside this binary may add depth to the conversation on education. Also in this project, girls’ education includes both primary and secondary education at different types of schools with different types of curricula. Primary school generally includes children between the approximate ages of six and twelve, secondary continues from twelve to eighteen, and tertiary is considered a college or university level (Cordell, O’Toole, Burki). It is difficult to narrowly define education simply because of the sheer variety that exists in schools across the world. But in identifying Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (“eight goals with measurable targets and clear deadlines for improving the lives of the world’s poorest people”) for gender parity in education, the United Nations (U.N.) describes a plan “to get every girl in school and learning” (“Millennium,” United Nations). For the purpose of this project, education means physically
attending school on a daily basis. This definition revisits the Western ideology that education must be trackable—one of many Western definitions applied to worldwide education. These problematic definitions inevitably arise throughout my research, but not only do I define girls’ education in Western terms, but the girls themselves also understand their education in this way. The infiltration of these definitions in diverse non-Western cultures speaks to the power of institutions like the U.N. on the postcolonial world.

The U.N.’s unaccomplished goal for girls’ education speaks volumes about pervasive challenges many girls face in pursuing an education. Education is considered a basic human right—a basic right that girls are not always allowed as humans. The U.N. calls it a “fundamental human right for all” and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) calls education “everybody’s human right” (United Nations, Bellamy 17). Though it is generally agreed that education is a basic right for all people regardless of gender, race, religion, or other social constructs, the U.N. did not reach its MDG that “every boy and girl will receive a quality basic education by 2015” (Herz 1). “’All’ implies that girls and boys must be equally well provided for; but there is a separate MDG that makes this explicit: to eliminate by 2005 all gender disparity in primary and secondary education, and to achieve by 2015 full gender equality in education—including enrollment, completion, and learning achievement” (Bellamy 31). The world is getting closer to realizing this goal with every passing year, but the numbers are still bleak. UNICEF estimates that “thirty-one million girls of primary school age and 32 million girls of lower secondary school age were out of school in 2013” (“Girls’”). Of these, “17 million are expected to never enter school,” according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (“Fact”).
Many factors affect the current state of girls’ education. In many cases, the resistance to girls’ education is culturally specific. For example, local beliefs and attitudes on whether education improves or reduces a girl’s marriageability and thus her chance to be “successful” for the family are intricately linked to cultural values (Bellamy 23). Even if educational opportunities are present, these beliefs can hinder a girl’s chance at taking advantage of them. Some cultures see women as subordinate to men, and this cultural gender bias is pervasive in education and not easily removed. For example, in a study on education in rural Papua New Guinea, Celestine Ove found that “educational opportunities” have been “hindered” by “cultural views that women and girls should not receive equal access to services like education” (43).

Though the specific challenges of girls’ education exist within various cultures in the developing world, many challenges supersede culture. The distance girls live from their school can affect them regardless of their culture. In “Girls’ Secondary Education in Uganda: Assessing Policy Within the Women’s Empowerment Framework,” Shelley Kathleen Jones addresses how some girls walk as far as sixteen miles a day to school (393). This distance can affect different aspects of a girl’s life, like her “available time for homework” (393). But it also poses the threat of sexual assault. Some girls are “harassed” while walking to and from school, thus discouraging their interest in attending (393). Discrimination of girls’ bodies can destabilize their education. Marni Sommer’s study in Tanzania highlights the inadequacy of some countries in creating comfortable conditions for girls to learn. Menstruation and the availability of bathroom facilities affect a girl’s willingness to attend school, because of “inadequate water, latrines, and disposal mechanisms, or due more directly to fear of being shamed in front of boys and/or experiencing negative repercussions due to mishandling of used menstrual materials” (325). Some girls even
“miss school during their entire menstrual period each month” (330). Inadequate attention to girls’ bodies forces them to miss out on the same educational opportunities as boys.

Girls’ access to education can also be complicated by financial challenges. These challenges can be monetary, time-associated, or related to general poverty. In *What Works in Girls’ Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World*, Barbara Herz and Gene Spelling break down these costs in four ways. First, parents recognize the direct fees of educating their daughters in their tuition costs (7). Second, they identify the indirect fees, such as “parent-teacher associations or to supplement teacher salaries” (7). Third, parents face the indirect costs of “transportation, clothing, and safety,” which “may be greater for girls than boys because of the need to ensure modesty or meet cultural requirements” (7). Finally and perhaps most damaging for girls is the “opportunity cost” of sending girls to school (7). Any time a girl is in school, parents may see that as “lost chore time” and lost “contributions to family income” (8). In addition to the tuition and fees parents may pay for a son, the added opportunity cost may make a girls’ education appear more costly. Educating boys is often perceived as adding value to a family because boys are more likely to enter the workforce. Their education is seen as an investment. Though this perception is connected to cultural gender bias, it is one that many girls face around the world.

What’s more, girls are not always taught by women. In “Research Perspective for Understanding Women’s Education,” M. D. Usha Devi articulates that “women teachers are very essential for success of girls’ education” (1280). But fewer teachers are women than men, because as Rudo Gaidzanwa explains, “the actual problem is the social context for productive work for men and women. Women’s exposure is poor because of the social expectation of women, such as looking after children and doing domestic duties. Academic networks are male
dominated” (Kuuya 1). Girls may identify better with female teachers and parents may insist on a female teacher for their daughter, but cultural gender bias inhibits girls’ education at the teacher level, as well. Culturally specific struggles with distance, safety, sanitary care, and finances are pervasive challenges in girls’ education in the developing world, and these are only a few of the numerous toils that girls face.

While there are many challenges associated with girls’ education, its life-altering benefits are more than enough to encourage change. It is important to keep in mind that these are benefits as defined by Westerners, not women from the developing world. Nevertheless, the potential benefits are striking. The benefits of girls’ education grow with each passing day as other issues in the world arise. In “Women and Illiteracy: The Interplay of Gender Subordination and Poverty,” Nelly Stromquist summarizes that women “show benefits equal to or greater than those derived by men,” because of the effects women can have on communities (97). Generally, “more education for women results in fewer children per family, less infant mortality, marriage at a later age, healthier children, and better-reared and educated children” (97). According to a one hundred-country World Bank study, women with four years of additional education have “roughly one birth” fewer than women without these years (Herz 4). Likewise, a study in Brazil finds that “illiterate women have an average of six children each, while literate women have an average 2.5 children each” (Herz 4). With smaller families, women are better able to ensure the health and education of her children, thus creating a foundation for their success.

Educating girls can also increase their knowledge of HIV/AIDS, including prevention (Sommer 326). A study in Zambia found that “AIDS spreads twice as fast among uneducated girls,” and “young rural Ugandans with secondary education are three times less likely than those with no education to be HIV positive” (Herz 5). Increasing education not only of HIV-specific
subjects, but also health in general can reduce the likelihood of girls engaging in “risky behavior” (Bellamy 49). For example, “life skills programs also incorporate instruction on health, hygiene, and nutrition” (Bellamy 49). Girls’ and women’s health drastically improves from having the knowledge not only of health benefits, but also of health resources. Women are more likely than men to pay attention to these health benefits because information on pregnancy and sexual health directly affects their own bodies and their children’s bodies. By keeping girls in school, they are more likely to be exposed to information that can drastically affect not only their health, but the health of their future children. Thus, girls’ education creates a ripple effect for later generations.

This ripple effect not only impacts health, but also education in general. A recent study shows that women’s education has “more impact than men’s education on children’s schooling” (Herz 4). Educated women are more likely to send their daughters to school and create a continually more educated generation (Herz 4). For the girls themselves, it also provides the confidence needed to accomplish personal goals, participate in local politics, and make individual decisions (Herz 5). Education provides empowerment, which is an unparalleled creator of change (Herz 5). Herz and Spelling explain that this “empowerment of women comes from greater years of education—but it also comes as women catch up with men in education even when average levels of education remain quite low” (5). In one way, empowering women can increase women’s participation in politics (6). For example, a recent study demonstrates that “educated Bangladeshi women are three times as likely as illiterate women to participate in political meetings” (6). Likewise, research in India shows that “women with no formal schooling are less likely to resist violence than women with some schooling” (6). In all aspects of their lives—family, health, safety, community involvement—women benefit from education. And
when women benefit, the community benefits, as well—from broader representation, new perspectives, and the ripple effect to future generations.

The state of girls’ education sheds light on the state of gender equality. Jill Blackmore describes that “access, participation, and levels of achievement in education are arguably primary indicators of how women and girls are faring in globalized societies” (243). With the right approach to creating change, there is immense potential for creating equal education around the world and thus fostering gender equality. By examining specific countries and hearing women within the countries, my project demonstrates this potential. My project is one small attempt to affect change. Though the women I interview come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, they all speak to the potential benefits of expanded educational opportunities for girls around the world. In an increasingly globalized world, change not only ripples within communities, but also among communities across the globe. By planting the seed of gender equality in one locale, it may grow to encapsulate multiple regions. In concluding her study, Devi articulates that “research in the field of women’s education do not appear to reflect either the feminist theoretical propositions or the genuine concerns of the nation and its priorities” (1282). My study attempts to bridge this gap.
Methodology

On various Wednesday mornings in spring 2015, I rode the Chicago Transit Authority el train red line for two hours to volunteer as an English language tutor at Pan-African Association (PAA) on the north side of Chicago. A non-profit organization, PAA helps African and Southeast Asian refugees, asylees, and immigrants transition from a refugee agency to the “real world.” One particular Wednesday morning, I spent some time working with Dusabe—a female refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As we struggled over the alphabet and word association, Dusabe finally landed on the correct pronunciation. She raised her voice so I could hear, and I said, “Yes! That’s correct. Good.” A shining smile broke across her face.

I returned to PAA to work with more women like Dusabe. Women with unique life experiences—women with stories to tell. When I traveled as a housing volunteer in Peru, I explained my desire to hear these stories to a fellow volunteer whose parents emigrated from Pakistan. My research relies on accounts from these women who now live in the United States (U.S.)—Cecile from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sirah from Guinea, May from Burma, and Nayla from Pakistan. To encourage disclosure and protect privacy, I assigned these women pseudonyms.

I conducted Cecile, Sirah, and May’s interviews on the PAA premises at 6163 N. Broadway, Chicago. Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes, because although each woman was English literate, her lexicon was limited. Anticipating this limitation, I created consent forms and interview questions using plain English language. At the request of the organization, the PAA clients collected twenty-five dollar gift certificates to Target and five dollar Ventra public transit cards to compensate them for their participation. As explained by PAA, these clients are low income and therefore should be reimbursed for their time. What’s
more, these women’s statuses as refugees shape their stories differently than Nayla’s story in Pakistan. I interviewed Nayla on the North Central College campus. She is fluent in English; therefore, while I asked the same questions, our interview lasted more than twice the time of my interviews at PAA. Fortunately, Nayla enjoys a more economically stable lifestyle than the refugee women I spoke to, so she was not compensated. I asked these women questions regarding their day-to-day school experiences as girls, their ideas about what constitutes a quality education, their interests (or lack-there-of) in school, and their family’s opinions on education.

To provide additional perspectives, I examined these interviews in tandem with women’s memoirs from the native countries of the women I interviewed. I sought to find compatible memoirs for my interviews in terms of location, so as not to generalize the cultures of West Africa, Central Africa, Southeast Asia, or South Asia. Multiple perspectives help demonstrate the different kinds of experiences women can have within certain cultures. Perhaps not surprisingly, it proved difficult to find published, first-hand perspectives from native women within some of these countries. Many of the texts I discovered in my research—particularly on areas of Africa—were written either from the perspective of a Westerner visiting a culture or a man within the culture. These conditions demonstrate two things: one, that much of the literature on women’s education in the developing world is presented from a Westerner’s view point; and two, that women’s voices are not elevated as frequently as men’s in those countries. My project seeks to elevate women’s voices within their cultures, not silence them.

Though I seek to represent the countries I study, I have encountered certain limitations. Published written texts like the memoirs I employ undergo a series of editorial procedures—namely, editing and proofreading—that can alter the voice represented in the text. More dangerously, foreign texts may be modified by Western publishers. These conditions
differentiate written texts from the oral texts (interviews) that I rely on, which are not censored. Although, by interviewing women who now reside in the U.S., rather than women still in their home countries, these oral texts face a different limitation. These women’s views are inevitably influenced by a change in locale; new Western processes may alter their perceptions of their home countries. What’s more, they may struggle with thinking critically about their culture while still honoring their heritage. Despite these limitations, their voices are still valuable and provide a more compelling perspective than that of a Westerner who entered their home countries. And while memoirs can also be altered for a certain audience, in combining memoirs with interviews, I attempt to give justice to women’s voices within the cultures.

That being said, it is never my intention to generalize the people within a culture. I never seek to perpetuate stereotypes of the developing world (i.e. though a woman from the DRC may come from a low income family, not all women in the country experience the same circumstances). My methodology shares the thoughts and opinions of women on girls’ education in their own contexts. Each woman came from a different background—poor or wealthy, educated or not. And though their accounts are from different regions and communities, their stories demonstrate that no culture, no country, and no woman can be generalized about based on one account.
Transnational Feminisms

In this project, I deploy feminist tactics. My method is specifically informed by global and transnational feminisms. As a white Westerner, I am situated differently in this feminist discussion than the women I interview; however, these feminisms encourage us to develop a transnational perspective in understanding other cultures and advocating for women’s voices. The plural feminisms recognizes the “diversity, complexity, and contested nature” of the global women’s movement (Smith 1). Across the world, women have raised their voices on different issues rooted in gender and specific to their locales. This movement is too intricate to fall into a single definition of feminism, thus it becomes “feminisms” (Smith 1). In Global Feminisms Since 1945, Bonnie Smith recognizes that “there is and has been no single global feminism, no single issue, nor single way of pursuing women’s ends” (9). Nevertheless, feminism can be defined broadly as the “broad goal of challenging and changing gender relations that subordinate women to men and that thereby also differentially advantage some women and men relative to others” (Ferree vii). In an increasingly globalized world, the “transnational contexts” are also “increasingly important” to this definition (Ferree vii).

While feminisms generally speak to the hierarchy of men and women, an unfortunate hierarchy also exists within feminisms. The idea of multiple feminisms is often challenged by a particular Western view of feminism. Western women tend to “dominate” feminism—to define what it is, what it stands for, and where it came from (Smith 6, 7). In “Introduction: Citizenship and Migration Theory Engendered,” Seyla Benhabib and Judith Resnik address that “where a person is—literally and physically—has profound effects on that person’s life” (1). Where a woman is physically located affects how she is treated as a woman and how she practices feminism. Because of this, Western women’s practice of feminism can be radically different
from that of Southern women (women from Southern parts of the world, like Africa, South America, etc.) (Smith 8). Transnationalism can join these multiple feminisms by connecting the international space with the local (Ferree vii). Transnational feminists work across their “national borders” to “offer new leverage for local activists” (Ferree viii). They seek to foster better communication and understanding between women of different cultures. Valentine M. Moghadam adds that “growing literature on the globalization of women’s rights movements” draws on feminism’s “participation in, and contribution to, a transnational public sphere” (255). Women’s rights exist in a global context. Moghadam further defines the objectives of global and transnational feminisms as “bring[ing] about women’s equality, autonomy, and empowerment” (256). Transnational feminisms still address the general definition of feminism in “challenging and changing gender relations,” but it does so in a globalized world (Ferree vii).

Despite transnational feminists’ emphasis on connecting across boundaries, they still battle hierarchical issues within feminisms. In white Western women’s practice of feminism, they commonly apply their Western problems onto women of different ethnicities in different parts of the world. This perspective is problematic in many ways because these problems do not always apply equally. For example, Western women tend to assume that Muslim women are oppressed by wearing a hijab, when in reality, it is often the woman’s choice to wear it. In doing this, Western women silence women in different parts of the world and ignore their cultural traditions or challenges. This ignorance can create new problems. For instance, in parts of Africa, “men and women shared well-defined segments of political authority” (Smith 6). Ironically, when “Western dominance” was introduced, this “established” and equal way of life was threatened by Western patriarchy (Smith 6). By imposing Western ways of life and neglecting transnational feminisms, Western women actually created gender imbalance, rather than
fostering equality. Westerners tend to assume that their way of life is paramount to other cultures. In this assumption, they can minimize and forget challenges women around the world face. For example, the day-to-day complaints of Western women are seen as “utter luxuries compared to the real harms of sexual practice” to Southern women (Smith 8). Without transnationalism, the diverse challenges of women worldwide are ignored.

Global feminisms account for the diversity inherent in a global women’s movement. Across the world, “women’s activism is consistently rich, complex, and vast” (Smith 9). While my project cannot come close to covering the complexity of women’s issues in different parts of the world, it deploys transnational feminist tactics to recognize this complexity and guide my methodology and mindset.
Education in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

As I examine girls’ education in different parts of the world, I’m informed by these transnational feminisms. Because each country I study is different from the others, these tactics allow me to sensitively study their respective characteristics. I first studied the DRC, because this is where my interviews began. According to Dennis Cordell and Ntsomo Payanzo, the DRC is located in Central Africa and is the second largest country on the continent. Over two hundred languages are spoken in the DRC, but the official language is French. The DRC is a primarily Christian country and approximately two-thirds of the land is rural and comprised of small scattered villages. For years, the DRC has experienced civil war and conflict (Gettleman, “DR Congo,” Cordell). In 2012, more than two million people were internally displaced in the country (Central 171). With Cordell, René Lemarchand elaborates that the DRC’s state of education is affected by this unrest, as evinced in the shortage of funding, lack of facilities, and inadequate number of teachers. Despite these burdens, at age six, Congolese children begin their compulsory primary education which lasts for six years. If they choose, they may continue onto secondary education until age eighteen. Though twelve years of education are offered, Congolese boys attend school for an average eleven years while girls typically attend school for eight years (Central 168). Congolese girls end their education approximately three years sooner than boys. Parallel, where nearly seventy-seven percent of Congolese men are considered literate, only fifty-seven percent of women meet the same standards (Central 168). A country facing conflict and unrest, the DRC struggles to provide equal education for its citizens.
Cecile: Education through the Eyes of a Mother

“My dream is that she can get a private school, so that she can learn and become someone.”

Cecile, my first interviewee, experienced many of the challenges impoverished children faced in the DRC as a result of the country’s unrest (see Appendix A). In examining these statistics with Cecile’s account, we are granted a fuller, more humanized understanding of girls’ education in the DRC. Cecile’s personal views are shaped by her roles as a mother and as a refugee. Raised in the DRC, twenty-nine year old Cecile traveled to the U.S. in March, 2015, after living as a refugee in Uganda for several years. Cecile is married and has a five-year-old daughter. Her experiences with education have been dynamic and often uncertain. As a child, she attended a local primary school in her village. She didn’t return to school until her twenties when her family relocated to Uganda, due to the violence in their country. At a Ugandan church, Cecile studied the English language with other adult women who did not finish their educations. The church offered a type of certification for the program, which encouraged Cecile to continue her education. Now a refugee in Chicago, she’s continuing her English as a Second Language (ESL) training at a local college. When reflecting on her educational experiences, Cecile often views them through the lens of motherhood; she frequently describes her thoughts and opinions in terms of what education can mean for her daughter. In our brief but enlightening conversation, Cecile both laughed and cried. The stories she shared provide a first-hand account of a girl’s education in the DRC.

Cecile’s recollection of primary school is sporadic, not only because she is an adult reminiscing, but also because her school attendance was somewhat unpredictable. In her six years of primary education, Cecile attended school “on-and-off.” Her parents could not always pay her school fees, and as a result, she could not always attend school. Cecile explains that
“studying was somehow hard.” Because of her irregular attendance, it was difficult for Cecile to keep up with her classmates. This unreliable schooling caused Cecile to “struggle” and eventually “quit.” Unfortunately, as a mother, Cecile now faces similar financial concerns as she sends her daughter to school in the U.S. As a “low-income earner,” she articulates that she wishes her daughter could attend an expensive private school, rather than the affordable government (public) school she attends now, because “even in Africa, they say that private schools give more attention and they teach children… different things from government schools.” When examining the Zimbabwean education system, Lloy Sachikonye and Fay Chung explain that “private schools, tend, on the whole, to be better funded as fees and other parental contributions are much higher” (76). While they address a different country, the logic likely applies to Cecile’s viewpoint. Though Cecile fuses her perception of Congolese schools with American schools, she is motivated by the desire to raise a well-educated daughter. Cecile fears a similar problem for her daughter that she experienced as a girl—deprivation of quality education.

When Cecile did attend school, she faced more than one challenge. In the DRC, public schools are often far from a child’s home. In her experience, not only did Cecile endure a lengthy walk to and from school every day, but she also missed meals. She explains that if a child didn’t have the ability to bring food to school or if the school didn’t offer food, then “you stay hungry and you have to wait until you go back home.” For Cecile, distance from school was not only a matter of walking—it was a matter of hunger. It is unlikely that Cecile was performing at her best in school if she was hungry until she returned home at the end of the day.

While Cecile voiced her concerns and gratifications associated with education, she also unknowingly raised other compelling challenges. Though she identifies finances as an challenge she experienced as a child in the DRC and one that affects her daughter in the U.S., she doesn’t
identify it as an challenge that will affect her own education in the U.S., though she expresses how finances may determine her chances of obtaining a degree. Cecile expressed that after obtaining her ESL certificate, she would like to obtain her General Education Development certificate (GED) and eventually attend college to pursue a nursing degree—a dream of hers since she was a girl. But a sense of uncertainty accompanies this dream because of her financial situation. Cecile explains that she “still doesn’t know if I’m going to get grants for the college.” Funding for her education is a challenge that Cecile experiences even in adulthood. Education affordability is a pervasive challenge for Cecile, one that may potentially determine her and her daughter’s futures.

Even so, Cecile identifies success as a benefit of education. In speaking of her daughter, she reveals, “My dream is that she can get a private school, so that she can learn and become someone.” Cecile’s admiration of private schools is prompted by the idea that an improved education will translate into a better future. Even as a girl, Cecile believed that education created opportunity. She explains that in the DRC, school children boasted about the successful “doctor… nurse… or lawyer” they would be when they grew up. Attending school suggested they had the opportunity to achieve these goals. Cecile adds that, unfortunately, things didn’t “work out well” for her. Though Cecile’s education in the DRC didn’t lead to the future she desired, she still hopes that education can help her daughter achieve a similar goal. While Cecile’s experiences attending school are distinctly her own, they help reveal the school experience of girls in the DRC. The elements of education she raises illuminate how she values education in her own context.
Marie: A Colonized and Gendered Education

Cecile provides excellent opinions based off of her experiences with education, but her experiences are just that—hers. Cecile’s is only one viewpoint standing in for thousands of women from the DRC. In an attempt to better represent these viewpoints, I’ve included one more. *Young People of West Africa*, published in 1961, by Charles Rind Joy provides compelling, first-hand accounts from children and teenagers across the region about their everyday lives. While this text offers valuable first-hand perspectives, it’s time of publication affects its subject matter. There is a difference in world view in comparison to Cecile’s contemporary view and the publishers themselves may represent Africans in a specific way that potentially stereotypes or fetishizes them. Read and analyzed with this in mind, the account can still provide a valuable perspective.

Marie Ntela, a young woman in what was at the time the Republic of the Congo, speaks about her unique experiences attending school. Marie transitioned between schools several times in her childhood (191). She started her schooling at a small school run by the Salvation Army in her village where her father was also a teacher (191). But when Marie’s father began training as a Salvation Army officer, Marie’s education also began to change (190). She moved schools as her father moved for work, at one point staying with her grandparents and attending school in their village (191). The biggest change in Marie’s education occurred when she moved in with a female European Salvation Army captain—Captain Beney (191). This living situation determined the educational opportunities Marie was offered. In exchange for cleaning her house and preparing meals, Marie was able to attend a large established school in the city (191). She became a maid in exchange for an education. Marie’s transportation by car to school was always arranged by the Salvation Army and her day-to-day schedule was consistent (191).
Because Marie was given the opportunity to live with a captain, she did not face the same financial challenges that Cecile faced. This situation then meant she did not experience the same challenges concerning distance and inconsistent schooling that Cecile did. Living with Captain Beney also exposed Marie to different opportunities, like communicating with European officials and participating in after school activities like the Girl Scouts (192). But this involvement also demonstrates how Westernized Marie’s life became in the Republic of the Congo because of her living situation. Marie learned to cook European dishes and became familiar with American holidays, like Thanksgiving (192). Marie’s life and education are fundamentally colonized and her education is dependent on colonialism. This raises the question of whether or not embracing education in the DRC also means embracing colonization. In nearly every account of this project, Westernization has taken hold of girls’ experiences and expectations of education.

Marie’s experiences demonstrate that African women cannot be generalized. Despite coming from the same country, Marie and Cecile experienced vastly different encounters with education. Marie’s educational experiences growing up as a young girl in Africa were certainly affected by the Salvation Army; however, this association allowed her to receive a quality education. Though it is empowering that she was able to go to school, she only achieved this by fulfilling a gendered role as a housewife and maid. Marie didn’t escape the stereotypical role of women in her country; instead, she had to enter this role willingly in order to gain the opportunity to eventually leave it. Marie’s discussion of her everyday life does not directly reference the challenges or benefits of her education like Cecile’s interview does, but her account still provides a valuable first-hand perspective of a young girl’s life in the Republic of the Congo.
Education in Guinea

From the DRC, I move West across Africa to Guinea on the Atlantic coast. As with the DRC, an overview of Guinea provides valuable background to my study of girls’ education in the country. According to Thomas E. O’Toole, Guinea is a primarily Muslim country. While many indigenous languages are spoken in Guinea, the official language is French. The country has experienced much unrest over the years, both within its own government and from surrounding countries (“Guinea”). Much of this political unrest is due to the country’s different presidents, and this unrest has spilled over into different aspects of Guinean life, like education (O’Toole). According to O’Toole, Guinea’s “educational facilities at all levels declined in the last decade” of the country’s first president. This president banned private schools, but they reopened after his death in 1984. Typically, Guinean children begin their compulsory primary education at age seven and attend for six years. Secondary education also offers an additional six-year program, but it is not compulsory. Most instruction is offered in French and local languages. While Guinea offers schooling for its youth, its literacy rates are “below average for Western Africa.” Only fifty-two percent of Guinean males are literate and an even less substantial thirty percent of Guinean females meet the same standards (Central 312). And while twelve years of schooling are offered, Guinean boys attend school for an average ten years and girls attend for an average seven years (Central 312). The damage created by Guinea’s first president appears to be enduring, with little improvement in more than two decades.
“But me, I like to go to school to learn more and to have more experience.”

An overview of Guinea’s public school system interestingly compliments twenty-five year old Sirah’s experiences in the country (see Appendix B). Sirah traveled from Guinea to the U.S. in 2013. She attended both primary and secondary private schools in Guinea, but was unable to finish her education in her country. When she was young, she started her schooling at an Arabic school and attended for five years, but eventually left to attend a French school closer to her home for four additional years. Her school was segregated by gender; in other words, different teachers taught the boys and the girls. After class, Sirah attended an after school program where students could ask questions and review their lessons from the day. After finishing “French school” as she calls it, Sirah attended high school for approximately three years, but was unable to finish for reasons she did not disclose. It’s possible her refugee status affected the end of her education in Guinea. Though not explicitly stated, it is safe to assume that Sirah came from a family that was financially stable. She was able to attend private schools as an adolescent and even receive after-school tutoring. These positive experiences certainly affected how she discusses education. She truly loved school, but was still able to recognize certain challenges in her education. In the U.S., Sirah is currently working to achieve her ESL certificate from a local college in Chicago. She hopes that she can also obtain her GED certificate and eventually attend college to pursue a degree in accounting.

In our conversation, when asked to describe aspects of school that she disliked, Sirah identified how her female friends struggled with challenges of finances and distance. Sirah explains that “in my country, the public school is not too much,” but the private schools are much more expensive. She elaborates that she had several friends who began attending private
school, but “if they parent say they didn’t have money to pay for them, then okay I will stop the school.” And attending a less expensive public school was not always an option, because the public schools were too far for the girls to travel on a daily basis. There were only one or two in her “area” and “too far” to travel to any other public schools. Many young girls may have been unable to attend school simply because there was not an affordable school nearby. Sirah was fortunate to have the funds to attend not only private school, but also a school closer to her home.

While she identifies challenges associated with education, she also elaborates on the many benefits for girls. At the very least, Sirah immediately recognizes that by going to school, you’re able to “have more friend.” Attending school is a social activity. It helped expose Sirah to other girls her age and create friendships. What’s more, Sirah loved the opportunity to learn, a benefit that resonates with her. In her words, “I like to go to school to learn more and to have more experience.” This “experience” is a special opportunity in light of the alternative. Sirah explains that the only alternative for girls who do not attend school is becoming a housewife. She asserts that “if you didn’t go to school, you didn’t have anything in your head. You’re only at home cooking and do the house.” Staying at home completing housework does not interest Sirah, a woman exposed to what education can offer. She sees school as an opportunity for girls to learn and experience opportunities outside of the home. It’s also possible that she also sees this benefit as an opportunity to be successful later in life. As an adult, she still desires to get a degree in college; therefore, she enjoys learning and sees education as a tool for success.

Sirah also mentioned other interesting items, but did not officially identify them as challenges or benefits of education. When asked to describe what her schooling was like, Sirah immediately mentioned the regular beatings students received for poor work. She describes, “in my country, you have to learn more…the teacher give you something to read, to memorize, if
you don’t memorize that, if you go to school, they will beat you.” The beatings instilled a sense of commitment in Sirah by encouraging her to complete her school work, but this encouragement was based on fear. She describes this practice in a way that suggests solidarity; Sirah does not identify this as a challenge in schooling, but rather as a motivator. She prefaces it by mentioning that in Guinea, the students “have” to learn more. It is understood in their education that students must go above and beyond average expectations. These expectations may be tied to the country’s belief system or even Western development goals, for they correlate with Sirah’s family’s opinions on education. Her parents did not attend school, but they encouraged her to attend. Sirah explains that “in my country, they don’t force you to go to school. If you don’t want you don’t have to go to school.” Her parents did not want to go to school, so they did not. But Sirah was interested in school and her parents wanted her to go as well. This combination provided ample reason to attend. Fortunately, Sirah had the resources to realize this desire to attend school, unlike many other girls. From the beginning, school was something that Sirah always wanted. She closes our conversation by reiterating this very fact: “I like everything about school.”
Fatou: A Catholic School for a Muslim Girl

Like Marie’s story, Fatou Soumah’s story from Guinea is shared in *Young People of West Africa* by Charles Rind Joy. Fatou’s account suffers from similar constraints due to the time of publication. Nevertheless, her description of education in Guinea adds an interesting angle to Sirah’s account. Fatou is from the small village of Koba in Guinea (70). She is approximately fifteen years old and comes from a polygamous family (71). She is the oldest of her mothers’ five children, but has four additional brothers and sisters from her father’s other wife (71). Fatou is also Muslim, which affects how she experienced school in Guinea (73). Fatou is unique in her village, because most of the younger children in her village do not attend school, despite the village having a small school (72). In her words, “many of the people don’t think it’s necessary” for the children to attend school (72). She also makes the clear distinction that the children “cannot read or write” in her village (70). Unlike these children, in her youth Fatou attended several different schools. She “had six winters,” or was six years old, when she first attended school at a government-run institution in Conakry, the nearby capital of Guinea (72). She attended this school—the École du Centre—for six years, then transitioned to the Collège de Jeunes Filles (the Girls’ School) for one year for reasons she does not clarify (72). She then took an examination and entered the Catholic School of St. Joseph de Cluny (72).

Fatou describes the Catholic school as “a big school with about one thousand pupils in it, right opposite the cathedral in the city” (72). Like Marie, Fatou’s education is defined by colonialism. Her education is based on Western religion and subjects. From her description, this Catholic school must be more difficult to get into and perhaps even provides a higher quality education. The school offers quality resources like a cinema in the school that shows “educational films” (73). A private school like this may also have been more expensive. When
Fatou attended the first two schools in Conackry, she lived with her brother in the city (72). But at the Catholic school, Fatou was a “boarder” and lived at the school (73). Though she never speaks of it, this raises the question of school fees, because her father was only a small shop owner. It is apparent that her family valued education for their children—including the girls—because they took pains to send Fatou to schools outside their village, including likely expensive and competitive private schools. Despite being Muslim, Fatou still attended a Catholic school. This suggests that quality education took precedent over religious beliefs in her family.

Fatou has great aspirations because of her schooling. At school, her subjects are history, geography, science, literature, French, English, Spanish, mathematics, and physical training (73). She takes pride in the fact that her school is “exactly like the same kind of school in France” (73). Though Fatou likes her multidisciplinary education, she wants to be a nurse when she grows up (73). She describes her education with a sense of contentment. She has a strict schedule at the Catholic school regarding times of class, study, rest, and meals (73). However, her day differs slightly from those of the other girls at the school. Because she is Muslim, Fatou does not go to the chapel at 6:30 a.m. with the other girls, but instead says her Muslim prayers independently every morning and evening (73).

Though Fatou provides interesting insights into her education in Guinea, these viewpoints come from the perspective of a young girl, not an adult woman. Because of this, she does not voice specific opinions on the challenges or benefits of education, but her perspective still offers valuable descriptors of what girls’ education is like in Guinea.
Education in Burma

After examining and learning from different countries in Africa, I move to Burma in Southeast Asia. A glimpse at this region expands the reach of my project by incorporating new cultural norms, governmental policies, and family values. According to Maung Htin Aung and David Steinberg, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, otherwise known as Burma, is the northernmost country of Southeast Asia. The official language of the country is Myanmar, or Burmese, and the country is made up of several large ethnic groups, including the Burmans, the Karen, and many more. The majority of the country practices Buddhism and is comprised of large villages across the territory. Burma was ruled by a “military junta” between 1997 and 2011, which was often considered an “oppressive” rule (Aung, “Myanmar”). This type of government played a large role in how the Burmese lived their lives, particularly in their education (Aung). With Aung, Michael Arthur Aung-Thwin explains, Burma has a “long tradition of educational achievement.” The Burmese educational system comprises of five years of compulsory primary education beginning at age five and a four year and subsequent two year cycle of secondary education. Though in some “remote” areas of the country formal schooling may not be available and the country is burdened by more than one million internally displaced peoples (IDP’s) and stateless persons, Burma’s literacy rates are impressive (Aung, Central 120). Approximately ninety-five percent of Burmese males are literate and approximately ninety percent of females are literate (Central 117). Though there is a small gender discrepancy, generally the educational rates are similar between the sexes. Of the eleven total years of education offered, the school life expectancy for both girls and boys is nine years (Central 117). As a developing country, Burma has well-maintained educational standards for all its peoples, which may be due in part to a society influenced by military rule.
May: Irregular Education and Steadfast Career Dreams

“I would say a good school would teach not out of the book all the time, but it would teach what the real world is.”

While May’s experiences were not always directly influenced by military rule, her account helps inform the statistics given on Burma’s educational system (see Appendix C). Twenty-year-old May came to the U.S. when she was thirteen. Originally from Burma, May left her country as a refugee and lived in a refugee camp in Thailand for two years. May has no children and currently lives in Chicago with her mother. Because of her different relocation experiences as an adolescent, she’s attended school in Burma, Thailand, and the U.S. When she lived in Burma, May went to local schools from the equivalent of preschool to the beginning of high school and learned math, science, history, art, English, and Burmese. When her family relocated to Thailand, she continued at a high school level in the camp school. Because the school she attended was in a refugee camp, it was led by Christian volunteers from the U.S. and it focused mainly on English and math, because they understood that the refugees would eventually make their way to the U.S. Once she relocated to the U.S., May’s educational credits did not transfer into the American educational system. Though she was at a high school level in Southeast Asia, she was reverted back to eighth grade middle school in the U.S. and eventually had to start high school from the beginning. Because of her young age, May vividly remembers her educational experiences and her excellent English allows her to articulate them to English-speakers very well. She reflects on her experiences in light of her future: She is close to graduating from a local Chicago college with a degree in business management and will attend a larger university to pursue her degree in hospitality management.
In our conversation, May thought critically about her education in Burma. Most of the challenges that she identified with education were not gender-focused, but she did mention other aspects of her education that had gendered causes. Among the challenges that May identified directly was the punishment many students faced in school. Even before I asked May what she disliked about school, like Sirah, she identified the whippings simply as an aspect of school in Burma. She explained, “You know how in other countries they don’t really have, like, children’s right and stuff, so they actually whip the students.” The school whippings were as much a reality as school uniforms—an aspect of school that May feels is an important representation of a student. If students failed to wear their uniforms to school, they were promptly whipped. In our conversation, she mentioned the whippings on three separate occasions and laughed every time she spoke of them. Even when describing that students were “kind of scared” of getting whipped, she laughed. Her laughter seemed to lighten the dark topic of abuse or potentially demonstrate the cursory attitude she has towards whipping students. It could also be a natural cultural reaction to discussing an unpleasant topic. May identified specifically how the threat of a whipping took a toll on her in school, because she was “too scared to not know what I’m doing in school.” Her desire to do well in school was chiefly driven by the fear of being whipped.

May also identified teaching strategies as problematic in Burma’s education system. When describing education in Burma in comparison to the education she received in the U.S., she explains that in the U.S., teachers are primarily “explaining” and students can “write your own sentences”; whereas, in Burma, students must “memorize the sentence and write exactly what [the teacher] teaches you.” May makes a clear distinction between these two teaching styles. She also describes her local school in Burma as a lower quality school, because “all we do is memorize stuff. Just… like only think about what they’re teaching us and if we can recite it.”
May values education in terms of the amount of free and critical thinking a student is able to accomplish while at school. She identifies that a good school “would teach not out of the book all the time, but it would teach what the real world is.” May saw memorization and text-focused lessons as problems in her education in Burma and considers the opposite of these experiences—her education in the U.S.—as a quality education.

Like Cecile and Sirah, May identifies money as an challenge associated with education. She explains that a school—regardless of place—should be tuition-free. She references how some colleges and universities in Europe do not require tuition payments of their students. In referring to Chicago, she says, “some people in the city, they don’t even have money.” She is acutely aware of the financial struggles of many people in the city, perhaps because of her refugee status. She potentially implies that by making school tuition-free, low-income individuals would have a chance at education that they may not otherwise have.

In our conversation, May brought up other compelling items that she did not specifically recognize as challenges affecting girls’ education; in particular, gender bias in Burmese culture. When speaking about her family, May discussed how her parents sent her brother to a city farther away from their home to attend a better school. She describes how he was sent to “learn more stuff” and her mom thought that “he’ll be more… like there’ll be more educated… there’s more education system… higher education” in a larger city. She describes that in her small town, they don’t have a “high education system,” and she mentions how the students focus on memorization in their learning. By higher education, I believe May means a higher quality education, rather than the definition of post-secondary education the phrase carries in the U.S. While May had to stay home to attend a local, lower quality school, her parents sent her brother away to a better school. May had to bike nearly thirty minutes to arrive at her local school every
day, but her parents paid for her brother to board at his school, which was likely more expensive. By sending their son and not May, this decision suggests that a better education was valued for the boy in the family, not the girl. However, May did not directly recognize this as an challenge. Rather, she sympathized with her brother, because he has to “learn more stuff” and therefore “it’s harder for him.” Though she explains that she thinks she and her brother had a similar school experience, she points out many details that suggest otherwise. It is important to note that this gender bias may not be as pervasive as it appears. May’s mother attended college in Burma and became a registered nurse, while her father did not even complete his primary education. This demonstrates that while gender issues exist, they are not all-encompassing.
Zoya: Education Across Borders

In *Undaunted: My Struggle for Freedom and Survival in Burma*, we hear from Zoya Phan, a young woman from rural Burma whose life is shaped by the unrest in her country. Zoya’s account crosses May’s in many places. Zoya grew up a member of the Karen Tribe in Burma, but when she was only a teenager, her family fled the country as refugees (1, 79). Zoya’s experiences as a refugee are complex, because they intricately entwined with her family’s values and Burma’s politics. Much like May, Zoya started her education in Burma, transitioned to school in Thailand, and eventually moved on to higher education in Thailand and England (17, 122, 187, 223). Her educational experiences in Burma also inform her understanding of Western-style education. Zoya’s education was diverse and often divided by time and place, and she describes it in great detail. She recognizes both challenges and benefits associated with school from her own personal experiences.

In Burma, Zoya’s first experience with school was not because her parents sent her there, but rather because she needed a babysitter (17). When she was four years old, Zoya’s adopted older brother brought her with him to school so that he could watch over her (17). But at age five, Zoya began attending a local primary school and thoroughly “loved” it (37, 60). She describes the “blue skirt and white blouse” of their uniforms at school—an aspect of schooling that May also stressed as important (37). “Luckily,” Zoya was able to wear her older sister’s old uniform, because some students in her school were too poor to afford the uniforms (37). In our conversation, May described how students were whipped for not wearing uniforms to school. This may be why Zoya is “lucky” to have her older sister’s uniform (37). Zoya also describes what primary school was like. She explains how boys and girls sat in separate rows and how they studied science, math, geography, Burmese, English, Karen, and politics (37). They even had
“citizenship education” lessons in which they learned how to be respectful of people in their community, especially the elderly (39).

Zoya’s school subjects are of interest, because they demonstrate how even children were involved in the politics of Burma, a country experiencing political unrest. These topics could potentially have been government-influenced nationalistic propaganda for children. When explaining the details of the curriculum, Zoya explains, “It wasn’t designed to make you think, it was designed to make you learn. I just memorized our basic politics lessons, learning the words and definitions by heart in order to pass the exams” (Phan 72). Her real political knowledge was gained through day-to-day observation in her country (Phan 72). This supports May’s identification of problematic memorization versus individual thinking in the Burmese education system. She stressed the importance of experiential learning. In her own way, Zoya, too, recognizes this issue. She did not truly learn about politics by memorization in school; rather, she learned from life experience.

Not only did Zoya love school, but she also wanted desperately to do well in school. In her first year, she was first in her class and expresses the joy of seeing the pride on her mother’s face (38). This desire to do well may have had to do with meeting parental expectations, but it also had to do with her personal expectations. As a young girl, Zoya had dreams of eventually attending a university, but as “children of the resistance,” Zoya and her classmates’ only options for attending higher education were overseas (73). She explains that “many of my school friends shared this dream of education and a bright future, even though the gulf between our situation and where we hoped to end up was enormous” (73). Like Cecile, Sirah, and May, Zoya sees education as an opportunity for success. Also like these women, Zoya faces many obstacles as a
refugee. But the possibility of obtaining a collegiate scholarship provides a motivation for Zoya to pursue her dream.

When her family fled to Thailand, Zoya risked her life to continue her education. At first, she attended the secondary school that was temporarily set up in a section of the refugee camp her family lived in (122). Despite inadequate resources, Zoya and her family accepted the education offered. There were no textbooks in the camp, so the teacher would write entire lessons on the blackboard (123). Zoya’s frustration with memorization returned, because students had to focus on copying the text from the blackboard with little or no explanation following (123). She “often had little real understanding” of what she was learning (123). Zoya’s sister, Bwa Bwa, was frustrated as well. Bwa Bwa finished secondary school in Burma and was hoping to study medicine, but the only course somewhat related to this field in the camp was one on “palm reading and fortune telling” (124). At all levels, it appeared that school in the camp was holding the children back. But when her family moved to a different camp, things changed.

Nearby this camp, a new school was established in a different camp (174). She and her sister were very excited to enroll in classes again, but at a high risk (174). Because they didn’t have “papers” (likely citizenship documents) and were not even supposed to leave the camp, they were at risk of deportation if they were discovered (174). The girls took this risk in order to go to school and reaped high rewards. It was at this school that Zoya learned of the scholarship that sends Burmese students that were victims of the Burmese military regime to college to study business administration (175). Zoya was one of the few students to win this scholarship award and was able to move to the St. Theresa Institute of Technology in Bangkok (185). In college, Zoya’s limitations in early education caught up with her. Unlike her new classmates, she was unfamiliar with computers and learning how to use them was her “biggest challenge” (186). She
was also shocked at how lightly students took their education. Unlike these students, Zoya had
“fought” to attend college (188). She was “amazed that people could treat education with such a
lack of respect” (188). Though she faced challenges, Zoya studied as she “never had before,”
because she constantly remembered everything she had to give up to be there, like her “family,”
her “home country,” and a familiar “environment” (189). Zoya continued to persevere, and
eventually received a scholarship to pursue a master’s degree in the United Kingdom (224).

While she doesn’t necessarily view her education in terms of a gender binary, Zoya’s
deep reflection in her memoir helps shed light on what other young refugee women like Cecile,
Sirah, and May potentially faced in their transitions to education in a new country. Though they
do not directly recognize how clothing, technology, or new student attitudes may have affected
their experiences, it’s likely the other challenges they raise—like finances or distance—are
informed by such experiences. When entering a new culture, refugees are forced into a new way
of life, down to the clothes they wear, manners of transportation, and every day utensils. They
are often expected to “learn how to fit into their new environment.” (Donnelly 7). This cultural
shock may have affected how Cecile, Sirah, and May perceive education in the U.S. as well as
the lens through which they view their education in their home countries.
Finally, I move to South Asia to learn about girls’ education in Pakistan. Examining Burma prior to Pakistan provides an interesting contrast; where public Burmese education had a heavy military influence, Pakistani schools emphasize religion. According to Shahid Javed Burki, Pakistan, a majority Muslim country, is comprised of “five major and several minor ethnic groups,” the largest including the Punjabis and the Pashtuns, otherwise known as Pathans. In Pakistan, English is used for primarily official purposes, but Urdu is recognized as the country’s national language. Pakistan has historically faced much unrest, including political, regional, and religious conflict; it currently holds more than 2.5 million refugees and more than one million IDP’s (Burki, Central 563). A country sharply divided by class, Pakistan unfortunately has a literacy rate “substantially lower than that of many developing countries” (Burki). Approximately sixty-eight percent of Pakistani men are literate, whereas only approximately forty percent of women meet the same standards (Central 561). According to Burki, while most girls attend school, their attendance “progressively diminishes” after primary school. The average school life expectancy for boys is eight years and only seven years for girls. While, in recent years, the number of schools in the country have increased and thus more children have enrolled and more attention has been given to teacher training, education is still not compulsory. In public schools, the government focuses on Islamization of the education. Because of this, more Westernized and wealthy segments of the population choose to send their children to Western-style private schools, which have grown in recent years and have led to a division between Western and Islamic sectors of education. Much of the success of education in Pakistan, as in many developing countries, appears to depend on wealth, because the government cannot provide the resources of quality education for its impoverished citizens.
Nayla: Socioeconomic Status Meets Education

“I had a very happy childhood. And school was a big part of it.”

The influence of wealth on education in Pakistan is evident in Nayla’s childhood experiences (see Appendix D). A Pathan from the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, Nayla traveled to the U.S. when she got married at eighteen years old. Her husband was also from Pakistan, but was attending college in the U.S. Now, Nayla is forty-one and has three children, the eldest twenty-one years old. Nayla’s story is quite different from that of the other women I interviewed. In Pakistan, Nayla came from a very wealthy and “exceptionally educated” family. She describes the large class discrepancy in Pakistan—either people are wealthy or poor and the middle class is virtually nonexistent. Nayla’s family fell into the former category. She had a stable happy childhood and always had necessary resources. Nayla’s perspective is important in this project, because she demonstrates that living in a developing country does not always mean one is impoverished. And while Nayla was informed about the lives of impoverished Pakistanis, she experienced schooling separated from them. In both primary and secondary school, Nayla attended private schools—specifically, an air force school—institutions that affected her positive memories of school. The air force focus of her education made her experience very unique in comparison to many other Pakistani children. The school was Westernized and incredibly disciplined; students learned English, began school at 7:00 a.m., and adhered to a rigid dresscode. When she graduated from high school, Nayla pursued pre-medicine in college, but because of her marriage, she did not complete her degree in Pakistan. After her kids grew up in the U.S., Nayla returned to college at a local university in Illinois, and after eight years of primarily part-time registration, she graduated with an undergraduate degree in health science.
Nayla’s proficiency in English and length of residence in the U.S. greatly affect her perceptions of education. She looks at both her education in Pakistan and the U.S. with a critical eye and recognizes many challenges, both gendered and non-gendered. Broadly, Nayla describes the poor quality of public schools in Pakistan as a major challenge for children’s education. Overall, the conditions are “very, very poor.” She explains that the schools often do not have electricity and the buildings are “falling apart.” Because these are public schools, they are funded insufficiently by the government, which Nayla calls a “poor government,” and typically the only students to attend public schools are children from impoverished families. Thus, the schools are not funded by the community, either. Nayla also considers them low quality because they are “Urdu-medium” schools, not “English-medium.” In Pakistan, the primary language is Urdu, so public schools are taught in Urdu and do not teach English; whereas in private schools, a focus is placed on English proficiency.

Nayla’s perceptions of quality education are informed by her upbringing. Because she was fortunate to come from a financially stable family and experience private schooling, she views a Western-style education as a higher quality education. Nayla explains that language mediums are very important in primary school, because they affect the students later on. If the student decides to pursue a college degree, they will likely struggle if they only studied Urdu, because at the university level, all the textbooks will be in English. Even higher education maintains a Western influence in Pakistan. It is likely that the public schools are not striving to prepare students for higher education because of the average socioeconomic status of the students attending public schools, but if the student does pursue it, they may struggle in comparison to their peers. Nayla explains that if parents “really want their kids to become something, they would not like them to go to public schools.” In other words, attending a public
school is not setting a student up for a successful future—which she equates with a Western future. This challenge goes hand-in-hand with poverty in Pakistan. Nayla explains how people will do anything to send their children to school in the hope of their child becoming someone. However, this dream is not always attainable with other, more pressing financial demands. She explains, “If you have nothing to eat, how can you even think of educating a child? This is the biggest problem you have: to feed them, to have a home, a shelter.” Like Cecile and Sirah, Nayla recognizes how finances play a critical role in a child’s ability to obtain an education, as well as their ability to be successful as a result of it.

Nayla’s family situation affected her unique educational experiences in many ways. Because of her grandfather and father highly valued education for women, Nayla distinguishes herself from many other Pathan women. In the area of Pakistan that Nayla is from, she describes the community as a “very strongminded and fierce people.” But in this community, “women are not encouraged” to go to school and are not “given the same status as boys.” This cultural factor contributes to how girls experience education in Pakistan, particularly in this one community within the country. But this also connects to the general gender bias that exists in the country, especially among wealthier families. Nayla explains that “even if they can,” parents “would not spend that much money on their daughters.” There are several reasons for this. The first and perhaps most complicated idea is that “daughters are probably considered not as smart because they are spending more time doing chores at home.” Because girls are brought up to do housework, they are not thought to have the same mental abilities as boys; however, this idea is complicated by the fact that these roles are placed upon the girls. They do not choose to do the housework, they are told they must complete it and as a result of this are assumed to be of lesser intelligence.
Nayla describes how when children are young, after school boys were allowed to leave home to play, but girls have to stay home. Though she earlier relates this as a reason that Pakistani communities see girls as less smart than boys, Nayla personally feels this in fact makes girls smarter than boys. She explains, “Because girls stay home more and as a result they study more, so they are considered smarter in that way. Because they are studying, staying more home, and not doing outdoor chores that much. And they have more time to study.” Though this thought potentially conflicts with her earlier address that girls are considered less smart because they stay home, Nayla is actually raising her own personal opinion in comparison to a typical point of view. In this way, the gender bias may in a sense benefit young girls. However, Nayla’s situation is a unique one and in more ways than one, the gender bias hinders girls’ education.

Another gender issue inherent in Pakistani culture is the idea that boys are an “investment,” whereas girls are not. Nayla explains that parents are more willing to spend money on a boy’s education, because it is expected that the son will grow up, become successful, and take care of the parents in their old age. On the other hand, girls leave the family for marriage; therefore, if a parent spends money on their education, they can’t guarantee that the education will translate into success and that the daughter will assist them in retirement. This is a sensitive issue for Nayla. When speaking of it, she was emotional, because in her words, “My dad spent so much, and even when I got married, I came here and I left them and all the money away…” Her brothers were given the exact same educational opportunities as her, but they finished their degrees and they take care of her parents now, whereas, Nayla got married and had to postpone her education. She raises the issue of how pressure is put on girls in Pakistan to both get married and support their families, but when given positive opportunities like school, if they do not fulfill the expectations they feel immense guilt.
This idea connects to another issue that Nayla raised: early marriage. She recognizes that education is “put on hold” because of marriage for many girls. Arranged marriages are a customary tradition in Pakistan. This custom involves a parent suggesting a suitable partner to their child, and asking if their son or daughter wants to pursue a relationship with him or her. When the process begins, girls may leave college for marriage and in Nayla’s case, even move to a different country with their new spouse. She explains that she was no longer in her “dad’s home,” so she didn’t have the same financial resources to continue her education. This is not the case for all Pakistani women, but it certainly affects some.

While private schools are very expensive in Pakistan, Nayla explains that tertiary education is incredibly inexpensive. She identifies the low cost of colleges and universities as a benefit of obtaining early education in Pakistan. For example, her brother attended medical school and became a doctor, but the total of his higher education cost less than his primary and secondary education. At the university level, “literally the minimum fee would be just nothing.” While this is a generous positive in that it encourages students to pursue higher education at a low cost, it still raises the financial challenge of primary and secondary education. If a student does not receive a quality education early on because of finances, they are unlikely to pursue the opportunity of college and do not benefit from its affordability.

Nayla also recognizes the method of her studies—memorization—as a key factor as to her success and others in the system. She describes students as “unbelievably trained” in memorization; “writing skills and memory is a big thing.” Nayla takes pride in her memory and the memory skills of her community. She even compares it to a method she experienced while in the U.S. A professor at her American college wanted students to memorize passages, then “think about them.” Nayla appreciated this philosophy, likely because it matched her learning methods
as a girl. She even used this methodology to teach her kids Arabic. She would repeat letters of
the alphabet and she believed that by memorizing them, her children were learning. This
perception of memorization is very different from how May experienced it. In Burma, May felt
that memorization was an ineffective method of teaching, because students were not forming
their own thoughts or attempting to understand the material, they were just relying on
memorization. Where Nayla valued memorization as efficient, May rejected it as unproductive.
Though there are countless differences between Nayla and May’s lives and accounts, it is
interesting to see how a single technique can be perceived in different ways based on culture and
perhaps generation. Girls’ opinions on learning methods in their respective countries are
important, because their varied answers may help create more culture-specific and effective
teaching practices.

Because of her residence in the U.S. for over twenty years, Nayla also perceives the U.S.
education system with a critical eye. Unlike Cecile who was still learning about the system,
Nayla has inserted herself in the system. A substitute teacher for local grade schools, Nayla
examines some aspects of the schools with a unique perspective. For example, she does not agree
with how children move from class to class because in Pakistan the teachers were the only
individuals leaving the classrooms between periods. She compares the U.S. system to Pakistan
and is actually critical of the U.S. system. Ironically, this critique seems minor in comparison to
many of the challenges—low quality facilities, cost, college preparedness—she raises about
Pakistan. However, Nayla’s critique of both countries helps emphasize the importance of culture-
specific attention to educational improvements, as the challenges are both different and diverse.

When speaking of marriage, Nayla raised what she perceived as a benefit, but I
understood as a potential challenge associated with girls’ education in Pakistan. She described
how “things are changing” now in Pakistan and more girls are going to school. “Education is valued more and more with every passing day,” she explains. “Everyone realizes everyone has to read and write and get some kind of work.” But for girls, she attributes this partially to the fact that “no one even wants to marry a girl who is not educated.” In this way, girls are again viewed as a commodity. Their worth is connected to the opportunity for marriage. Though Nayla sees marriage as an opportunity for a girl to get an early education, this ends up hindering her pursuit of higher education later in life. Several times in our conversation, Nayla revisited the idea that one of her brothers completed medical school and is now a doctor. He and Nayla followed the same path and attended the same medical school, but she postponed the completion of her education because of marriage. While I’m sure Nayla is grateful and happy for her life experiences, it’s worth recognizing that gender inhibited her ability to pursue the career she wanted.

Nayla’s perspective is nuanced differently than Cecile, Sirah, and May’s, primarily because of her socioeconomic status and exposure to Western-style education. In many ways, Nayla adopts the perspective of a Western feminist and is critical of her home country. Nevertheless, she is also defensive about the items she raises. Like most of the women I interviewed, Nayla struggles to think critically about her culture while also honoring her heritage. While this struggle is evident, the thoughts and opinions she shares provide valuable insight into girls’ education in Pakistan and a different type of education than previously addressed in this project.
Malala: Fighting the Taliban for Girls’ Education

Malala Yousafzai’s autobiography, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, provides a thorough account of a contemporary girl’s experience attending school in Pakistan. Not only is Malala’s perspective contemporary, but it is also of a different socioeconomic status than Nayla’s. Sharing two different class perspectives enriches our understanding of education in Pakistan. Malala also specifically discusses the violence in her country and how it has shaped her educational experiences. Like Nayla, Malala’s father’s value of education also influenced her experiences. He saw Malala as equal to any boy, especially in school, and his encouragement was a large component of her education. As Malala revisits her educational experiences in Pakistan, many of her thoughts are informed by her encounters with violence and distance from her home country, as she now lives abroad, like many of the women I introduce in this project (275).

The most unique and informative quality of Malala’s education was the value her father placed on girls’ education. Before Malala was born, her father opened his own school in their community and welcomed both boys and girls at the school (47, 69). While the men in Nayla’s family also valued education for their daughters, Malala’s father incorporated equal educational opportunities as a primary driving force in his life. Despite bombings, threats from local men, and fear of the Taliban, her father did whatever he could to keep the school running and allow girls to attend (94). Her father was an activist in their community, as well. A respected elder, he would often speak at community events about social justice issues (23). Malala explains that he was not home very much because “he was busy, not just with his school, but also with literary societies and jirgas, as well as trying to save the environment, trying to save our valley” (23). Not only did her father value schooling for girls, but he also fought for that opportunity. Growing
up with such an influential figure, Malala’s own activism and education were shaped by his beliefs. She experienced first-hand the power of language and education and therefore her own educational beliefs were solidified. However, despite her father being a positive figure in her life, she still relied on this male figure to accomplish change.

Much of her father’s activism was influenced by the role of the Taliban in their lives. While Nayla recognizes the gender bias in Pakistani culture, the Taliban exacerbated this issue for Malala. She describes how the Taliban specifically blamed girls from attending school (162). This issue was tied closely to religion. Malala explains how there was disagreement on how Muslim girls should behave. Some said her father’s school was “blasphemy” and Taliban leaders even started congratulating girls by name on the radio if they left school (94, 118). Malala’s acknowledgment of the role of religion in girls’ education in Pakistan is interesting, because Nayla also identified it as a potential challenge. Nayla explained that religion can be problematic, but it does not have to be. Malala sees it similarly, for she recognizes that Muslims can practice their religion differently (93). In addition, both Nayla and Malala recognize that the Quran states that every Muslim man and woman should be educated (311). Of course, this topic is extremely complicated, especially in light of religious extremism. Despite differences in age, both women identify how religion can be misconstrued to affect the masses.

The growing unrest with the Taliban led to an underlying fear in Malala’s educational experience. Soon, she and her classmates “hid our school bags and our books in our shawls” and were “afraid” to wear their school uniforms (135). Some men even criticized their education for being too “Western,” for fear that the girls would become too “Westernized” (162). Unlike during Nayla’s childhood where learning English was a key component of gaining a quality education, the men around Malala saw it as a threat to their culture. Despite the violence going
on around Malala, she describes her school lessons as what “kept [her] going in those dark days” (135). She attended school six morning a week and she describes interesting particulars about her lessons: “My classes were spent chanting chemical equations or studying Urdu grammar; writing stories in English with morals like ‘Haste makes waste’ or drawing diagrams of blood circulation” (5). Malala’s education was Westernized like Nayla’s, but Malala argues that this does not matter. She believes that “education is neither Eastern nor Western, it is human” (162). Because of Malala’s different life experiences, she views Western education in a different light than Nayla. Although, arguably, the idea that education is a natural human concept is in itself Western. Despite the clear influences of Western educational practices on her schooling, Malala was grateful to simply receive an education of any kind.

Like Nayla, Malala identifies the high level of competition in school. There were two girls in her class with whom Malala competed fervently, but still considered her friends. Malala was always in competition to be “first in class” (135). Like Nayla’s experience, most of Malala’s classmates “wanted to be doctors” (5). The medical profession was one of value that children were exposed to from a young age in Pakistan. There was pressure to achieve this quality profession no matter what walk of life the child came from. For some girls, the pressure to perform well in school was placed on them by their families. A friend of Malala’s worked hard to do well, because “she worried that if she got low marks her male relatives might use it as an excuse to stop her education” (136). The authority of the male figures in the families posed a threat for aspirational girls, for it meant the difference between their ability to go school and not, much like the women in Nayla’s family. It was not the girl’s choice, but the men in her family’s choice. Competition wasn’t the only challenge Malala identified in her memoir. Like Cecile, hunger was a pervasive challenge for many children in Pakistan. Malala’s mother would invite
some of the girls at Malala’s school over for breakfast because it was “hard for the poor children to learn when they were not getting enough food at home” (83). The class divisions were also acutely felt by many children, for wealthier families began to take their children out of the school when “they realized they were sharing classrooms with the sons and daughters of people who cleaned their houses or stitched their clothes” (83). Malala’s situation is very unique, for her father and mother did not see class divisions quite so acutely. Her father was a purveyor of equality of all kinds, thus influencing Malala’s life and education.

When the violence in Malala’s life reached its pinnacle and she was shot by the Taliban, her life drastically changed. Malala and her family moved to England after her attack, which meant Malala began attending a new school (306). A marker of this change is her new school uniform. She describes how “a smart new uniform hangs on my bedroom door, bottle-green instead of royal-blue” (306). The uniform acts as a symbol for her education. In Pakistan, she was unable to wear her uniform for fear of being hurt; in Birmingham, she is acutely aware of the life change that a new school uniform means for her. In Burma, May also saw school uniforms as critical to self-identity. Malala recognizes how at this new school no child fears an attack on their way to school. While she experienced many opportunities in school because of her father’s admiration of education, Malala still considered attending school safely a luxury in Pakistan.
Takeaways & Conclusions

The women I interviewed speak about their equally unique and personal experiences in their countries to inform the world. The question is not generally what we can learn about girls’ education in the developing world; but, rather, what can we learn from these women about this very subject. Many Westerners may understand that equal education is an issue around the world, but it is not humanized. The issue is reduced to statistics and recommendations from Western activists. The real cause breathes in the lives of women like Cecile, Sirah, May, and Nayla.

These women’s experiences do not fit into the same mold; however, their motivations and desires blend and echo through each conversation. Regardless of country, culture, income, or religion, girls want to attend school because they enjoy learning and they see it as an opportunity for success. Sirah very poignantly stated that she “like[s] everything about school” and all four women pursued higher education at some point in their lives. Cecile even stressed the importance of her young daughter attending a quality school so that she could “become someone.” These women demonstrate how much they value education—especially for girls. They communicate that despite challenges of finances, distance, or methodology, girls are equally driven and as capable as boys and seek out equal opportunities.

With girls’ education, the world is presented with a simple idea and a complex situation: girls want to attend school, but accomplishing this is inconceivably complicated. Many of the challenges appear ubiquitous—schools are too far away from homes, education is too expensive, and punishment can be too harsh. But these challenges exist within different cultures with different economies and different norms. There is not a single end-all solution to providing equal education, because of the sheer diversity worldwide. Rather, the situation calls for small concrete
steps tailored to local cultures. Where May saw memorization as a fault in Burma’s education, Nayla praised it in Pakistan. A single solution to educational methods cannot succeed in all parts of the world. And while these women display the importance of distinct solutions in their specific, individual concerns, they also communicate prevalent challenges in girls’ education. The challenges weave throughout these cultures and generally guide discussions on how girls’ education may be improved.

Though the inhibitors like distance, finances, methodology, and punishment that Cecile, Sirah, May, and Nayla raised are not in-and-of-themselves gender issues, they exist under the umbrella of gender bias. A boy is more likely to be encouraged to overcome the very same challenges that a girl experiences. In parts of the developing world, parents are more likely to find resources for their son’s education than they are for their daughter’s. For example, in Burma, May biked to a school with limited resources every day, but her parents boarded her brother at a higher level school in a large city. May’s parents found the financial resources necessary to ensure their son’s education, but did not spend the same on their daughter. By diminishing obstacles like distance and finances, parents will not be faced with the choice of sending a daughter or a son to school.

This question of how a Western individual can contribute to girls’ education in the developing world is one that rose frequently in my research. Though I am not working directly in these women’s communities, this project acts as a small step towards taking positive action. In listening to these women and attempting to approach the conversation of girls’ education differently than many Western feminists, I contribute to the cause. With this purpose in mind, I often revisited how Westerners have imposed their views on education in these countries. While I attempt to elevate the women’s points of view, I still define their education with Western
terms—primary, secondary, classrooms, subjects, etc.—and they understand it in this way. All of Cecile, Sirah, May, and Nayla’s ideas of what education should look like are based on Western definitions, and when it does not meet these definitions, education fails for them. Because of colonization, these women adopted the definition of Western education as their personal definition. Additionally, I describe their countries as “developing.” While this term does not quite connote the hierarchy that “third world” does, it still differentiates between “developed” Western nations and “undeveloped” nations. While the term helps the public universally understand this project, it creates a hierarchy with which I am uncomfortable.

Despite associating quality education with Western ideals, there are some influences that have not quite reached these women. For example, with the exception of Nayla, the women in my research did not necessarily consider gender bias an issue in their education. Though it exists from my perspective, many women do not perceive it. A Western point of view imposes this issues’ existence onto their education. These ideas of Western influence on the developing world raise many questions: Is it ethical to impose Western views on education and gender in different parts of the world? How should we, working in a global economy, define education? Is there a way to define education outside of Western views in this contemporary world? This project does not offer answers to these questions, but recognizes that the answers are not easily found.

My research findings support the concrete steps in facilitating equal education that Westerners have identified. Based on the thoughts of Cecile, Sirah, May, and Nayla, some of these solutions may reduce the challenges that girls face, as many of these suggestions compliment the discoveries that arose organically in my conversations with these women. For example, UNICEF suggests that outside the classroom, countries should enable “young mothers to return to school” (Bellamy 86). Because all four women I interviewed showed interest in
returning to school, enabling this in their countries not only demonstrates the value of education but also the likelihood that they will encourage their own daughters to attend school. Likewise, many of the women described the difficulty of girls’ school attendance. UNICEF’s suggestion to provide “alternative education for girls” and “overaged children” can help prevent this challenge (Bellamy 86). Similarly, UNICEF suggests thinking “both outside and inside the ‘education box’” (Bellamy 76). This can help disseminate the prevalence of Western-only methods in different parts of the world where this type of schooling may not benefit the students as much.

Finally, UNICEF suggests two solutions that Herz also suggests—eliminating school fees and building schools closer to children’s homes (UNICEF 76, 86). Herz explains that “cutting school fees increases girls’ enrollment” (9). This is an example of how eliminating barriers can enable parents to send both a son and a daughter to school. For example, in Uganda, enrollment increased by “seventy percent after fees were cut as part of major school reforms” (Herz 9). Each woman I interviewed recognized school fees as a hindrance to many girls’ education. What’s more, when new schools were built in rural areas of Egypt in the 1980s, “girls’ enrollment” increased by “sixty percent” (Herz 10). Cecile specifically had difficulty attending school because of its distance from her home and many of Sirah’s friends stopped attending when the distance became too inconvenient. But most compelling, perhaps, is Herz’s argument for “teach[ing] in ways that discourage gender stereotypes and encourage girls to achieve” (11). If local cultures find value in women, they can create this positive change.

While I identify potential actions to improve girls’ education in the developing world, I am situated differently in this conversation than the women I interview. As a white American woman, I can never understand these women’s experiences on the same level as women in their cultures. I am also allotted a certain amount of power in this discussion, as I am the vessel that
encourages the elevation of their voices. In recognizing this dynamic, I attempted to proceed with my research with the level of sensitivity that I recommend of Western feminists in addressing transnational feminisms. I hope that by sharing the voices of the women I interviewed and avoiding overpowering these voices with my own, I have created a project that can help Westerners not only learn about other cultures, but also how to discuss them.

My methodological approach to this research reiterates the idea that this project is not about me; it is about the women I interviewed. However, as diligently as I try to hear these women’s voices before my own, my cultural perspective often and inevitably infiltrates my reading of their accounts. With this effect in mind, I adopted a transnational feminist perspective to more thoughtfully understand girls’ education in the developing world. This approach is an example of how nations or activists in those nations can proceed with activism for this cause. Listening to women and girls in countries under investigation provides the depth and understanding necessary to create positive change. And by proceeding with a transnational feminist perspective, this change can be culturally relative and avoid ethnocentrism to create a deeper, more profound, and longer lasting impact.

While there is no end-all solution to improving girls’ education in the developing world, girls’ education is also not an end-all solution to distinguishing gender bias or oppression of women. Like girls’ education, women’s oppression is a complex issue worldwide. But with small steps and cultural sensitivity, positive change can occur for women. In the words of Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, “That is the power of education” (169).
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“Cecile”
16 November 2015

Lauren Baltas (LB): Okay, so let’s begin. Can you start by telling me a little bit about yourself: how old you are, where you’re from, if you’re married, if you have any children?

Cecile (C): Yeah I’m called “Cecile.” I come from Congo. I came here in March 26. Something like 7 months here, going to 8. I am married. I live with my husband, my one daughter, and two cousins. I am taking care of them.

LB: And how old are you? Do you know?

C: Yeah, I know my age.

LB: About…

C: I was born 28th of August, 1960… 1986, sorry. [laughs]

LB: [laughs] Okay, I was going to say I didn’t think you looked that old.

C: Yeah, 1986.

LB: Okay, thank you. Thank you so much.

C: Yeah, I meant 29 of August.

LB: Great, thank you. And did you attend school as an adolescent, as a child in Congo?

C: Yeah, I attended. I attended, but I only stopped in… it’s like level 6.

LB: Okay, so you… I’m sorry, go ahead.

C: When we left Congo, we went to Uganda.

LB: Okay.

C: I was interested in learning English, so there was this church called ?Winner’s? Chapel, and they teach members English. So I was interested and started I learning from there.

LB: Okay.

C: They encourage you, you learn, and after that you get something like a degree. Which makes you to be eager to continue.

LB: Yeah, absolutely.

C: So I went until the time that we came here.
LB: Okay, so how many years were you in that school?
C: I was there for… four years? About four years.
LB: And that was how many years after primary school? Did you go to the church?
C: Six years.
LB: Six years after primary, okay. So, can you first tell me a little bit about your primary school experience? Can you describe your school and what your lessons where like? Up until grade six you said, level six.
C: Yeah, my school was called ?Vepe Verunga?. I started from there, but studying was somehow hard, because of you know Africa, financial problems. Yeah, [inaudible] in my town they fail to pay for you, you stay at home. Yeah, so it was hard. So I studied. We struggled anyway, until that level 6. And I saw that things were not going well because of being on/off, I struggled. I quit.
LB: Okay. Because of the financial reasons?
C: Yeah, because of the financial reasons.
LB: Okay, great. So, but when you were in school, what were you learning? Were you learning math, English, reading?
C: Yeah, we had literatures in math, English. They teach everything that they teach here.
LB: Okay.
C: [Inaudible] you know that they’re teaching French. Many people are not… unless they are interested in English as well.
LB: If you can remember, I know it was a while ago, can you walk me through the average day? From morning to afternoon at school?
C: Yeah in Congo they have from morning to eleven then from eleven to four.
LB: Okay.
C: It was two different… it’s like shifts.
LB: Yeah, so like lunch in the middle. A meal, in the middle.
C: No, not saying you study from morning to eleven then you have lunch and go back to school. If you are for morning you study from morning to eleven then go back home. For lunchtime go from eleven to four.
LB: Which one, group were you in?
C: Morning.
LB: Morning, great. Can you tell me a little bit about what the church learning center was like? An average day when you learned English in Uganda? What was that like?

C: It was good.

LB: What was an average day like?

C: The day? Okay. We used to go from two to twelve.

LB: Okay. Two p.m. to twelve p.m.?

C: Yeah.

LB: Was it… what kind of students were there? Were they primarily adults or children?

C: Yeah all adults. They were church members. In fact those who missed going to school at an early age.

LB: Can you repeat that?

C: Those who missed going to school at the early age.

LB: That’s a really nice program. Did you travel to Uganda for that program, or was it just?

C: No we came to Uganda because of the war. So when we were staying there, someone introduced us to that church. And we went there. We liked it because it had many different programs that help and other programs that not only teach English. Yeah, that teach a lot of stuff. Not only English, sometimes they used to teach, like say this month they would teach the women how to dress up and this month they teach women how to cook.

LB: Okay. That’s nice. Awesome, thank you. So I just have a couple of more questions. Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Did others in your family go to school?

C: Right now I can say only the kids that I am having here, [inaudible] they are family that I see. Yeah. I have my two brothers, which I don’t know where they are.

LB: But you grew up together in Congo? Did they go to school with you?

[Client gets emotional and cannot speak.]

LB: So let’s talk about school a little bit more, if you’re comfortable with continuing. So you mentioned you have one daughter? Is that correct? If you need a moment… okay. So thinking about your daughter going to school… and does she go to school here in the U.S.?

C: Yes.

LB: And how old is she?

C: She’s five.
LB: She’s five. And thinking about the kind of school… the best possible school you could think of for her. How would you describe that school? The best possible school for that child? Would it be big, would it be small, what would the teachers be like, what would she learn? Just in any situation.

C: I would like her to… because even in Africa they say that private schools give more attention and they teach children I think different things from government schools. Of which I’m not very sure of it but I hear people say the private schools are very good. My dream is that she can get a private school so that she can learn and become someone.

LB: I think that we all want that for our children. Absolutely.

C: She’s in a government school. Yeah.

LB: That’s great thank you. Yeah, absolutely. And thinking about that kind of a private school. Ideally, what would the cost be for that kind of school? Would it be lower… just thinking of the best situation.

C: For the government school? If it would be what?

LB: For the private school, if it would be better if it was a lower cost or a higher cost?

C: I don’t understand.

LB: I’m so sorry. If you sent her to a school like that, what would the cost be? Would it be low? In the best situation.

C: Okay. At least if they could make it affordable. They could make it affordable for people who are low income earners. I hear that private schools here are very, very expensive. I wish it was affordable because everyone would love to take their kids there.

LB: That’s something I was just thinking about.

C: I wish it was affordable.

LB: I have one more question for you. When you were in primary school, what interested you about going to school when you were a girl and what didn’t interest you about it? What did you like, what did you not like about school.

C: What was interesting was that in Africa when you’re young, you always go to school saying I’m going to become a nurse, I’m going to become a doctor. Everyone wants to be a doctor, a nurse, or a lawyer. That’s what everyone says. So I was very much interested in going to school. I also wanted to become a nurse (or a nun?) or a doctor. Yeah, but things ?didn’t work out well?.

LB: Yeah, well, that’s a great reason to go to school. Was there anything that you didn’t like about school when you were a young girl?
C: Going to school was… some schools are far. We’ll go 14? If you don’t have something to eat from there, you stay hungry and you have to wait until you go back home.

LB: Totally understand, yeah. Okay “Cecile,” thank you so, so much for talking to me and taking the time and answering my questions. I know that they’re very personal questions so I really appreciate you sharing. And like I said it will be private to me I won’t even use your name, so it will just be for my knowledge. And I wanted to ask if you had any questions for me about any of this.

C: Yeah I have a question. I’m here, they have told me they’re going to interview me about schooling here. When I come I thought it was about here, like how do you find school here, because I’m going to school here.

LB: Are you? Do you want to tell me about that?

C: I’m going to [college name].

LB: [?]

C: [college name].

LB: Oh! Congratulations!

C: Thank you.

LB: What are you studying?

C: For now I’m still taking ESL, trying to polish my English first, and then from there I’m going to do GED. And then I want to do a nursing course.

LB: Okay, yeah. Congratulations. What is it like? What are these courses like for you in this college? How do you like them? What is the experience like?

C: For now I’m not yet in like gone in too much details in. I’m only doing the ESL. I still don’t know what it will be like, because I still don’t know if like I’m going to get like grants for the college. They told me about this… something they said, they loan me money and then I will study whatever course you want and then you pay in future. I still want to learn more about it before I go into it.

LB: But you’re on your way. That’s great, congratulations. Yeah I’m sorry if that wasn’t clear.

C: Oh no it’s okay, yeah no problem.

LB: Do you have any other questions for me?

C: I don’t think so.

LB: Again, thank you so much.
Lauren Baltas (LB): Okay, so if it’s okay I’m going to ask some questions.

Sirah (S): Yes, okay.

LB: So can you start by telling me a little bit about yourself: how old you are, where you’re from, if you’re married, if you have kids.

S: I’m from Guinea.

LB: I’m sorry?

S: Guinea. West Africa.

LB: Guinea.

S: I’m single. I live with my mom and my little brother and sister.

LB: I’m sorry, how old did you say?

S: I’m 25. Let me see. [Counts] I’m single. I go to [college name] for ESL classes.

LB: That’s great. Do you want to continue at [college name]?

S: Yes I… generally [Inaudible] because in my country I didn’t finish high school. I live with my mom and my brother and sister. I have been here two years in last November 2013.

LB: Okay great. That’s awhile. Yeah, it is. So in Guinea, so did you attend primary and secondary school?

S: Yes.

LB: Yes, but you didn’t finish.

S: Yes, I didn’t finish high school in my country. That’s why generally I started taking [Inaudible] ?GRE? at [college name]. And continue to go to college.

LB: Congratulations!

S: Thank you.

LB: Yeah. I’m sorry, can you repeat what you want to study after you complete the ESL?

S: After I complete ESL, maybe, I don’t know.

LB: Oh, if you don’t know that’s okay!
S: Maybe after I’ll take a comptabilité.

LB: Contrable? Computer?

S: No, it’s not computer. In French there’s a name comptabilité.

LB: Oh, I know a little bit of French. But that’s fine. Thank you. So can you tell me a little bit about what school was like in your country? What primary school and high school was like?

S: The name?

LB: Sure! The name, what the school was like…

S: When I was little, I went to Arabic school. The name is [Arabic name]. And I dropped there and I go to the other school to learn French. The name is [French name]. And my high schools name is [inaudible].

LB: So you went to three schools?

S: Yes.

LB: Okay, so how many years were you in school?

S: Eleven.

LB: Okay, so it sounds like you weren’t in Arabic school for that long?

S: No. Okay. When I was little, ?5 or 3? I go to Arabic school and then they stopped learning for this area. It’s far to my house, and I stopped the Arabic and go to French school.

LB: Okay.

S: I studied for Arabic school for five years. And I go to learn French four years. And I go to… I don’t know how to name them.

LB: Okay so probably three years? Or two to three years at high school?

S: Yeah.

LB: Okay. Great. So what when you were in school, what would be an average day like. In the morning, in the afternoon? Can you describe it for me?

S: In my country, you have to learn more. If you don’t… The teacher give you something to read, to memorize, if you don’t memorize that, if you go to school they will beat you.

LB: Okay. And what were your lessons like in school?

S: We study… [Inaudible] science, biology, chemistry, math, physics… [Inaudible]

LB: Like everything?
S: Yeah, everything.

LB: That’s great. And then when you went to high school, did you study something different? Or was it similar?

S: No it’s not... [Inaudible] If you go to high school, they will three… six year math and social and math and experiment… [Inaudible] I don’t know how to pronounce this in English.

LB: Okay, that’s fine. No problem. I think you’re doing great.

S: My English is not good.

LB: I think you’re doing good. I know a little bit of Arabic and a little bit of French. But I bet your Arabic and French is better than mine.

S: No, I don’t know how to speak Arabic. I only studied that for five years. To read it I know, but to speak it I don’t know.

LB: Yeah. Oh, that’s interesting. Yeah I know how you feel. Let’s think about this. So would you go to school in the morning, in the afternoon, or...?

S: I go to school after 7:45 and I be back at 2:00. Sometimes 2:30. After class I go to “after school” to 5:00 p.m.... from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m.

LB: And what would you do at “after school”?

S: Review the lesson. We review the lesson. [Inaudible] ?We come down to review the lesson and speaking…? We ask question.

LB: Yes. Absolutely. Great, so then is there anything else about your school that you want to share? What it was like, what your teachers were like, or what your classmates… Were you in school with all girls or boys and girls?

S: There is boy and girls. We have different teachers.

LB: Okay.

S: We all study English, but if you go to elementary and you starting to learn English.

LB: Great. So you go to a different class to learn English?

S: No, not different class, it’s the same class but a different teacher come to eight to ten we have a new teacher. To ten to twelve we have a new teacher. Different. We learn different.

LB: Different subjects?

S: Yes different subjects.

LB: Got it. Great. So then can I ask you a little bit about your family? If your brothers and sisters went to school?
S: Yes.

LB: And you said you have one brother and one sister?

S: No I have three brothers and one sister. Sorry.

LB: Oh no, I’m sorry! So did they… how old are they?

S: The older one who started to go to college last… [inaudible] Okay wait.

LB: Are they all different ages?

S: Yes. The older one he is nineteen, the older (?) other?) one thirteen, and ten, eight.

LB: How old is your sister?

S: Eight.

LB: Eight. So I know they’re younger than you, but did they go to school in your home country?

S: No [inaudible]. He has 19, he was going to school to my country. But the three other one was from here.

LB: Do they go to school now?

S: Yes.

LB: And what is that like for them.

S: Hm?

LB: Do they go to public school?

S: Public school.

LB: Okay, great. And did your mother or father go to school?

S: No. In my country they don’t force you to go to school. If you don’t want you don’t have to go to school.

LB: Did you decide? Did you want to go or did your parents want you to go?

S: Yes my parents. They didn’t go to school but they want.

LB: They wanted you to.

S: Yes.

LB: That nice. Okay, great. So now I wanted to ask a little bit about… it’s kind of like a pretend question. Thinking about the perfect school. The best school that you can think of. What would that look like? Would it be a big school, what would you learn, where would it be…
S: In my country?


S: Where is the biggest school?

LB: Where would you like to go to school? What would be the best school? Do you think?

S: I only go to [college name].

LB: Let me phrase it differently, I’m sorry. In your opinion, is a school better if it’s larger or if it’s smaller?

S: Larger. In my opinion.

LB: Larger. More people? Do you like that it’s larger?

S: Yeah.

LB: Okay.

[Drops recorder]

LB: Sorry! So I have one more question for you. When you were in primary or high school in your home country, what did you like the most about school? And what did you not like about it?

S: I like about school. If you didn’t go to school, you didn’t have more friend. If you didn’t go to school you didn’t have anything in your head. You’re only at home cooking and do the house.

LB: Yes, the housework.

S: Yes. But me I like to go to school to learn more and to have more experience.

LB: Yeah.

S: Yeah. My favorite lesson was math, chemistry, and music and French.

LB: That’s great. And then did you have friends—

S: Yes.

LB: [Laughs] I’m sorry. Did you have friends that were girls that didn’t go to school in your home country? Or did most of your friends go to school?

S: Yes. They all starting going to school and they stop.

LB: And they stop. Do you know why they stopped?

S: You know if you, in my country, the public school is not too much, the private is…

LB: Is better?
S: Yes, but if they parent say they didn’t have money to pay for them, they okay I will stop the school. Because I don’t have someone to pay for my school. That’s why.

LB: But you went to private school, right?

S: Yes.

LB: So if the student went to private school and then it was too much money, they would just stop, instead of going to public school?

S: The public school is not too… [Gestures] [Inaudible]

LB: Expensive?

S: No it’s… [Inaudible] Sorry. There’s not too many public school. Only one or two in my area. It’s too far to get the other public school. That’s why they stop. Some of them if they didn’t get the grade good, that’s why. If you go to… I don’t know.

LB: Oh, no. That’s great what you just said. Thank you. What didn’t you like about school? Was there anything you didn’t like about school or did you like it all around?

S: What I didn’t like about school?

LB: Yeah, if anything. It’s okay if there’s… [Laughs]

S: No, I like everything about school.

LB: You like everything. [Laughs] Okay, that was my last question for you! Do you have any questions for me, “Sirah”? 
Appendix C

“May”
16 November 2015

Lauren Baltas (LB): So, I just want to ask a couple of questions if that’s okay. Would you… can you start by telling me a little bit about yourself: how old you are, where you’re from, if you’re married, or if you have any kids or anything like that.

May (M): Okay. I’m… my name is “May.” I’m actually from Burma, Myanmar and I was a refugee for two years. I lived in a refugee camps for two years. I came to this country when I was thirteen years old. Right now I’m twenty years old so it’s been seven years since I’ve been here. I go to [college name] at the moment, about to transfer to [college name].

LB: Cool.

M: I major in hospitality management. And I’m not married yet. [Laughs]

LB: [Laughs] I didn’t think so, but I wanted to ask. Great, so you’re about to transfer to [college name]? What are you studying? Oh! You just said hospitality. What were you studying at [college name]?

M: Well, right now I’m a business management major. When I transfer I’ll go into hospitality management.

LB: Okay. That’s great. How do you like it? How do you like [college name]?

M: It’s very diverse. That’s something I like about that school. And you can actually learn about how everything’s working in the city because it’s a city college. So I know what’s going on in the city right now.

LB: Yeah, absolutely. Great. So, you lived in a refugee camp for two years?

M: Yeah, two years.

LB: In Burma?

M: No that was in Thailand.

LB: In Thailand. Were you with family or…

M: I was with my dad, mom, and my brother.

LB: Okay, great. During that time or before that time or after that time did you go to primary school then as an adolescent?
M: Well, when I was in Burma I actually went to… I studied from preschool, and then kindergarten, and then elementary, and then high school. And then after, when I… yeah high school and then when I went to Thailand I was in middle school again. Oh wait no, I was in high school. I did go to like two years of school there and then when I came here I was in middle school for an eighth grader then go back to high school again.

LB: So you had to flip flop a couple of times, because you were in a different country then?

M: Yeah, ‘cause in Thailand and Burma we have like from grade one to seven is considered elementary. Actually, grade one to five is considered elementary and then six to ten is high school.

LB: Okay.

M: And here it’s like nine to twelve is high school so eighth is still considered elementary. That’s why I had to go back to elementary.

LB: Okay, so when you came to the U.S. you had to go back to grade eight.

M: Grade eight. Yeah, go back to high school again. [laughs]

LB: [laughs] That’s frustrating. So when you were… ‘cause most of your schooling was in Burma before you came here. So can you tell me a little bit about what that school experience was like? What your school was like and everything.

M: Well in Burma, it’s not as diverse as the United States. And people actually required to memorize everything over there. And like here the teaching is mostly explaining the stuff and you have to write your own sentences, but over there you have to memorize the sentence and write exactly what they’re teaching you. Or you get zero. And like teachers over there, if you don’t study and do your work very well they kind of like… you know how in other countries they don’t really have like children’s rights and stuff so they actually whip the students.

LB: Okay, yeah.

M: That’s only in Burma, not in Thailand.

LB: Okay. Yeah we’ll just stay on Burma for now.

M: Okay. So yeah so students are kind of scared so they study hard so they won’t get whipped or anything. [laughs]

LB: Yeah… [laughs] Wow. So what were you learning, what were your lessons like… yeah.

M: The lessons… We were learning science, math, history, art, a little bit of English, and Burmese. We were learning Burmese in that country. I think that’s about it.

LB: Great. What was your favorite?
M: My favorite was… I’ll say history. It’s boring but I like listening to the stories and stuff.

LB: Yeah, of course. Great. So can you describe what an average day was like?

M: In school?

LB: In school. Yeah like morning, afternoon…

M: Oh yeah, in the morning we have to… I actually live in a very small town so we have to go into the city to go to school. So it takes about thirty minutes to get there, by bike. And usually we have lunch time. Students…. It’s like elementary school for the students. Elementary and high school are like the same thing. Students kind of like stay in one room and teachers will come to your room and teach you stuff. You won’t be walking around.

LB: Okay. So you stay in the same room all day.

M: Yep. Except lunch time you can go out and play and stuff.

LB: Were there any major differences between elementary and high school?

M: Major differences? Well, it’s harder obviously in high school definitely and elementary… it’s kind of the same thing but it’s just a little bit harder in high school. Well in elementary school we mostly just play that’s it. And go to sleep. Because you’re still a kid and stuff.

LB: Right, of course.

M: And in high school like the tenth grade…. It’s really hard to pass the tenth grade because you have to study all year long so you can pass that one test.

LB: Oh, okay. Does that test mean you can continue? Or what does that mean?

M: You can continue to college. Yeah you don’t pass that test, you have to just repeat until you finish. And you can just stop school, you don’t go anymore.

LB: Okay. Yeah, that’s a lot of pressure. Okay, great. So I’m gonna ask you a little bit about your family if that’s okay. Like, did your brother and sister... Right you said brother and sister? M: I don’t have a sister. I do have a adopted sister but she’s not here.

LB: Oh okay. Just a brother. Did he have a similar experience in school as you do you think? Did he go as many years or…

M: He… oh. I think we had the same experience but he went to a different city to go to school, so he has to learn more stuff and it’s harder for him I’m sure.

LB: Okay. Why did he go to a different city?

M: My mom think it’s like… well he’ll be more…. like there’ll be more educated… there’s more education system… higher education so if he goes to a bigger city. [Inaudible] Because in my
town we didn’t really have a high education system. All we have to do is memorize stuff. Just… like only think about what they’re teaching us and if we can recite it.

LB: Sure. Did he have to live at that school though? Was it that far away?
M: Yeah, it’s another city. A completely different city. He has to live in a boarding with other kids who are from other cities.

LB: Was that an all boy school?
M: No, boys and girls. But the board he was living in was all boys.

LB: And was your school boys and girls?
M: Boys and girls, yeah. And one more thing. Girls and boys don’t usually sit together.

LB: Okay. Were your teachers typically men and women?
M: Mostly men and a few… I mean mostly women. And maybe one or two men.

LB: Okay. Did your mother and father go to school growing up?
M: Yeah, they did. My mom actually went to university. [Inaudible] My dad I don’t think… he just like go to a few elementary classes and he stopped at eight. ‘Cause he is from a really, really small town so he just stopped.

LB: And your mom continued to university? Yeah, did she get her degree?
M: She did! She majored in nursing, so she was a nurse back in our country.

LB: Wow, that’s amazing. And you said they’re here with you now in the U.S.
M: Yeah, my mom is here, she’s working.

LB: And so thinking about… this question is kind of… I worded it kind of weirdly. But I’m trying to think about an ideal school, like an ideal primary school/elementary school. What would that look like?

M: Ideal school?

LB: Yeah, like in the perfect world.
M: Oh, in the perfect world.

LB: You know, like would it be a big school, what would it teach, you know kind of thinking like imaginary.

M: I would say a good school would teach not out of the book all the time but it would teach what the real world is. And it wouldn’t require payment like the university does right now. We have to pay tuition and stuff. And that’s like some people in the city they don’t even have
money. So yeah I think like it should be tuition free like Germany and we should have uniform of course. Yeah, uniform. To represent who you are.

LB: Did you have uniforms in Burma?

M: Yeah we did. We had to wear uniform all the time. You get whipped if you didn’t. [Laughs] So you have to.

LB: Okay, perfect thank you. And then did you want to talk or describe your school experience in Thailand a little bit?

M: In Thailand?

LB: Yeah.

M: Well in Thailand people like the students or the teachers mostly focus on teaching us English instead of other stuff. And math. English and math. Because they know that we’re gonna come here so we have to know English.

LB: So were you enrolled in a Thai school or enrolled in a school within the camp?

M: I was enrolled within the camp. It was a Christian school. So the teachers, I think it was two of them, were from the States and they taught us English. And yeah we have to wear uniforms.

LB: Well your English is very good. [Laughs]

M: Thanks. I tried. [Laughs]

LB: Okay and was that about the same… you go most of the day…

M: All day.

LB: All day, yeah.

M: It’s the same as the United States.

LB: Like five days a week.

M: Yeah.

LB: Same in Burma?

M: Yep, same there.

LB: Great, thank you. Okay so I have one more question for you. Thinking about your school… well maybe I have a couple more. Your school experience, what did you like most about going to school growing up and what did you maybe dislike. Did you like and you dislike?

M: Like from which part of the world?

LB: Any of them.
M: Oh, okay well in Burma, what I liked most was they weren’t much of diversity. I like most… it’s really weird for me to see many people going to school in many different colors and stuff.

LB: Yes.

M: So in Burma there’s only like same faces so it makes me feel more comfortable. What I dislike was that… like the whippings. It’s really hard ‘cause like I’m too scared to not know what I’m doing in school. [Laughs]

LB: Right yeah absolutely. Totally understand that. Do you want to talk at all about… I mean we talked about it a little bit, but school in the U.S.? High school…

M: School in the U.S…

LB: Comparing it… or how was that experience for you when you came here.

M: Well when I came here first I was placed into bilingual language class and it was easier definitely because I don’t have to be scared or afraid of anything. If you don’t speak English then you have to find friends from other places who don’t speak English at all so yeah I was comfortable with them. That’s what I like about it. But we actually try really hard to get out of bilingual education program… because you know it’s… I don’t know to me personally, it makes me feel stupid. Like it makes me feel like…

LB: Which program?

M: Bilingual education program. So yeah we trying to get… most of my friend trying to get out of the program. So yeah. I mean I don’t like that program that we trying to get out as fast as we can.

LB: And that’s what you were enrolled in?

M: Yes. Yeah what I don’t like about school here is… What don’t I like…

LB: It’s okay if you don’t like, if you like everything. If you can’t think of anything.

M: I actually like, I actually like the schools here.

LB: Good. And how has college been going for you?

M: College is great.

LB: Yeah?

M: Yeah, I think I’m learning more than I should be. I’m taking a lot of classes here. I’m just happy that I’ll be transferring soon.

LB: Why is that?
M: I don’t really like Chicago. I’m trying to move to a smaller town. I grew up in small towns so I don’t like Chicago as much.

LB: Chicago is huge.

M: The weather is a bit… extreme.

LB: Well the weather in [college location] might be cold too.

M: I mean like when it’s hot here it’s really extreme too. It’s hot and then it’s very humid. I like cold weather.

LB: That’s great. Are you gonna move out to [college location] then?

M: My mom is moving and my dad and brothers are already there. They’re there for like years already. So only me and my mom are gonna move. After I’m done with school. She’s just waiting for me to finish.

LB: Are you finishing up at the end of the year?

M: I still have one more semester after this.

LB: One more semester? Me too!

M: At the North Central College?

LB: Yep at North Central. It’s in a suburb of Chicago, so like an hour away.

M: You came all the way here?

LB: Yes. It’s not too bad. I lived in Chicago for a little bit but I’m the same way, I like a smaller town.

M: You like smaller towns?

LB: Yeah. So I think that that is all that I need from you.

M: Okay.

LB: Thank you so much! Do you have any questions for me?
Lauren Baltas (LB): Okay, so my first question is, I’m wondering if you can start by telling me a little bit more about yourself: your age, where you’re from… I believe you’re married, if you have children, any details…

Nayla (N): Sure, so my name is “Nayla” [spells name]

LB: [Spells name]

N: Yes. And so I’m from Pakistan and in Pakistan, Pakistan has four provinces or four states you can call them. So I’m from North West Frontier Province. Or we call it NWFP. You can do more research on it online. So that’s the area where it borders with Afghanistan. So we speak Pashto. So we are Pathans. And again Pathans is a very distinct, I should call it distinct people because Talibans are Pathans. So we are Pathans which is kind of interesting. But we are from Pakistan and the border that we share is with Afghanistan. And so Talibans are literally what they speak, so sometimes when they show on TV we understand that… we all speak Pashto. And so I grew up in NWFP in Pakistan. I came here when I was 18 and got married. I came here. Now I’m 40… 41.

LB: Okay.

N: Yes. I’m married have three children. [Daughter’s name] is my oldest and then I have two boys. So that’s just a background. Yeah. Yeah that’s where… that’s just a background.

LB: Yeah, that’s great. So did you get married before you came to the U.S. or when you got here?

N: Yes, yes I did. I got married just a very regular typical arranged marriage. I was 18, my husband was a couple of years older than me. He was here. He went to college here in United States. So we got married ad we came over there. Went along with his family, got to know each other, just I would say a year before we got married, I would say more phone conversations, letter writing things like that. Arranged marriage is not like literally not a scary thing like what they say, but it’s more like families involved. So, yeah you don’t bring, like here mom meet the person. Usually the parents bring someone like here, do you want to get to know the person.

LB: Yes.

N: So that’s how it happened. And so I came here started my life here. Have [Daughter’s name] right away. I was twenty when I had [Daughter’s name] and then my son a year and a half after. So I had two very close. Took a long gap then I had my third one. And so I went to school,
because once I had kids my education was put on hold. I went to school over here to [college name] and continued my education and got my degree, my undergrad.

LB: Great.

N: Just two years. [Daughter’s name] and I graduated together, she graduated high school and I from college.

LB: That’s right! That’s what she said.

N: It took me eight years because initially I was part time so towards the end I got full time.

LB: What degree did you get?

N: Health science.

LB: Health science. I can see how [Daughter’s name] would be interested in that then.

N: Exactly, so in the influence of the family, there’s a lot of science in the family. So I think that’s influencing the careers.

LB: Congratulations! That’s great.

N: Thank you! That was fun, that was exciting. I never thought I would be so happy. It was like, “Yes!”

LB: It’s a great accomplishment.

N: It took a long time, but I’m glad.

LB: That’s so nice. So then when you lived in Pakistan did you attend formal elementary and secondary school, or…

N: So what happens in Pakistan, things are very different. Very different. It’s a… sort of a… sometimes I make my kids watch some documentaries or YouTube channels because they cannot, you guys, my kids grew up just like you just going to school here in America and don’t really go back home that much because our families are here now. It’s different of day and night. You guys cannot even start imagining how different it is. So the class distinction is too much. So either people are really rich or really poor. And the middle class is almost… very insignificant. Very little. So if you’re poor you’re going to public schools. So just like [local public high schools]. I never even set foot in public school or anyone that I knew ever went to public school. Now I don’t want to say I didn’t go… they’re lower standard. But they are. The education is very low standard and the conditions are poor, almost no electricity. The buildings are falling apart. The public education standards are very, very poor. And so if you’re not in that section. And those are the people that don’t even see them. Or you don’t ever see them. Those are the people that don’t every make it to cameras or make it to media, don’t make it to TV, so usually that side of the world is always dark and hidden and you don’t see it. Unfortunate, as unfortunate as it is.
Very, very unfortunate. But then there’s the other class who are going to private schools. English medium schools. Private schools are almost all, basically all English medium. So English as a second language. So that idea of how you speak English is interesting because, you go to school you are taught English. Just like from the first day. So the school system is the same there, there’s elementary there’s middle school. However, you graduate at 16 from high school.

LB: Okay.

N: And then… so that is an interesting system. It’s just that over here you graduate at 18, over there you graduate from high school at 16 and then there’s a two years of college. And usually that two years of college is pretty straight forward. Either you take sciences or you take arts. In sciences you don’t have… So the choices are very limited, there aren’t that many choices. But when you see the greater majority of people, 90% of the people from our community or from Indian descent or Pakistani, basically they’re the same, choosing going for medicine. There’s a reason. The reason is when we are growing up over there if you take sciences, it’s either biological sciences or engineering or math.

LB: Okay.

N: So the choices are either you become a doctor or an engineer. So it’s not, it’s almost like a default system in our blood, I maybe wonder if it’s in our genes. Either you become a doctor or an engineer or you go for art degree. Which would be English or art or painting or music or whatever. So that’s… almost like three choices. And in that there are fields. So two years whatever you take… so the college is two years. And after there is professional school. So after two years if you got into med school you got to med school or you go into engineering or you pursue your masters and everything or PhDs or whatever in the art field. So that’s how the education system is built up.

LB: Sure.

N: And expensive. It’s very expensive. Not everyone can do it, but people will do anything to go to a private school. And there are standards in private school. Not everyone will be super expensive. But they would not like their kids to go… if they really want their kids to become something, they would not like them to go to go to public schools. Again it’s very unfortunate, I believe 70-80% of the population is illiterate, and that’s the reason. Because public schools are not doing… the teachers are not making money and the schools have no funds. It’s a poor government, a poor country. If they cannot educate teachers how can they educate kids. Because kids get into work because their families support… they have to support their family, financially. So a lot of other issues, a lot of issues very common with poverty. Nothing new. It isn’t anything new I tell you.

LB: Absolutely. It’s pretty pervasive issue. Okay thank you, that’s really detailed, really helpful. Would you like to share about your school experience particularly?
N: Sure. Do you want to know just the girls part or just the regular school? As a woman the issues or just as a student? Or both a little bit.

LB: I’m particularly interested in girls, but anything you’re willing to tell me, I love to learn.

N: Okay. So I… it’s interesting and very unheard of because where I come from, we are Pathans. That is a very… So just a few years ago National Geographic did a whole issue just on Pathans because it’s just a significant group of people. Very, very, very strong minded, very hospitable, very strong minded and fierce people. Not ordinary people. I mean you can see what they’re doing in Afghanistan, they just not regular minded people. So when it comes, we see a lot of unfortunately with the radicalism and whatever happened, but the rest of the Pathans are all over the world so it’s not like we share that part but we do share the same roots, the same blood, the same genes, the same genome. So what happens is that the women are not encouraged in Pathans to go to school. And it’s, they’re not encouraged to go to school. They’re not given the same status as boys. But in my family, my grandfather was a very educated man and he sent his daughters to… my grandma. Not just his daughters, but his wife. So my grandma was educated by private tutors. Private tutors would come to… so it depends on what family you’re coming from. So my family was exceptionally educated. So my grandma was fluent in Urdu, Persian, Arabic, and math, arithmetic. So she would have private tutors come and teach arithmetic so she was very skilled and she wrote, she was a writer so she would write for a lot of national magazines and journals. So as a result of that, my parents, especially my father—I’m talking about my grandparents on my father’s side because father is usually, still is the dominant figure in the family. And if he had a particular mindset it would be very difficult for a wife to offset that. So my father come down from that kind of a mindset. He was… In my home I always felt like he encouraged me more than he encourages my brothers. So I have two brothers and one younger sister. My brothers are very close to my age, so yeah I have a year… the brother right after me is a year and a half younger than me and then there is one that is two years younger than me. So yes he always encouraged my education, he praised me more, he really saw that I have more potential actually than the others and I don’t know if I did but he really believed in it. So I went to when my schooling started I went to a private school, a very high end private school in Pakistan. It was an air force school. So the beauty of that school was there was no religion issues. They would discourage that. Everyone was a student, they… It was very impartial to religious beliefs and it was a lot of respect. Teachers were not beating kids, because it’s very, very common for teachers to be beating kids. Students. Whereas my husband tells the story he would really get beaten up because he would always get in trouble he would never do his homework like ha! you didn’t do that. He never experienced it. So it was great for us. But on the downside we really didn’t see the other part that maybe my neighbor was experiencing. So it’s almost like you have your own life, you have your own bubble that you’re living in. And we literally were. We literally were. And as much as we were blessed, we were living in our own bubble. So we were… I would, I covered my head just like this [shows scarf] whenever we would go out I
would wear a chador… c-h-a-d-o-r. So I don’t know, Have you read the book Parvana’s, or Breadwinner?

LB: No…

N: Okay, it’s a middle school level they’re teaching, but you should read it its interesting. But they use the word chador, chador is a long like almost double, like three times this thing when we kind of go out, we cover ourselves when we go out in public. So I’d wear a chador, so go to my school, have uniform. All school have uniforms, all schools have uniforms. The beauty of that is that once you’re in school you don’t have to worry about what you look like or all of those issues are gone so you’re a student. It was an air force school so if you go to a military school, exceptional discipline, exceptional time regulations, a lot of regulations. We have to check our nails, our hair had to be tied in our ponytail, we had to wear uniform, very spick and span, very organized, very high level, very high end. We would never have more than 15-20 kids in our class. Because it was very expensive, very expensive. My father always put me… that we always had private tutors come later on with our sciences and our math. So a lot of emphasis was put on our education. Unbelievable. We had another tutor come just for Arabic. Because as Muslims we do learn Arabic. It’s not taught in schools but each and every Muslim you encounter, at some point in life they had read the Quran so it’s almost a must. So for that we had another tutor. So… Yeah I was fortunate, but then you hear about what Malala did.

LB: I did just read her book.

N: Yes, so everything is true. Pathans were not encouraged… it’s still an issue… women education is still a problem. When I said we are 15 to 20 students in our class, there would be about 6-8 girls and the rest would be boys. There aren’t that many girls. Especially in a good set up. Because parents would, even if they can, they would not spend that much money on their daughters. Because first of all their daughters are probably considered not as smart because they are spending more time doing chores at home.

LB: Sure.

N: Even if it’s not needed they usually have servants and everything. Their time is spent more on doing housework then reading books or getting an intellectual education. So yeah that is very common. And for the rest of Pakistan it’s the same. For the Pathans its much more… they’re very strict by nature. But the rest of the Pakistan, yes. If anyone tells me they didn’t experience it, that’s different, I didn’t experience it, but saying that it’s not there, it’s wrong. It’s a predominant problem.

LB: Right.

N: But it’s a predominant problem all over the world. We see it… I mean it’s a problem. Women are not given that much importance and they think that once they marry they’ll go to spend more money on my son, they will take care of us. They will bring a wife and they will take care of…
it’s almost like an investment thing. They will be able to work, they will go abroad and do things. Whereas daughter, you spend too much… even in my case it happened. [gets emotional] My dad spent so much and even when I got married I came here and I left them and all the money away… if I look at it all the money that was spent on my brothers, we went to the same school and same college until I got married. I got married, had to… couldn’t continue my education and came here. My brothers continued, they become who they wanted to become and they are taking care of my parents now.

LB: Okay.

N: Our parents. In a way I feel like culturally, it made sense.

LB: Sure.

N: My father didn’t, because he didn’t believe… and kind of, he wasn’t doing it because… he’s like they’re all equal. She’s better, she’s smarter…. I was the daughter, I was the only one. My sister, she has Down Syndrome and she was born 15 years after I was so for a long time it was like I was the only one, I’m doing you are better. But not a lot of people would do that.

LB: Sure. It’s very unique.

N: It’s unique, yeah. And upper class people, would not do it. Because of course they are very rich and they are educated and they don’t believe it. But that, it’s a minority, it’s definitely a minority.

LB: Sure. That’s really detailed, really great. Thank you for sharing. Would you say that then girls who don’t get as much attention on their education then continue doing, like you said staying at home and doing their housework? Is that their primary focus then?

N: Yeah, they do go to school nowadays. Everyone is eventually going to school, and things are changing. And everyone realizes everyone has to read and write and get some kind of work… they’re better off because no one even wants to marry a girl who is not educated, for their son. Education is valued more and more with every passing day. Every passing day, every passing second. So girls are getting more educated, they just don’t have as much of… there isn’t as much emphasis put on their education as the same education emphasis that would be put on their brothers. Like as if there’s a boy and a girl in the family, the girls have exams coming up, or what you call tests or finals week—we could call them final exams or papers. So if she has a paper exam coming up, she’s like mom, someone comes in, mom is like go make some tea for someone or grab me this or something. Don’t bother him, he’s studying. It’s a natural thing, men are given more importance. So it’s that patriarchal nature of society where more emphasis is put on boys, on men.

LB: Sure. Right.
N: So they do continue and they do… it depends on how far they’ll go. And another thing is because of our religion, and again religion is not, never a restriction, how people mend their religion towards their own desires is an issue. Religion encourages… Islam clearly says that it is the duty of every Muslim man and woman to be educated. Which is clearly not being followed. By majority of the people. And they just choose boys because again it’s their personally self-made issues. It’s not religion. But religion does require a woman to be… when she goes away, to be around family. It encourages that. For the safety of the woman. And we see it even now on campus. A lot of issues won’t happen. When I translated, in my personal life, opinion, women, there is one thing of freedom of woman, but woman are vulnerable and weak so we have to be more careful. And that carefulness can be translated differently. And people can be like don’t even go there, I won’t even… A lot of families, men or brothers be like make the decision, oh no no no that college is too far you’re not going there.

LB: I see.

N: Why? Because you’re a girl. So instead of coming up with an idea, they just think, oh Islam doesn’t allow it, it’s very unsalamic to go out. Yes Islam doesn’t doesn’t encourage it, but Islam encourages education so instead of problem solving they just… and the problem solving it’s hard, it’s easier said than done. For some it’s hard to commute to a far off college, for boys it’s easier, they can go on busses and they can go on public transportation, which is not ideal for women. To be honest it is not. If you’re covered up there is that danger. It’s a dangerous world out there. They don’t have 911s, they don’t have cops, they don’t have the phones and everything, the security and it’s an issue. So because of that and another issue that education won’t be continued is exactly what happened with me. Even from such an educated family, usually if a good proposal come and the parents like, oh it looks like a good boy I think it will be a good match, what do you think, its almost considered like a normal thing. Again, it’s changing, but you get married. So, a lot of time your education is put on hold because of that. Even if you have all the ?portention? I did pre-med over there, but once… I sometimes laugh at my husband, like you ruined the plan because you came in the middle. But I was like, ah, I like him, I’ll get married and continue there. It’s not like as easy. A lot of times once you get married a lot of financial things, the situation changes. It’s not the same, I was not in my dad’s home. My dad worked in a bank, he was the president of a bank so he could afford and my husband couldn’t. I had kids. You know things change. Sometimes there are other issues, sickness or something. So marriage is another issue that stops the education. Early marriages. So that’s another issue. I mean when my brothers came that was different he got married, wife was… wanted to pursue medicine. My brother was here just about ten years ago and he was like okay I’ll support you. So they went to the residency and everything and they held off on having kids. That’s kind of… how many times will you find that supportive of a husband. It’s everywhere. That’s why women even here want to have a career even before they get married, because usually men once they get married they just want to get married… usually! You’ll always find support. So things are pretty similar, issues are. Over here it looks like we have found the solutions, maybe 50 years earlier
than Pakistan is. Maybe 50 years behind. So it’s getting there, but it’s not quite there. And the only sad thing is when people start using religion and people are using it, and people still to this day, the extremists will turn, will use religion again women education, which is clearly not… Islam supports religion at every level. Quran says… I forgot the words, but Quran says let every Muslim… every believing man or woman of the same criteria. So it’s not like okay, if education is… it’s not where written that only men would get education. Only men would go out women would not. All the criteria are the same for us. For… in order to get God’s pleasure. So it’s just a distortion of religion. Extremists would do that… people are uneducated… they don’t even know how to read Quran. So if you give them a translation they will accept it. Just like a few hundred years ago, in the west, the church had all the power to… oh the Bible says this. People were not even allowed to… The translation were not even available and people were just… at the mercy of the priest and whatever they were saying, the clergy. So that’s what they’re saying over there. Is it diminishing? Yes, with the changing world, with social media, with internet, with people like Malala. But at the same time, good things are happening. Unfortunately the extremists are getting stronger and stronger too. I don’t know. I’m not there anymore, I’m here. I don’t know why… I don’t know why the parties, the mindset of Taliban is getting hold of women. They don’t really don’t agree with women education at all, just know what happened to Malala. So that is an unfortunate thing and these are the two forces that are going against. So one is this natural way of going forward, no one can ever stop and the other way is these terrorists are trying doing things with fear. I didn’t face that, I came here 22 years ago. But again, where I was, that area has always been very much restrictive and very suffocating when it comes to educating. Even sometimes the uneducated… I remember this gentleman, we called him uncle just out of respect elderly uncle, he was our gardener and cook. So he would work in the garden and help in the kitchen, like a cook, so… or a chef or whatever you call it, so he was a poor man, working for us, so… at one point I was like, uncle would you send your daughter to school? He was like yes, I didn’t go to school, I will definitely make sure my kids are educated. And sure enough we just heard from him, somebody from our family visited from back home, his son made it to med school and daughter because a teacher. So yes there are people who would do anything, so yes he was working hard to make sure his kids were educated. So it’s a mindset, some people do have that respect for education and they’ll do anything. But… it’s… the issues are there, problems. If you have poverty, how do you…

LB: Where do you begin? Right.

N: What do you do? If you have nothing to eat, how can you even think of educating a kid?

LB: Absolutely.

N: This is the biggest problem you have, to feed them to have a home, a shelter [get emotional]. But other than that, the education system, I liked that it was simple, not too technical. It still is not too technical. So when I say not too technical, so in elementary school or med school, or high school is only two years and then you get done and then two years is college. And it’s pretty
straight forward. Usually the profession schools are again even government pays for that, so just like public school, the profession schools like all the med schools and engineering schools are all public. So from that I mean like even the community colleges like COD or something, so even the best medical schools and engineering schools are public, so it’s very cheap. So a person becomes a doctor, they don’t have those hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt so nothing of such. My brother is a doctor and even though we went through the same schooling and college, and when he want to medical school it was actually much less than much school. Dad would laugh like, I’m not paying anything, because that’s how the system is made. So that’s the beauty… that’s very good because at least once you get past that, college is not expensive. Which is very opposite. School is a problem, whereas college is cheap… because once you made it to university you are paying minimum... Literally the minimum fee would be just nothing. So that’s very interesting.

LB: Yeah, that is very interesting.

N: The beauty of that is once you go in that college you can continue. And that’s why people are, once they get over the hump of getting good schooling, or they just do very minimum effort or get into some kind of college, they can get into some kind of college, doesn’t have to be medical or engineering. Things like that.

LB: Sure.

N: Once they ought to continue, they will. Because money will not be problem once they are in college. So I don’t know how government is dealing with that, they are some private colleges now, professional colleges, just for rich people, again if they don’t make it to even regular meds schools… so it’s been the last 20 years things started, they pay tons of money. It’s like if a person doesn’t get into med school in the United States, you know how people are sending their kids to Caribbean. It’s expensive, because they’re living there, and far and coming and all the commute and everything. Not daily commute but you know the air fare and everything. But at the end they do become doctors, physicians or whatever. So that’s the private medical schools, private engineering schools they are getting more… this idea is becoming more common. Yeah, it’s happening. So in school, so there are subjects like… core subjects like, Urdu is our national language, so Urdu is taught. From the beginning. Then English. So Urdu and English are always together, in English-medium schools. In Urdu-medium schools or in public schools there will only be Urdu so English will not be taught. So that’s another drawback, if kids went through that system and they do end up in professional schools, like let’s see if even someone… [Daughter’s name] went to a public school okay, very smart student and everything because even after public school. Because if a person is smart they will get to med school because they’re a smart kid. It’s not like Chicago schools, not anyone will come out of it, a lot of great brains are coming out of those schools and they’re great kids and they beat the odds and they do come out, I mean Pakistan only Nobel Prize laureate is in physics. He’s from our community actually. I mean he’s from Pakistan but he’s strictly from our community, where we come from.
LB: Right.

N: He is… he went to public school. And he got a Nobel Prize in physics. So he was the first Muslim scientist to get the Nobel Prize and he was the only Pakistani to this day. Ever. So his name is Dr. Abdussalam. A-b-d-u-s-s-a-l-a-m. And again, you can search him online. So he’s a Nobel laureate. And went to public school. So it’s… if you’re a brain, it’s impossible, but I’m saying it’s like a lot of times opportunities would be harder for them. So yeah, what was I saying, so yeah if [Daughter’s name] goes to public schools and ends up in med school, she’s a smart kid, she pass the exam, the entrance exam, and everything great, the initial problem she’ll have, she’ll not have been taught English from the beginning and now in professional schools all the texts are in English.

LB: English, okay.

N: So that is a problem. Again, a smart person would get over it, because they would probably have learned English over the way, because you can’t avoid not learning English. But for an English-medium student life would be much more easier.

LB: Got it.

N: But again, it’s never harder, it has never been, it’s just something… So my brother would tell us that people who came from Urdu medium, they were struggling, the first semester they would maybe even drop a few classes and things like that. The first semester it was really hard. But they catch up because they are smart enough to go that far. And again just the text is in English but all the communications, even teachers would give lectures in Urdu.

LB: Okay.

N: So with the English it goes hand in hand. But the core subjects re English, Urdu, math, science, and social studies, oh and Islamic studies.

LB: Okay. At both private and public schools?

N: Yes, yes. But again in public there won’t be any English.

LB: Right.

N: Because mostly they will be Urdu-medium. We call it Urdu-medium or English-medium. So if it’s English-medium, which would be private schools would have all of that. Once they, so they’re given a book in the beginning, so each student would have… and they all have to buy their own textbooks, private or public I believe. I can’t… I don’t know if public schools… the college if the schools gives them the books? I believe they do... but for private you have to buy your own texts. So you buy those five or six texts for those core subjects and you take them… so that is what you have to do in the whole year, the whole textbook. And you’re given two journals, you call them journals we call them copies, and two copies: class work and homework. So whatever you do in class you take the notes and then whatever homework is given you take it
in that journal. So you bring the journal the homework and maybe Friday the teacher checks it, give it back on Monday. So the system is pretty organized and at the end of the school year, before the summer break, there will be one final exam. And for each subject. We call them exams, like the week, finals week, just like you have finals week here. But it is for the whole year. So it’s… that is the memory test. And that’s why again when people from our community, their memory skills are [snaps] unbelievable. Because we… not that our memories are necessarily better, but we have been trained.

LB: Right.

N: Because if you do it for like for 16 years of your life, so you are memorizing the whole thing for that three hours. And it’s usually a three hours paper. So that’s how we are trained so things come very naturally. I mean we memorize everything, all the times tables are memorized by the age of five and six, seven or eight. I remember I was studying chemistry the first thing that was memorized was the periodic table, so just don’t go in the middle of the transitional metals, but the ones that are used the elements we just memorized this thing [snaps] because we were going to use. It just works for any of our nerves or anything we just memorize. Because that’s how the system works that how I’m going over there the last paper in the end of the year I have to spit out everything that I’ve learned. I have no time to think. Three hours, like boom boom boom. So writing skills and memory is a big thing. We really we really depend on it, and we’re trained. We’re unbelievably trained. Like even with my kids I did it, whatever I could do for Arabic.

LB: Yeah.

N: It’s unbelievable, you would not imagine how we’d really memorize, but sometimes I feel like oh if I videotape, people probably think I’m abusing my kids so whenever they are in the back, now they’re big but when they were younger, when we’re going somewhere in the car seat with the seatbelt on I’m like okay, so I’m saying something without them even knowing. They repeating they’re repeating they’re repeating until they get it. And they spit it out.

LB: Yeah.

N: Just tell me, don’t even think about it just boom boom boom boom boom boom. It works.

LB: Alif baa… [laughs] That’s great. So that’s funny how you translate that into teaching your own kids.

N: Yes, because how else do you memorize Arabic. I mean they don’t understand.

LB: Right, I just learned Arabic actually this past term.

N: Oh, really?

LB: Yeah they just started offering it here. So I… before graduating I really wanted to learn it.

N: Oh, how beautiful!
LB: Yeah, so I…

N: That is beautiful. So did you realize how… what a… when you go forward how difficult of a language it is.

LB: Yes, it’s learning a whole new set of sounds, a new alphabet.

N: Everything. Everything and we still don’t get the sounds because it’s not our native language. Memorizing the verses from Quran for our daily prayers and you don’t understand them you just have to depend on your memory, right?

LB: Right.

N: So this memory, the brain it’s just a set of neurons how you train them. I remember when I was taking my philosophy class the teacher was big on memory, he was give us passages and he was like memorize them without even knowing. First memorize them and then you think about them. So over here in [college name] and it was interesting too for me because he was telling us how some scientists say how memory skill is diminishing we have to bring it back, because we totally cannot expect us to understand everything. First you memorize and then you understand. It becomes a little bit easier. So I was like that’s interesting, it’s usually not the approach used here.

LB: Right, right.

N: He made us and it worked for me so I was like ah, I like it.

LB: That’s good!

N: That doesn’t mean everyone has a great memory. I don’t have as much of a great memory as my brothers, but that’s why he’s a doctor and I’m not. [laughs] But it doesn’t mean that everyone isn’t good, but that’s a skill at some point they use it, they had to. But I’m just answering the question of the system. It’s pretty straightforward. In a way it’s straightforward, you do your classwork you do your homework there aren’t that may papers give or pass or this or that. Everything’s in the textbook, the teacher covers it, you read it, you memorize it, you understand it. And there’s a pass or fail, if you don’t pass a class you will fail and you will stay in a class, which is... which stinks.

LB: Yeah.

N: Which is very hard because we had pupils we had students three, four years older than us, so that’s the flaw of the system. Once you’re stuck you are stuck you’re stuck you’re stuck.

LB: Yeah… until you really… get it.

N: Which is very sad. [laughs] It’s not a laughing matter, but it was interesting to have these people like I would have and so-an-so was in my class and my brother would have the person and my younger brother would have that person and it’s like ugh! The person is so dumb. Again
the system sometimes there are some learning disabilities that’s going on undiagnosed unnoticed, they are not getting the help they deserve. Sometimes they’re just not working hard sometimes they just don’t have the same memory or there could be a million things, so that’s a fault. And they’re not as strict they will let eventually, but I’m just staying there are just some little things. No system can ever be perfect.

LB: No, that’s so true.

N: Times are changing and I think maybe it will change, some schools with different policies like my school. There’s a lot of difference even in private schools just like any other system. Not all of them are exactly what I’m telling you. I’m just definitely giving my experience so.

LB: Exactly. No, I’m definitely going into this with the mindset that I can’t… I can’t judge or think of an entire system based off of one account.

N: Exactly.

LB: So yeah, absolutely.

N: And it helps me, because otherwise it’s strictly one person’s story.

LB: Yeah, of course.

N: Yeah there are… there are changes, just like any other human system.

LB: Okay, so, we talked about your family a little bit. Were there parts of school when you were growing up that you particularly liked or that you didn’t like that you can remember?

N: I loved everything about my school. I absolutely, part of the reason we look back our childhood usually be… we choose to remember the best things, the best time of our lives. I probably… I’m biased…

LB: Sure.

N: I think I had an amazing childhood, so sometimes even if something unpleasant… Even, “mom, so and so happened and they were so mean and…” It’s like “really?” I don’t know I choose to remember the best things. I had a very happy childhood. And school was a big part of it. School was a big part of it. Dad was very much involved, very good teachers, very, very good teachers, very… teachers are very, very capable. Because unfortunately teachers don’t get paid. They are such educated people, get their masters, PhDs, and get paid very little. So I still feel even at that school teachers are poor, because sometimes we go to their homes to give them some, you know sometimes how you do it, like winter break you give your teachers treats. It was a small country small place, so people are more connected, so we would find out where our teachers lived (which is kind of unheard of here) and we would go there and give them gifts. Just like our end of the year thank you gift, and our parents with some treats, and I would find them living in… not not rich people. But they were very educated. Usually teachers are very, very
respectable, it’s a very respectable profession. And kids do respect their teachers a lot too. Unbelievable bond of respect that I don’t unfortunately see here. It’s just unbelievable…the respect that I have for my teacher after my parents I put my teachers. I just… I still think of them and I have so much respect and love [gets emotional] for them. And I think it was reciprocated, they have the same respect, they are very passionate people. If that society they chose that and they are such smart brains, unfortunately they can’t go farther with any kind of research or anything like that and they become teachers I don’t think they make enough money. So it’s just the passion, it’s just the care for kids, try to change the system and do something for the kids. It’s driving them.

LB: Right, they’re not in it to make…

N: For anything, just for the betterment of the children. But they were amazing people. And the society teachers a lot of respect. So the family, the parents would respect the teachers. Too much. To the point the teacher would say something harsh, parents would take the teachers side: like “go and apologize to your teacher the teacher’s right” but that’s part of the society of showing too much respect to the elder, the teacher and things like that. But um... so I love my teachers, what other things… we had a lot of extracurricular, we were very fortunate. We had debate team, I was on the debate team, we were traveling. Again, I mean how many time you will see a woman traveling, only dad would do it. Only my dad would allow it. Even I look at my dad and think, how could you do that.

LB: Yeah.

N: It’s like, I had so much confidence in you and knew you. That is unheard of but we had a great debate team, we had a great speech team, drama team. And we were involved. A lot of extracurriculars… when it comes to sports there weren’t that many, many things have changed now, maybe it was the kind of era that I was that in that… I’m not an athletic person so I didn’t mind, it’s like great okay [laughs] I don’t care. But maybe it’s there now, I don’t know. The only thing I didn’t like was, because I was not athletic so the PE class was something I absolutely didn’t like. I had to do p.t., p.t. it’s what we call physical training which we would literally line up in assembly, the boys here girls here there were two grounds. Things were still segregated. So when you go to school, so there’s a main campus, so you enter like this [gestures] and there are classes here and here so things are pretty symmetrical in our country, even homes are. So when you go, when you enter there’s this courtyard, like fenced, and the classes are here, and this is the ground, like boys ground and girls playground so you’re playing your hanging out your recess is here [gestures]. So boys are separate. Men are separate. And then in classes you’re together, in labs you are together, in the library you are together, of course but that’s how it was. And I would dress up with our traditional clothes with a longer shirt and loose pants for girls and a scarf, head scarf. It doesn’t have to stay on your head, it can be just… people would just have it like this [gestures] girls would have it, again it’s a personal thing. When I went out I wore a chador, again it was a personal thing, not all girls did some were very liberal they didn’t care
they didn’t live in the purdah part. It's a personal thing, it still is. Again a lot of Muslims, [Daughter’s name] doesn’t even cover her head and it’s a personal thing if you want to and I do. So my favorite part was definitely our school was good in sciences and the debate and speech and the intellectual parts was very much part of… our college magazine was great so I liked all that because that was my strength. I didn’t like the p.t. class. Part of it was you’re opposite the boys and you’re doing your exercises and it was very embarrassing I didn’t like that part [laughs] I didn’t like it. That’s the age of growing the body is changing and you just don’t like it.

LB: Yeah [laughs].

N: I never cared for exercise anyway so, but yes that’s about it. And just the regular things you don’t want to leave at home, it was private school—it was very strict and the course load was much, much higher so the expectations much higher the competitions, usually people are coming there from very, very educated family with constant pressure of doing good is constant there. It’s so competitive, it’s so competitive.

LB: Sure.

N: I remember towards the end finals if I would find out so when it was in high school if I would find out my so and so friend studied 17 hours I would make sure I would study 18 hours. So this unbelievable drive and competition was there.

LB: Sure, sure.

N: So yeah, sometimes I feel like that’s a little too unhealthy and doesn’t leave the room for what you want to do, it’s more like it was expected. Especially for boys I believe for more. I think my brother was even more stressed so when my brother right after me, he didn’t, he was not a medicine person so he didn’t do medicine and that was harsh. That was not fun for him. There weren’t that many… like what do you do now. So that’s why 18 and came to the United States. He went to DePaul and got his education here. He was very successful and has in corporate now. Did computer science and accounting. So he could not have gone that far had he stayed in Pakistan. But maybe…

LB: Sure.

N: I’m not saying everything would have been completely dark but definitely it’s become easier for him here. And my other brother who got into med school, right away he finished that, things were easier for him. He went to med school things are easier. He’s here now too, but...

LB: Yeah maybe just because he just had different opportunities because he was here. Okay... I just want to make sure that I’m doing good... okay. This is great. [laughs] What else… maybe really briefly, could you tell me what an average day was like? Like if you went to school all day, in the morning…

N: Yeah that’s actually a very good question because each day was very different.
LB: Oh, okay.

N: So school was start at 7 in the morning, which was very early. And again it was unusual because it was a military school an air force school, so not all schools were starting at 7, but air force style military school the discipline was unbelievable so we have to start early no matter what the weather is and this and that but normally we would never have breaks, school would never have off. So Monday through Thursday oh wait a minute I even forgot now... wait... so Thursday was a half day and Friday was off day and then you don’t have anything off on Saturday or Sunday. So from Saturday to Thursday you have school, or Wednesday you have full school. So Saturday to Wednesday you have full school. Thursday was half day and Friday was off. Because Friday is our holy day.

LB: Right, okay.

N: For Muslims, just like Sunday is for Christians. So we like to kind of change and go to prayers at the mosque. It’s an official off day in Pakistan. So, so you wake up early in the morning, there was a school bus—not for private schools. So you would have a private arrangement, like for every sub division there would be a carpool and you would pay towards that. Whereas we had a driver, we had a chauffeur, a private chauffeur so it didn’t matter for us, who we went with. But you go there and I would wear a chador, we change, ironed clothes. For boys it was pants and shirt and a tie and uh formal shoes no gym shoes, the same color, no socks, the hair cut has to be very army style crew cut for boys. For girls I said they had to tie up their hair. So everything was very disciplined. And it’s pretty much average in any schools, private or public. The sense of discipline is there. Uniforms and students do look very neat and sophisticated usually they do. And then after that, so even if you see pictures and everything students will be very, you can see them, there is that special thing about them. And then so there would be an assembly every morning.

LB: Yeah.

N: Everyone gets into an assembly like over here I don’t know if your schools had it [Daughter’s name] schools had it. At least in elementary school, the first day there’s an assembly and the principals are there, teachers are there. Teachers are wearing robes just like the Harry Potter teachers all the teachers will be wearing robes, those black gowns and they’ll be looking very nice and fancy. Our principal was a pilot because it was an air force school so he’d be wearing his things and stuff like that. His full uniform. So we would have a national anthem and the whole ceremony the flag hosting ceremony. We’ll say our morning prayers, because it’s a Muslim country. Did we have other religions? Yes we had one Christian. One Christian. So think about diversity. Which is very sad [laughs] but that’s what is was. One Christian. Which at various point, was a very nice guy. His name was ?Gogee? I should remember and at some point some foolish girls just made him read part of Quran in Urdu and they were just like “congratulations, congratulations.” And I was like what happened? And they were like we converted him. Oh really? He didn’t care, he was laughing, [laughs] but it was just a funny story.
I tell my children. Like this is how naïve we were and stupid. But yes he was only Christian. His last name was John which was very exotic for us. Like ah… we take pictures of him [laughs] he was a very nice guy a nice fellow. And so that’s it. So not a lot of diversity. Languages, yes. Too many languages. Because in Pakistan different states different people speak different languages so that’s one thing, but basically you communicating in Urdu or English. So that’s the only thing. Usually Urdu, if your English is good, great you’re talking in English. Not everyone’s English is so good that they communicate but for good or bad you don’t feel at home if you’re speaking a different language. That’s about it. So the school would start with the assembly, it’s probably the same for all schools. It’s definitely the same for all schools of I’m speaking. There would be morning prayers, where someone would read from Quran with translation, then you would go to your classes your classes, it’s… usually you stay in your classes until college. You do stay in your home class and your teachers would come instead of you going to the classes. Which really bothers me, I’m a substitute teacher and it’s like oh my God why do the poor kids have to go to locker and get the stuff, why can’t they just stay there and teacher come, because this way there won’t be that much of a chaos and kids going out. I don’t know it’s just my thing. Teacher is one person leaving the class and going to this one and that one. But now 30 kids are going in different directions. But again there’s so many options and every child has a different schedule, over there since there aren’t that many choices so life is a bit easier. Teachers stay, if there’s something like towards the later classes in high school even in high school the core classes are the same, there’s only this much wiggle room [gestures] maybe be adding a few, like I added Arabic, or maybe someone added an art class so they would move to a different class the teacher would come to teach them Arabic. But there are a slight change of classes but they aren’t given hundreds of different classes like high school over here which is like what do we choose. Which is a very good thing you guys are blessed to have that but there’s pretty much less chaos, you’re basically staying the same, you have lunch break or recess and a p.t.… did we have music? No we didn’t have formal music classes. Maybe some higher end… I’m sure there are some higher end schools that had them but we didn’t have them. We didn’t have formal education, I still don’t know how to read music. I was not given an opportunity to learn any instrument. Did people learn it at home and privately family traditions, some family had music tradition. So I am not aware of that, I didn’t learn it. And that’s my biggest regret actually. I wish we had some kind of music education. Sciences were great, the whole country is big on sciences. Languages, linguistics. That program is really great. Social studies is great. It’s just that when it comes to liberal arts and things that the country is lagging behind. When it comes to music and other fine arts I don’t think that there will be a drawing class but they were never taught anything we never studied anything, we never… it was like okay draw. [laughs]

LB: Okay. [laughs]

N: So it’s just it was very bad it was horrible. So yeah I think that would be a good thing. That would be my only regret in the system. It’s only the in the system I wish I was more introduced more at higher level, initially, early on, to liberal arts and science and arts and paintings. I see
students going to art and literally working on art. So we didn’t have that. So that’s about it. And then when you come home you get off at 2, 2 o’clock. So be home about 2:30. The country’s weather gets very very hard so you usually eat lunch and dad usually come home for lunch, because the distances are not that much. The area gets so hot. Let me check I don’t want [Daughter’s name] to be calling me…

LB: Oh yeah, please do. I don’t want to…

N: Okay. I’ll leave it on because I just don’t want…

LB: Yeah, please do. I don’t want to…

N: So the dads usually come home and there’s usually a siesta, a fiesta. What do you call it when you nap, a siesta?

LB: Oh yeah, a siesta. It’s Spanish.

N: Yeah in Spanish. So something like that we do take a break because it’s such a… the weather gets so hot and sweaty and everything so people like to take a nap and like almost everything stands still. You don’t really, can’t go out… nothing you don’t want to study. You just want to nap a little bit and take a shower and then when you wake up its like early evening, much earlier evening. Just have some like cold drink, different traditional cold drinks like it’s like a snack time for family or tea time or call it team time. Like maybe cold ice tea or things like that or lemonade so it’s almost like a must for every family. And then we would retire. Boys would go out to play. Usually girls stay in. I stayed in. Usually girls stay in. The older the girl gets the more she stays home. If they’re lucky they have sisters, I didn’t have sisters for a long time and the reason I was just home alone basically I had no sister to play with the boys would go out to play my brother would go play and once they would come back then we do our homework. Usually girls are much smarter. In med school, my brother went to med school, he said more than 50% of the class would be girls. Because girls stay home more and as a result they study more so they are consider smarter in that way. If they have the right opportunities they will. Because they are studying, staying more home and not doing outdoor chores that much. And they have more time to study. So then we do our homework and then its dinner time like around 8 or 9 o’clock. Then bath or shower and go to bed. So pretty much very average day so. Yeah that’s an average day, so.

LB: Great, thank you.

N: But we did used to come home much earlier than my kids come home.

LB: Yeah! That is…

N: Because we start earlier we were not wasting that much time. Because as a teacher I see that time is wasted. Or maybe its new things have changed, more demands, society has more demands more to cover more information. I don’t know, I don’t want to make any judgement on
that. But we did come home earlier. We were able to do all the math and science and everything that’s needed and then we’ll have more time to take a nap, wake up, enjoy a little bit of play time, then do our traditional homework and have dinner and retire. But that’s what it was.

LB: Great thank you.

N: And that’s pretty standard with some variations. Kids usually don’t work and in both cases. [phone rings] That’s mom. I can call mom later. So... I can call her later. So… let me turn the voice down a little bit. But it is usually kids don’t work. Child labor thing is not that much common. [phone rings] Unfortunately like I said poverty is a big part of the society. That issue is there but it’s not common. I don’t see that. Even poor people would love for their kids to go to school, they would not have as many opportunities the education standard is lower, they’ll leave school much earlier they’ll get to work much earlier, let’s see 16 or 18, but it’s not like 8 year old would be working would be forced to work. Because it’s a collectivistic society so people will step up to help if there is a situation where the family is so needed or so poor to help the family in something.

LB: Yeah, okay. Okay, I feel like I’ve taken so much of your afternoon.