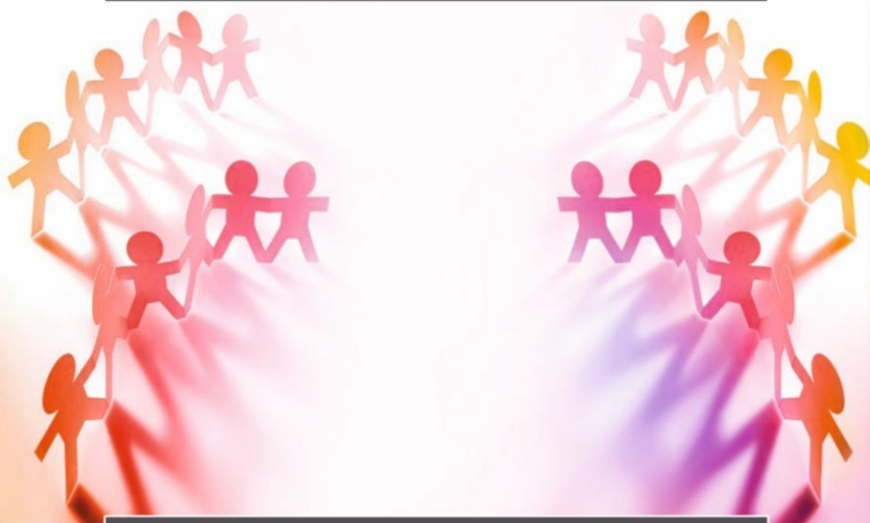


# Getting There

## Women's Journeys to and Through Educational Attainment

Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton

Rima Karami Akkary, Donna M. Beegle,  
Eileen Casey White, Wangeci M. Gatimu  
and P. Maureen Musser



*SensePublishers*

GETTING THERE: WOMEN'S JOURNEYS TO AND THROUGH EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



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*By*

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*This work is dedicated to women.  
May we ever aspire higher.*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
INTRODUCTION <i>Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	1
DONNA'S STORY <i>Donna M. Beegle &amp; Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	7
MAUREEN'S STORY <i>P. Maureen Musser &amp; Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	39
RIMA'S STORY <i>Rima Karami Akkary &amp; Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	55
EILEEN'S STORY <i>Eilein Casey White &amp; Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	77
KATE <i>Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	101
WANGECI'S STORY <i>Wangeci Gatimu &amp; Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	105
CYNTHIA'S STORY <i>Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	119
ENDING IN THE MIDDLE <i>Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	145
APPENDIX – METHODOLOGY <i>Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton</i>	157





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CYNTHIA LEE A. PEMBERTON

## INTRODUCTION

*Why it matters ... Why this book*

### PROLOGUE

I haven't always valued women or their lived experience. In fact, women in general have been a puzzle to me; perhaps largely because I've lived so much of my life in and driven by sport. Historically and traditionally sport has been and continues to adhere to a masculine model—a sort of warrior mentality, characterized by winners and losers. Cooperation, collaboration, compassion, connection, and to a certain extent even fair play, are often not highly valued. And then I became one of the Sisters and my world view changed.

What I once considered trivial, even mundane, I began to see as rich in complexity, subtly and nuance. What I once considered weak, I began to see as strong, powerful and enduring. What I once viewed as side-lined support, I came to know as a driving force of life.

Women were denied access to United States (U.S.) higher education until the mid-1800s; and once admitted were segregated from men and often tracked to into what was, at the time, considered academically appropriate for females. In fact, U.S. higher education "... based on the Germanic model and invented by and for men ..." (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001, p. 1) was not only historically and traditionally less accessible to women, grounded in patriarchal and Socratic roots, it was also in many ways less relevant to women. Even today many academic disciplines appear at least somewhat sex-segregated, and the barriers and supports associated with pursuing higher education often differ based on sex (Sadker, Sadker, & Zittleman, 2009). These contentions and the gender-shift being evidenced in terms of post-secondary education enrollment, persistence and achievement, are further supported by educational statistics reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). While there is some variation dependent upon discipline, women's enrollment at both the undergraduate and graduate levels has outpaced men's over the course of the past decade plus (<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>).

Between 1997 and 2007, enrollment increased ... [at a rate of 26%] ... from 14.5 million to 18.2 million. Much of the growth between 1997 and 2007 was in full-time enrollment; the number of full-time students rose 34 percent, while the number of part-time students rose 15 percent. During the same time

PEMBERTON

period, the number of females rose 29 percent, compared to an increase of 22 percent in the number of males. Enrollment increases can be affected both by population growth and by rising rates of enrollment ....

The report goes on to say:

Since 1984, the number of females in graduate schools has exceeded the number of males. Between 1997 and 2007, the number of male full-time graduate students increased by 32 percent, compared to a 63 percent increase for female graduate students. Among part-time graduate students, the number of males increased by 10 percent and the number of females increased by 23 percent.

Similar data were reported by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS). According to that report, "... the majority of all graduate students are women" (2011, p. 4), with U.S. percentages by degree level noted as: 51% at the doctoral level, 61% at the master's level, and 59% overall. In addition to these quantitative gender differences, there are also profound qualitative differences. Although focused primarily on the undergraduate student experience, in her 2008 book *The Gender Gap in College: Maximizing the Developmental Potential of Women and Men*, Linda Sax states:

Today—decades after the women's movement started what became monumental gains for female students in terms of access, equity, and opportunity—the popular notion is that gender equity has been achieved. Some higher education statistics do paint a rosy picture for women, who now make up the majority of undergraduates (up to 58 percent nationally), earn better college grades than men do, and are more likely than men to complete college. (p. 1)

She goes on to note "... that the sociodemographic composition of female students is becoming increasingly different from that of male students" (p. 2); that is, female students are becoming more diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, etc. In the final chapter of her book, Sax states:

... gender shapes not just the characteristics of women and men entering college but also the way in which women and men *experience* college. In various ways and to varying extents, gender influences how women's and men's interactions with people, programs, and services on campus ultimately contribute to their academic success, their beliefs about themselves, and their outlook on life. (p. 217)

Sax elaborates:

First, men and women differ from each other in numerous ways when they arrive at college. Second, though some gender differences converge during the college years, an even greater number are magnified. And finally, in

many important ways, college environments and experiences differentially affect women and men. (p. 241)

This book presents findings from a multi-year qualitative study based on life-history narratives of women pursuing graduate/doctoral degrees in Educational Leadership. It explores the lived experiences and educational journey of women who found themselves together in an Educational Leadership doctoral program at Portland State University (PSU), in Oregon between 1993 and 2000; and, as such presents a real-world/real-people context to the numbers underlying the educational gender demographics noted. The personal stories are told as first person narratives, rich in complexity, struggle, pain and joy.

These stories are important because they illuminate the realities of resiliency and persistence exemplified through these women's educational journeys in the context of their lived experience (Christman & McClellan, 2008; Jones, 2003; Madsen, 2008). This matters because "... we need and deserve our stories. They ground our understanding...in culture and context, elements frequently missing in mainstream literature ...” (Ah Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998, p. 3). Further, because these narrative voices represent the voices of women from diverse personal, professional, and ethnic/national backgrounds and experiences, the emergent themes and associated understandings offer "... an [important] alternative view ... steeped in a rich array of cultural pasts and encompassing various ethnic ...” backgrounds grounded in a profoundly human context (p. 4).

In her book *Flux*, Peggy Orenstein encourages women to share their experiences, and “talk across lines of age and circumstance” (p. 292). This book does that, talking across lines of age and circumstance, bringing into focus the complicated and convoluted, knotty, thorny and often messy realities of women's lives. Seeing clearly the forest and the trees, the grass, the shrubs and dirt, the fully fleshed-out realities of lived experience, we, as educators are gifted with the opportunity to not only more fully and accurately see and perhaps appreciate the conflicting, competing chaos that often characterizes and monopolizes women's lives, but a foundation of understanding from which to begin “retooling” (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001, p. 1) higher education to better meet the life and learning needs of all our students.

“In the end ...” Orenstein says, “... there is no single path to a textured, satisfying life-nor should there be” (p. 293); and indeed as this book reveals there is not. Despite geographical and generational differences, these women's independent and intersecting lives created, and even today supports and sustains, their ongoing connection, empowerment and achievements.

#### THE SISTERS—BEGINNING IN THE MIDDLE

##### *Describing the Sisters*

We met during the fall of 1993, fairly early on in our individual pursuits of a doctorate degree in Educational Leadership at Portland State University. We are: Donna, Eileen, Kate, Maureen, Rima, Wangeci and me, Cynthia.

PEMBERTON

*Donna is like an onion ... many, many layers and folds, each delicate, complex and encompassing. And the peeling ... the peeling can make one weep.* Yet all the while Donna remains centered and calm, radiating an inner strength and warmth, along with a subtle sassiness and spice. Donna is a contradiction, complex—yet enduringly simple, filled with joy and at the same time very, very sad. Donna is petite, with fine blonde hair that she wears mid-length and straight. She has a smile you feel all the way to your soul. To say Donna is intelligent or smart is not sufficient. Donna is strong. Donna has persevered. Donna has simply refused not to give up. Donna is an inspiration.

*Maureen was both a student and instructor in the PSU College of Education at the time we became we.* She'd begun working on her doctorate while supervising student-teachers. Maureen has brown hair that she wears chin to shoulder length in a neatly trimmed bob. For much of her life she claims to have been on a diet, but despite what appears to have been her own dissatisfaction with weight, she is both attractive and athletic. Maureen has a practical, real-world intellect. She is a sensible and well-grounded education professional, with an eclectic experiential background that has and continues to serve her well.

*Rima, from Lebanon (the country),* came to the U.S. through marriage. She met a Lebanese man when he was home visiting family, married, moved to the Sates and enrolled in the PSU doctorate program not long after arriving. Rima is wildly intelligent, beautiful and exotic. She is the kind of woman people stop to stare at, and may well be the smartest person I've ever met. One of my most profound memories of Rima was her 108% class average in our Doctoral research sequence. I earned a 107%. Being the competitor I am, her 108% made a strong and lasting early impression. Rima has black hair that she wears fairly short (it streaks some of gray now—which in the past tormented her, but now she claims she sports proudly to signify a life well lived). She has beautiful and intense eyes, strong features and as smile that lights up a room.

*Eileen, at the time of our meeting, was a full-time mother of three, full-time community college employee and consultant, and a full-time doctoral student.* As she tells in her story, she's pretty much always been in school and always juggled numerous full-time responsibilities simultaneously and successfully. Eileen is of medium build with brown hair. She exudes a sense of warmth and joy that seems almost incongruous with the time-demands and pressures that make up the fabric of her life. She is intelligent, quick and articulate; unafraid to share her thoughts and opinions, yet sensitive, kind, astute and almost delicate in delivery.

*My first impression of Kate was of her shoes.* It was in my first doctoral class, and as I scanned the room of students, most of whom were women, I noticed Kate's shoes. They were light-brown leather, suede I think, no heel, with a flat rubber sole—durable, practical, yet comfortable and stylish—much like Kate. Kate is a

petite, yet sturdy woman, with porcelain-like features. She wears her shiny blond hair fairly short, and it is always well styled. She's attractive and highly intelligent, with a robust laugh that belies her small physical stature and no nonsense academic focus.

*Wangeeci is a middle-aged African woman with strong cheek-bones and laughing eyes.* She is quiet, reserved and introspective, with a quick wit and subtle humor. Like Rima, her ability to succeed in a foreign culture in a second (or even third) language is utterly amazing. She is undoubtedly the most mature of we Sisters, in more ways than age. She's reasonable, responsible, practical and reflective, preferring often to keep a bit to herself.

*And me, Cynthia.* At the time (1996), I was a 38 years old. I have blond hair and blue eyes, and am about 5'7" tall with a relatively lean, fit build. I've spent much of my life in athletics (as an athlete, coach and athletic administrator). I don't consider myself particularly smart or attractive. But I've been told the overall package is appealing. My husband says I'm wholesome. I'm also tenacious and voracious in the pursuit of goals; as a result, what I may at times lack in innate intelligence, I make up through drive, determination, and the willingness and ability to work however hard is necessary to achieve.

#### *This Story Begins in the Middle*

I was steeping tea. It was a fall morning—a Saturday. We'd use my dolphin mugs—Dolphins of Paradise, from the Lenox china collection. The Sisters would be arriving soon, and this would be our first taping session.

We'd been meeting at least monthly for over a year. We rotated houses, or met at various restaurants. We visited, talked about our doctoral work and dissertation progress, and updated each other on the lives we were leading—family, work, that sort of thing. Then one day, I don't really remember when, where, or exactly what the conversation was, we decided to tell our stories. Ultimately, we had some vague notion about transcribing them, and perhaps compiling them into a book, maybe leaving some sort of legacy—something potentially useful to others, especially other women.

So today we were meeting to start taping. We'd planned a pot-luck and I'd gone down-town to the bead shop and selected an assortment of glass beads. We'd work with our hands, making necklaces while the stories unfolded. The necklaces, once made, would be exchanged. Wangeeci made mine.

These are our stories. They are stories about women and the life journeys traveled up to and briefly through our intersection and connections pursuing doctoral degrees in Educational Leadership. They are about the accidental educational cohort and sisterhood that emerged. They are stories whose formal telling began that fall Saturday, as we sat cross-legged on the floor, stringing glass beads, eating, laughing—sometimes crying, and sipping tea from the dolphins of paradise.



PEMBERTON

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