

Paternal Support as a Driver for Educational Success among Arab Muslim Canadian Women

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ABSTRACT

The growing numbers of Arab Muslim women leaving the Middle East to study at Canadian universities may seem to contradict with the Westerners' perception of inflexible universal cultural norms and traditions. For example, Arab fathers mistreat and discourage daughters in pursuing academic achievement. In this study, a representative sample of Arab Muslim women testify that their families and their Islamic faith are some of the main factors that enable them to move to Canada to complete their education. This paper sheds light on the main factors that enable Arab Muslim women who were born and educated in the Middle East to move to Canada for post-secondary studies. The empirical research comprises interviews with nine Arab Muslim women who have left their respective countries of origin to study at a Canadian university. An analysis of the data reveals that paternal support is the indispensable element that determines whether an Arab Muslim woman born and educated in the Middle East is able to pursue post-secondary studies in Canada. This paper contributes to the literature because it contests a variety of widely held stereotypes regarding Arab Muslim society, Arab Muslim immigrants to Canada, Arab Muslim women— as well as others regarding Islam. It challenges the stereotype of Muslim women as suppressed by their male guardians. As this study demonstrates, a segment of Muslim women receive significant paternal and other male support and encouragement to pursue their higher education and careers.

Keywords: Arab Muslim women, Arab Muslim women's upbringing, parental influence on education

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INTRODUCTION

Study context

According to Statistics Canada (2005), the number of immigrants from Arab Muslim countries is steadily increasing.

The Canadian population in 1996 included 188,430 Arab Muslims: this number is on the rise. Since 1999, Islam has been among the top ten religious denominations in Canada.

The first wave of Muslims began immigrating to Canada in the early part of the 20th century. They continued to immigrate during World War II. These numbers were relatively small with majority came from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Turkey (B. Abu-Laban, 1980; S. Abu-Laban & McIrvin, 1991). The second wave of Muslim immigrants came as a result of political strife and upheaval in their native countries after World War II and continued until 1967. The influx were mostly from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq, the remainders were from India and Pakistan (Haddad, 1978). Most of these early immigrants settled in Ontario which now has the largest Muslim population of all ten Canadian provinces.

The immigration policy was based on the quota system during the second wave of immigration which occurred between 1950 and 1967; encouraged upper-middle class immigrants with professional backgrounds, such as lawyers, doctors, and skilled technicians (Awan, 1989; Azmi, 2001). The Canadian immigration policies were not solely based on the quota system, but also on how closely the prospective immigrants ranked in racial, cultural, and linguistic similarities to the British Protestant ideal (Haddad, 1978; Hamdani, 1991).

Two points warrant some emphasis. First, up until the second wave, most

Muslim immigrants were predominantly Arabs from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Jordan who could 'pass' due to their light skin color similar to members of other Mediterranean groups such as Italian and Greek. Second, it is the high socio-economic status of those early Arab immigrants. The third wave of Muslim immigrants arrived after 1967, following the replacement of the "quota system" with the "points system." With the point system, fewer points were necessary to be accepted as an immigrant (B. Abu-Laban, 1980).

Research indicates that in 1997, of all immigrants coming to Canada, 18% were from Africa and the Middle East (Agnew, 2002). Since 2001 there has been a 25% increase in the Muslim population, and according to Statistics Canada (2005), between 1990 and 2001 the number of immigrants from Muslim countries has increased by 128%. In addition, "two percent of Canada's 31 million are Muslims" (Nimer, 2002, p. 21) and two thirds of the entire Canadian Muslim population reside in Ontario. The Muslim population comprises South Asians (37%), Arabs (21%), and West Indians (14%), with the rest coming from Africa, China, and other countries. Also, in the past 20 years there has been a 400% increase in the number of Canadians who say that they are members of the Islamic faith. In fact, since the 1991 census, there has been a 122% increase in number of people with Islamic faith. The impact of such large numbers of a particular immigrant group on Canadian society cannot be underestimated. Furthermore, given the

way in which women are positioned in both societies, Arab Muslim and Canadian, it is important to conduct a study that examines the perceptions of Arab Muslim women about their role within this new context.

For the last three decades have, evidently, there has been a growing trend of Arab Muslim women leaving the Middle East to study at universities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, as well as other Western countries. They are independent enough to experience it without direct supervision from members of their family.

Given the cultural norms and traditions that continue to prevail across the Arab Muslim world, this phenomenon might seem counter-intuitive. Women in this part of the world are often relegated to positions of inferior status both within the household and elsewhere. The custom is for a woman to marry while still in high school or shortly thereafter. They are to forsake higher education, career, and individual achievement for her husband and his family honour.

The classic view is that only the roles of wife and mother provide a woman's true identity; all other aspects of her intellectual and social life are to be directed or subordinated to these dual roles. Ironically, despite these longstanding norms and traditions, a growing stream of women from countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan are pursuing post-secondary studies in Canada and elsewhere in the West in order to improve their lives and expand their horizons. This pattern raises many important

questions, some of which are the focus of this research project. This research supports other studies (Ahmed, 1992; Read and Bartkowski, 2000) that have discussed how Arab Muslim women are able to challenge the status quo. Haddad (2005) argues that "Muslim women in North America and the United Kingdom have been concerned about the prevailing diatribe and stereotypes about the religion of Islam and its teachings about the role of women" (p. 112). Haddad also points out that "during the same period, a handful of Muslim women from the Arab world begin to achieve public recognition as scholars and academicians. Generally, they are recent immigrants, educated overseas who acquire graduate degrees at American and European universities" (p. 113). For some time, Muslim women in the West have been challenging the existence of the stereotype propagated by the media and academic literature that Islam is inherently opposed to women's rights (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Alghamdi, 2002; Cayer, 1996; Cook, 2001; Hamdan 2009; Mehdid, 1993; Mani, 1992). For instance, according to the Canadian Council of Muslim women (2004), Canadian Muslim women can lay claim to the following educational attainments: nearly one in three Muslim women has a university degree compared with one in five among all women in Canada; twice as many Muslim women hold Master's (5%) and doctoral degrees (0.8%) in comparison with all women in Canada; nearly two-fifths (37%) of Canadian Muslim women specialize in a science or engineering discipline compared with 31%

of all Canadian women who are enrolled in university; and proportionately twice as many adult Muslim women compared to all adult Canadian women are enrolled in educational institutions for the purpose of improving and upgrading their skills and qualifications.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the most prominent factors that affect Arab Muslim women born and educated in the Middle East proceed to study at Canadian or other Western universities. The secondary purpose is to challenge and contest the prevailing Western stereotype that virtually all Arab Muslim women are passive, veiled creatures who grew up under the overbearing power of patriarchal fathers and extended families. While there is some truth to this caricature, the actual picture is much more complex and nuanced – as is suggested by much of the literature about Muslim women (Lughod, 1998; Alghamdi, 2002; Cayer, 1996; Cook, 2001; Hamdan 2009; Mehdid, 1993; Mani, 1992), for instance, according to the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (2004).

The tertiary purpose of this study is to shed light on a growing and greatly misunderstood segment of the Canadian population. Throughout the past few decades and since the beginning of significant ethnic-minority immigration to Canada, research on the educational attainment of minorities in Canada has largely overlooked Muslim families in general and Muslim women in particular. Given that this demographic group is rapidly expanding across Canada and, as of 2002, comprised 2% of the

Canadian population, it follows that scholars need to focus greater attention on the distinctive characteristics of this group.

This paper submits that paternal support is the indispensable factor that determines whether an Arab Muslim woman born and educated in the Middle East pursues university studies in a Western country such as Canada. This conclusion is reached through an analysis of data gathered by interviews. What follows is an overview of the theoretical framework, description of the sample group, methodology and interview dynamics, results and discussion, and conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is drawn from Sandra Harding's work on standpoint theory (1991; 2004; 1983; 2000). She describes it as "not just as an explanatory theory, but also prescriptively, as a method or theory of method (methodology) to guide future feminist research" (2004, p. 1). Standpoint theory is used because the research is performed from a woman's standpoint and thinking from the perspective of women's lives. It starts from the lives of Arab Muslim women.

The literature review that informs the research comprises three aspects: one encompasses literature on feminist and gender theories, shedding light on gender construction theories and Sandra Harding's aspect of standpoint theory in which inquiries start from women's lives. The second aspect is the Islamic perspective. The third is the Arabic feminist perspective

on issues pertinent to gender in Arab Muslim societies. Islamic foundational perspectives on women's issues in the *Quran* and *Sunna* are highlighted. Islamic teaching to women is greatly supportive of women's causes, and the history of the early Islamic era inspires Muslim women to obtain their optimum. Nowhere in the authentic religious texts does Islam appear "as fundamentally antagonistic to women's causes" (Mooney, 1998, p. 94). Nonetheless, the realities of many women in Arabic Muslim societies are depressing because of the focus on literal interpretations of the religious texts. The connection made between education and gender in this study is not only based on the sense of how one's gender affects one's schooling but more on how one's perception of oneself may change as a result of one's education.

The Sample Group

Nine Arab Muslim women have been interviewed in order to gain a better understanding of the factors that enable them to achieve educational and career success in Canada. In order to gain access to Arab Muslim women who have been educated in Arab Muslim nations and then moved to Canada to continue their post-secondary education, contact has been established with various councils, clubs and associations, including the Society of Graduate Students' Council, the Arab Students' Association, and the Muslim Students' Association that are affiliated with universities in South Western Ontario as well as the Arab Muslim local community. These associations have been contacted, and the researcher's email

address has been given to any interested participants. It is soon apparent that many young Arab Muslim women do not fit the research criteria because they have not studied in Arab Muslim countries and have immigrated with their families at young age. Almost all their acquaintances and friends are first, second, or third generation Canadians. One of these women takes it upon herself to solicit participants for the research after *Jomaa*.¹ Soaad,² helps securing almost all the participants. She becomes a valuable source and that reveals another aspect of community cohesiveness and communication.

The age range of the nine female participants is between 19 to 55. Most of them represent, to some extent, a deviation from the mainstream cultural norms and traditions discussed throughout this paper. All the participants are Arab Muslim immigrants living in Canada and they migrated to the country as young adults after acquiring certain part of their education in their countries of origin. These countries include Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, and Syria. The key personal and demographic characteristics of the nine women interviewed are as follows:

1. age;
2. parental background;
3. type of schooling, be it sex-segregated or co-educational;
4. type of environment prior to migration, urban or rural area;

¹ A prayer held every Friday afternoon.

² This is a pseudonym.

5. marital status;
6. number of children; and
7. highest level of education.

Table 1 highlights some demographical information of the participants.

The women's experiences do not represent all women in Arab Muslim societies nor do they represent the experiences of all Arab Muslim women in Canada. They definitely do not constitute a statistical sample. Rather, they are exemplars of a minority trend in the Arab Muslim world that is steadily increasing in strength as a function of the growing numbers of women completing higher education in their country of origin as well as abroad. This is a trend that clearly deserves to be studied.

Interview and Methodology Analysis

The one-on-one interviews with these women involve asking open-ended questions that allow the participants' ideas

and narratives to flow. First, the participants are given a demographic questionnaire that poses questions about place of birth, date of birth, education, profession, marital status, number of children and educational background. As to provide them with ample time to reflect, they are also given the research questions before the interview. The interviews are recorded and each session takes approximately three to four hours. Most of the interviews are conducted in English; however, three interviewees choose to speak in Arabic. The tapes are transcribed once the data are collected.

Following data collection and transcription, a content analysis is performed, taking into account the principle that "[t]he data are analyzed and interpreted in light of the research objectives" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.287). The interviews are treated as "a recorded interaction and then analyzed as a conversation analysis" (Czarniawska, 2004, p.50).

TABLE 1
Demographics of the participants

Name	Year of birth	Profession	Marital status	Year of arrival in Canada	Number of children (if any)	Highest level of education
Yasmine	1961	Family Physician	Married	1984	7	M.D.
Nora	1968	Sport Psychologist	Married	1999	2	M.Sc.
Morooj	1956	Photographer	Married	1999	5	B.A.
Sahra	1973	Computer- analyst Engineer	Married	1999	2	M.Sc.
Ruba	*	Computer- analyst Engineer	Single	1994	None	M.Sc.
Fadwa	1979	Teacher	Single	1995	None	M.A.
Eman	1971	Teacher	Married	1996	3	B.A.
Wafaa	*	Teacher	Single	1998	None	B.A.
Nahlaa	1985	Engineer	Single	2003	None	B.Sc.

The assessment of the data is carried out in accordance with the principles of content analysis. Silverman (2000) defines it as follows: "The researchers establish a set of categories and then count the number of instances that fall into each category" (p. 826). Each interview transcript is read and portions of the text that are related to the research questions are highlighted. The data are then divided into themes or categories to be analyzed. A temporary category is assigned to each highlighted section of the transcripts. This process produces a list of categories that can be used in subsequent portions of the text whenever they seem appropriate (Seidman, 1991; Stein & Paterno, 2001).

According to Silverman, it is crucial when conducting content analysis that the categories are sufficiently precise to enable different coders to arrive at substantially the same results when the same body of material is examined. In this analysis, attention is given recurring themes and contradictory and socially embedded gender discourses. The researcher's insider position as an Arab Muslim woman become beneficial in the analysis of narratives:

The role of the researcher's own experiences in reporting that of others; the capacity of narrative methods in the social sciences to report human experience; and the virtue of 'self'-consciously fictional story as a form which can bring and hold together the experiences of the researcher and of the subject (Clough, 2002, p.62).

Wetherell *et al.* (2001) argues for the need for "self-description" as a requirement and an account of the researcher's accounts, influences, constraints, and relationships to the topics and the data which she or he is capable of providing as an insider. In the analysis of the current data, the framework of Miles and Huberman (1994) is employed. The steps they suggest for the analysis of data are data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. Following familiarization with the data, an initial set of category labels is created, data is conceptualized, and then categorized through comparison and re-examination. Patterns and themes, among and between interviews are also determined (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Krueger (1988) posits a continuum of analysis ranging from raw data through descriptive summary statements to interpretation. Similar to all qualitative analysis, this research study also has an ongoing process of constant checking and cross-checking between raw data and interpretation (Cao, 1997).

Thematic and content analyses are used to analyze the women's narratives. In the thematic analysis, different streams of data are analyzed for recurring topics and themes with regard to the participants' social position, self-understanding and experiences (Smith, 1992; Winter & McClelland, 1978). According to this method, any text can be examined for thematic content that might reveal the ideological, motivational, and idiosyncratic, meanings of individuals, groups, relationships, symbols, and institutions.

Thematic analysis involves noticing recurring themes and patterns of association in content, that is themes that co-occur, and in a single text. Subsequently, different texts from other participants or sections of the texts are compared to detect particularized meanings by contrast. These two procedures, interpretive analyses of association and contrast sometimes yield a codified set of categories that enables the systematic content analysis of many texts (Stewart & Malley, 2004, p. 225). When thematic analysis, itself, is the goal, systematic coding of texts is always secondary to an initial thematic analysis in which patterns of association and contrast are uncovered (Stewart and Malley, 2004, p. 225; Winter, 1973).

This research project employs thematic analysis to explore how the participants narrate their gender perceptions which may have been influenced as a result of attending Canadian educational institutions.

Interview Dynamics: An Insider Researcher

An Arab Muslim woman interviewing Arab Muslim women and exploring the various factors that contribute to their educational attainments might constitute a dilemma for social-scientific research. The researcher is aware of the power dynamics and the potential for bias inherent in insider research. Yet, by applying a methodological approach to ensure that the voices of these women are heard through their own narratives, it is nevertheless possible for an insider researcher to make a proper assessment of the evidence.

The interviewed women incorporate their life experiences that have highlighted some of the most salient factors that have influenced their educational attainments. The author's interest in exploring the narratives of Arab Muslim women who were born and educated in the Middle East and then preceded to higher education in Canada stems from her own personal background. The author is a Muslim woman who have lived in Saudi Arabia during her undergraduate years and then migrated to Canada to pursue graduate studies.

Her parents' support and in particular her father's interest in her educational achievements is evident throughout her schooling in both countries Saudi Arabia and Canada. It challenges the stereotype of Muslim families being uninterested in their daughters' education.

Researchers such as Ahmad (2001) have argued that "Muslim parents have played an instrumental role in encouraging their daughters to succeed both academically and professionally" (Brah, 1993, p. 448 as cited in Ahmad, 2001, p.143). Other research findings of other scholars (such as Siann and Knox,(1992); Kitwood and Borrill (1980); Stopes-Roe and Cochrane, (1988); Ahmad, (2001), p. 143; Haque, (2000), p. 155 also reveal little evidence to suggest that parental restrictions hinder vast majority of Muslim girls from pursuing their career choice. All these researchers' findings are congruent with the author's research and resonate with the manner in which the women interviewed have been encouraged by their fathers. Patriarchy typically does play a significant role in the construction of gender in Arab

Muslim society. At the same time, the author's rich and multifaceted experiences in her native culture and in the Canadian context have enabled her to contest the dominant perceptions of gender discourses in her home society and in her stereotyped identity in Canada.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Traditional Approach to Female Education

There is a close relationship between women's education and their gender identity of inferiority in Arab Muslim societies. The gender construction of Arab Muslim women is the product of deeply rooted cultural norms and traditions. It is emphatically not a manifestation or product of Islam in its true form.

One of the main reasons for the extraordinary influence of cultural norms and traditions in the Arab Muslim world is the collective orientation of the society. An important aspect of this collective orientation is the fact that both extended family members and neighbours are considered to be close. This emphasis on the group results in an individual possibly risking her or his self-reliance and personal autonomy. While "individualists retain their identity, their sense of 'me'" (Myers, 1996, p.214), a collectivist may feel obliged by cultural norms to sacrifice personal freedom.

A major disadvantage of collectivism is that it typically leads the individual to consistently seek the approval of others for her or his decisions. Based on the participants' narratives, it can be seen that they all share a strong sense of obligation

towards their immediate and extended families. For Arab Muslim women, family and group approval for their decisions is almost always of great importance. The tradition of female social 'inferiority' is extensively visible, for example the widespread and overwhelming cultural bias towards having boys. The collective character of the society reinforces such biasness.

In Arab culture, a son is not only capable of earning a livelihood but, he is also seen as a help to his father, a protector of his family, a custodian of his family's values, heritage and name, and one of those on whom depends on the continuous existence of Arab Muslim society. However, the culture's perception towards daughters is quite in contrast. To most Arab Muslims, having a boy as the first born is the best gift that a woman can give to her family and society. Everyone celebrates when a woman delivers a boy for it is considered a blessing for the family to have more sons than daughters. In fact, in many families, it is considered a disgrace to have a daughter. As Morooj observed,

In our Arab Muslim society, I hear that sometimes a couple divorces because of having girls and not having boys. When a woman has five or seven girls and no boy, she is abandoned by her spouse and family.... I had three daughters before my two sons and I cannot explain to you how excited I was excited whenever I had a healthy baby....

She added,

Having a boy to carry the family name is a necessity so that is why my parents, husband, and in-laws were happier when I got the boy.... It originated from the traditions that boys help their father in farms or businesses. It is not the same case for the girls. They are always home and in their families' minds.... Girls are always at home and raised to be this way, when they are older they marry and stay at home. Therefore, they are seen useless.... It is also in the tradition that the girl has to be always protected from a slip-up. Girls' misbehavior brings disgrace and shame. While the boy's misbehavior has different consequences. The family will not be concerned.

The academic literature documents the overwhelming biasness towards having male offspring:

Islamic societies tend to be very patriarchal in nature (Walther, 1993). In most cases, the birth of a girl causes less joy than that of a boy. When a midwife or relative assists childbirth, the mother immediately knows if the baby is a boy or a girl. If it is a girl, the midwife says nothing. If it is a boy, the midwife says "Praise Allah." The preference for boys is explained in that a boy shall contribute to the

family maintenance and protection. When a girl marries, she leaves her family of origin to live with her husbands' family and adds to the strength of that family as she bears children (Schvaneveldt et al., 2005, p.81).

Nora's testimony also provides a vivid example of this type of biasness:

Once my mother had me in the hospital, they told my father that he had a girl.... He left without seeing me. He was unhappy that he got a girl. He did not come and see my mother or congratulate her.... His reaction was really strange.... He really wanted a boy. Today my father is still apologizing to my mother about it. My mother had a very difficult labor and I turned blue... 40 days passed. It affected my mother psychologically. My father was really not accepting me... not carrying me.... Soon after that, the situation turned... and my father started to feel that he could not be away from me.

The cultural obligation to give birth to boys is tightly intertwined with the cultural obligation for women to forsake career and individual achievement for the honor and welfare of the family. The close relationship between these two obligations is confirmed by the fact that when a woman marries, she is effectively deprived of status until she

has her first son. At his birth, she becomes mother of (*Umm*) the son's name.

The woman's civic identity is effectively enshrined in motherhood. To re-articulate, while a daughter is an element within the family, the common societal perception is that after she marries her identity becomes assimilated into that of her husband's and his lineage. Numerous writings of traditionalist Muslim scholars, both religious and secular, assert that only the roles of wife and mother provide a woman's true identity; all other aspects of a woman's intellectual and social life are to be directed toward these dual roles or are to be subordinated to them.

According to these views, "...women are inferior, less intelligent, incapable of coping with high mental tasks; thus, the only tasks fit for women are bearing children and maintaining homes" (Al-Manea, 1984, p.28). While mainstream cultural norms expect boys to go to college or university after graduating from high school, it is culturally expected that girls marry immediately after graduating or even while still attending high school. Most parents prefer that a girl secures a husband instead of an educational degree (Al Sari, 2003). Women in many families in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arab Muslim world have been convinced or forced to leave school early in order to start a family. The education system dictates that the purpose of women's education is to produce good mothers and wives.

There are strong pressures for Arab Muslim women to view higher education and marriage as mutually exclusive. In

accordance with the cultural views of woman and man's respective roles, it is inappropriate or undesirable for a woman to have higher status than her spouse. For example, males in Arab Muslim societies do not consider a single woman with a university degree to be an ideal partner in marriage (Al-Sari, 2003).

Based on my personal observations in Saudi Arabia, many men, regardless of their age, prefer to marry women whose age between 18 to 22 years. Furthermore, a man raised in a patriarchal society where men possess superiority over women may feel particularly threatened by a woman with higher status than he does. Ahmad (2001) indicates a similar finding:

Some women express concerns that degree status might limit future marriage prospects because of increasing age. There are also concerns that women may become "too educated" to find husbands who are either of a similar stature, or who will welcome a wife with an equal, or higher, qualification level (p. 147).

In Arab Muslim societies, disparities between the respective status of the woman and the man in favor of the woman can easily lead to conflict and divorce. Even situations where a woman has the same career prospects or educational level as her husband might lead to conflict. For an example, the experience that Morooj's daughter goes through with her ex-fiancée.

The conflict surfaces not due to the educational disparity within the couple but rather as a result of the ex-fiancée's belief that he should be the superior member of the household. This exemplifies some men's insecurity towards their hypothesized superior "nature" and "role."

Custom and Tradition versus the Islamic Essence

In Saudi Arabia, the patriarchal cultural traditions and societal norms are imposed, justified and carried on in the name of Islam and still prevail to this day, despite their contradictions with the *Quran*. Although many Muslims argue that Islamic teachings define gender roles and responsibilities (Vidyasagar and Rea, 2004), gender roles, in fact, seem to have been constructed more by patriarchal cultural practices and societal norms than by the *Quran* and *Hadith*.

In the centuries following the advent of Islam, many pre-Islamic customs and patriarchal norms have reappeared and regained a foothold (Jawad, 1998). Societal norms and customs that deny women equality, in general, and access to education, in particular, are now entrenched in Arab Muslim culture to the point that they are often accepted as unquestionable Islamic rules. Yet, many of the customs or rules adhered today cannot be found in the foundational Islamic texts like the *Quran* and *Hadith*. In fact, Islamic teaching as articulated in the *Quran* and the authentic *Hadith* greatly emphasizes the importance of education and encourages women's

participation in all aspects of public life. Indeed,

In the Prophet Mohammed's time, women were free to go to the mosques to pray, to listen to preaching and to receive lectures. Narrated is the incident of a group of women complaining to the prophet that the Quran only mentions the wives of the prophet and not women in general: "Men are mentioned in everything and we are not; is there any goodness in us to be mentioned and commended?" Hence, verse 35: "Verily, Muslims, men and women, believers, men and women, dutiful men and women, truthful men and women, patient men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, chaste men and women, those who mention and remember God – men and women – for all those God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward (as cited in Abou-Bakr, 2001, pp.2 - 6).

All these narrations provide eloquent confirmation of women's status in the sacred texts and in the early days of Islam. Historical documents reveal that women in the first Islamic community, such as the ancient warrior Nusyabah, were ardent defenders of women's rights.

The prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him) said that the rights of women

are sacred and that women are the “twin halves of men”. Early Islamic history has seen the emergence of Muslim women as scholars, politicians, businesswomen, jurists, and doctors. For example, Fatima al Firhi founded the first university in 859 in Fez, Morocco; Razia al Din ruled the Delhi Sultanate in India in 1236; and Umm Darda, a scholar from Syria, taught imams, jurists, and even had the fifth Umayyad caliph who ruled from Spain to India as her student (Inspired by Mohammed, 2012).

In that era, women stayed connected to the sources of education because, at that time, the mosques functioned not only as places to worship but also as sites for education (Al-Manea, 1984). Not only were women free to acquire knowledge, they were also free to disseminate knowledge to the community. Indeed, Muslim scholars have quoted the prophet as recommending that his followers seek knowledge about religious matters from his wife Aisha, who was a renowned scholar of her day. The Prophet said, “Half the knowledge of my revelation should be acquired from all of my companions and the other half from Aisha” (as cited in Syed, 2004, p.24).

This example provides tangible evidence of the fact that the prophet regarded women as both eligible students and trusted teachers (Al-Manea, 1984). Another important principle is evident in the following verse:

Believers, men and women, are protectors, one of another: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil.

This verse makes clear that women must acquire knowledge in order to be eligible for roles of leadership and influence. Thus, the essence of Islamic teaching in the Holy *Quran* and *Sunna* confirms that women and men are commanded by God to act in a socially responsible manner, to uphold morality and to combat vice.

All the women interviewed for this study acknowledge that their faith provide the strong encouragement. To varying degrees, these women and their immediate families follow an authentic approach in Islam, an approach that has at most only been minimally contaminated by pre-Islamic norms and traditions. The interviews confirm that all the women in the sample accept the proposition that Islam is pro-female. Their acknowledgement is in spite of many cultural traditions that perpetuate contrived and misogynist distinctions between male and female roles. Islam in its essential form does not prescribe fixed social roles for men and women. In each of their narratives, the women demonstrate that they draw extraordinary strength from their faith. For instance, Fadwa testifies that her religious background and deep understanding of her faith helps her keeping everything in perspective. Below is her explanation:

Religious beliefs [have] support my educational pursuits. Looking at the amount of strength and courage it took for Aisha, the beloved wife of the Prophet, to lead a battle, given that she was born in a generation

of women who were buried alive as one of the misogynistic things that happened to the girls, she was the kind of character that she has as a woman. The strength of that character that illuminates throughout the ages.... So yes, they [religious beliefs] help. They totally support my educational pursuits.... From a personal perspective... living on my own for five and a half years, if I do not have my religious beliefs to ground me, I might easily... delve into different lifestyles that are valid for other people, but might distract me from my educational pursuits, be it drinking alcohol or other aspects that are not considered Muslim.

Ruba finds Islam to be indispensable for educational and career success because it enables her to traverse boundaries:

It is absolutely weird that Islam hinders women or holds them back because to me it's the absolute opposite. To me it's the key to my freedom. I think if you're a Muslim woman you're a free woman.... In terms of my ability to reach goals, educational and even intellectual and spiritual, I always find that religion opens the door for me without any limits. ...When I was growing up and we read the Holy Quran some of the verses encourage continuous thinking.

Ruba also underscores that “My faith is liberating and culture is not affecting me very much because we [my family] do not live by culture.”

Family Social and Educational Background

Social class certainly influences the educational trajectory of the women interviewed (Mogahdam, 2004, p. 150). By class I refer to “a more sociological understanding of class which draws on Weber’s concept of status: a set of persons who stand in similar positions with respect to some form of power, privilege, or prestige” (al-Mughni, 200, p.17). Social and educational background both have bearing on families’ perception of cultural norms and traditions and more specifically, on their perception of the extent to which those norms and traditions should influence decisions regarding their daughters’ education and career.

Furthermore, it can be argued that families that do not adhere to anti-female norms and traditions are more likely to follow an authentic approach to Islam. It is an approach that actually promotes female education, as discussed previously.

Most of the interviewees have been raised in financially secured and well-educated families. Majority of them were born into the middle class and were admitted into Canada through regulations that filter immigrants on the basis of economic and educational status. Eight of the nine participants come from well-educated families, and only one does not. Five of the

women come from families in which both parents are highly educated, three come from families in which the father is highly educated and the mother has a secondary-school education and only one comes from a family in which both parents have only informal education. In addition, only two of the participants come from rural backgrounds.

The responses of most members of the study's sample group demonstrate significant parental, especially paternal concern with their daughters' economic security. It appears that these parents want their daughters to continue to enjoy at least middle-class status. For instance, Fadwa's parents have been keen on her pursuing an education in order to be financially secured. She says, "My father needs to know what my profession is. He is very uncomfortable with me doing a double major.... He wants me to be able to [have] a specialized trade."

This type of testimony dovetails with Ahmad's study of Asian Muslim women in Britain. It indicates that the desire to ensure the economic security of their daughters largely motivate parents. According to Ahmad, education and qualifications are seen as a possible "back-up" that assures a certain degree of security against the worst-case scenarios. Parental fears of failing to procure "suitable" husbands for their daughters further compounds these concerns (Ahmad, 2001, p.144).

Ahmad (2001) explores other reasons, encouraging their daughters into higher education assure parents that their daughter's future economic potential as individuals is

secured, attain and maintain the social status and prestige within their social circles. Educated daughters signify certain levels of "liberalism" to the family concerned. A daughter's education confers a certain level of social "education" to the rest of the family. Thus, parents are able to describe themselves as "modern" and socially astute. They are able to distance themselves from the stereotype of the patriarchal and "non-educated" family. The "non-educated" family often believes to confuse "tradition" with religion by observing "strict" purdah [veiling or hair covering] and restricting the education and movement of women. In addition, educated daughters can be expected to attract suitors of a similar status or above should the "arranged marriage" route is preferred (p. 145).

The male side of Fadwa's family provides an excellent example of Arab Muslims with a zealous commitment to education, in general, and to female education in particular. Fadwa's father is a son of a well-known advocate of female education in their community, holds a doctorate from a British university. Many years ago, Fadwa's paternal grandfather raised the money to build the first women's school in the village, something that hitherto was unheard of in that region. As Fadwa observed:

...there were people who threatened him, basically cursed him. According to those people, my grandfather was spoiling the women in the village. And I grew up hearing those stories about my

grandfather and realizing that my father took after my grandfather's attributes. That's why my father as opposed to a lot of other men in our family, appreciates me learning and studying....

Eman's background also provides a vivid illustration of the strength provided by a family tradition of transcending educational frontiers. It is noteworthy that Eman was raised in a family in the 1960s. Her aunts attended university. In addition, she was raised by a father "... who encouraged education and who was a professor in the 60s and had women students."

The testimonies from Fadwa, Eman, and many other women regarding their background and the overall attitude of their family are consistent with the findings of other researchers who have explored Muslim females' participation in higher education. Indeed, over the past three decades, many scholars who have conducted research on Muslim women have concluded that those who attend university do so largely as a result of "a family 'expectation' or a family 'ethos'" (Afshar, 1989, 1998; Basit, 1996a, 1996b; Brah, 1993, 1996; Brah and Shaw, 1992).

Although the women have identified several factors that influence their education, it seems that their fathers which I refer to as The Trend of Pleasing the Father had been one major reason for their educational achievement. Besides the role of fathers, other contributing factors to the Muslim

women educational success include faith as Muslim women seeking approval from others, respective class level, societal norms, feminist perspectives, Social Activism, status of Muslim in Canada, a Muslim hybrid identity, and Muslim women diverse perceptions of various issues.

Role of Fathers

Of the nine participants, one comes from a family with informal education, and two more from a rural background. The rest are from highly educated families. Therefore, it is interesting to learn what factors influence these three participants compared to the others. Are they influenced by their father? Did other individuals inspire them to pursue further studies in Canada? Almost all the participants are encouraged to excel in school. Fathers play the major role in that support. In almost all of the women's narratives, there is heavy emphasis on the father's role in supporting their educational pursuits. Ahmad (2001) also notes the importance of paternal encouragement: "*Fathers* are often far more determined to see their daughters achieve academically and this is especially apparent in families without sons" [emphasis in original] (p. 145). Ahmad's observation that paternal encouragement is most prevalent in families without sons is likely a manifestation of the "boy complex" that is deeply entrenched in Arab Muslim society.

It can be theorized that fathers' encouragement and support for their daughters' educational attainments, in particular where there is no son or where the

male offspring have not been academically successful, may reflect a type of over-compensation. Nora provides an interesting example of this phenomenon:

In my family... my father wishes that he had three girls after me instead of three sons because he was not satisfied with their educational achievements.

Generally speaking, the literature reports that “a high percentage of professionally successful women and school age girls are pointed to the influence of their fathers as the key motivational element in their lives” (Deak, 2003, p.169). The strength of this influence can be attributed in part to the strong desire of many daughters to please their father through education and achievements. This is a pattern in which the author identifies. Indeed, as Deak (2003) discovers:

The truth is that a girl feels profoundly about the way her father perceives her, or the way she believes her father perceives her, whether their relationship appears close and loving or not... girls today feel immense pressure to measure up to fathers' expectations (p. 164).

Deak (2003) continues:

While much of the rest of the world may be giving her limiting sexist messages her father can balance those messages with one

that removes the limits, equalizes gender expectations and anticipates eventual success (p. 171).

Looking beyond this variable to the major factors that alter the traditional role of fathers as guardians of patriarchal society, specifically to the reasons which some fathers decide to support their daughters' education is particularly relevant to the desire to compensate for not having a boy. In other words, some fathers encourage their daughters' education in order to overcome the culturally based feeling of shame caused by having only female offspring. Fadwa's testimony provides an outstanding example of paternal motivation. Ever since Fadwa was young, her father has been influencing her to view female higher education as a necessity:

Higher education in [country of origin] is much regarded. It has been told to us that be it girls or boys, should go to university and get an education because you do not want to live life without an education. It is just not an option. We all know that we will go to universities. The other thing is, my father tends to make the comparison between educated people and influential people. So he says to me as a kid at the age of maybe seven or eight years old, “Margaret Thatcher, Fadwa? I want you to be like her. She is a powerful, strong woman.”

Apart from Fadwa's account regarding the influence of her father, her interpretation of the prevailing attitude to female education in her country should be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism. Her interpretation of the actual state of affairs in this regard is almost certainly being filtered through her family tradition which represents a minority trend in the Arab Muslim world. Motivation often comes in the form of direct assistance. For instance, Fadwa's father is not only inspirational, but also helpful with school work. She explains how her father assists her with her math problems:

Even though I love math, word problems are a bit difficult for me. So we sit and discuss the problems and talk about them. He makes math very, very interesting.

Eman's father was helpful at the beginning of her schooling, especially when the family moved to the United States. When she entered Grade 4, her biggest hurdle was the language: "It was a bit overwhelming, but I thank my father for standing beside me and helping me a lot with that. He had daily exercises, building my vocabulary...." Eman can never over-emphasize how helpful her father has been to her.

Similar to the Arab Muslim women who have been interviewed for this study, the researcher's parents, especially her father, have also encouraged her, to pursue higher education. At the same time, she is encouraged to seek education that does not violate the norms, with no traveling

requirement and live alone. These are the issues discussed below. Unlike Fadwa, she is unable to cross or negotiate traditional boundaries and also maintain her self-interest.

Fathers exert significant pressure on many of the participants in this study to pursue a field of study and career that provide both economic security and social prestige. It is common in Arab Muslim societies for parents to impose specific subjects and professions on their children. Unfortunately, in the process they overlook how important it is for a son or daughter to fulfill his or her personal motivation. Nahlaa is among the participants who note this phenomenon. Below is her explanation:

I do not like math or physics.... Actually I am not that interested in engineering. However, my father is an engineer and he encourages me. I prefer medicine more, but I think it is much harder and engineering is good. I pursue engineering.

This phenomenon is not universal. For instance, Sahra's father chooses not to press his daughter despite his keen interest in her future career: "My father is not pushing me, but he is very, very excited. He wants me to go into engineering and is very, very proud of me...."

It is interesting to note that in many cases, the father is more interested than the mother in their daughters' education and career. For example, Fadwa's parents, as the first socializing influences in her gender

construction, instilled some contradictory values in her. Her father encourages her independent and argumentative nature, while her mother socializes her into stereotypical female roles such as cooking and sewing. Fadwa acknowledges that she was a “tomboy” who was not interested in playing with dolls. As she stated repeatedly in her narrative, “I was a tomboy. I grew up as a tomboy, and my mom hated that.” As she narrated:

My father always, always [with emphasis] says that there is no difference between a boy and a girl. Sometimes girls can be better than boys and he humbles me by using me as an example. He says to me, the fact that I am been here and I have maintained my faith, at the same time, done a good job of my education, is something he takes pride in. It proves to him that his assumption that women and men are essentially or inherently equal or capable of doing equal things is a correct assumption. On the other hand, my mom, even though she didn't grow up in the village like my dad did, is more aware of that cultural socialization, differentiation for genders in the local sense of it....

Socialization is another thing. My mother makes sure that I know how to do my own laundry, cook, how to clean, and it is all about me knowing how to do girls' things by

a certain age. And when I visit the village, my aunts, be it my father or mother's side, a lot of the times I get the lecture of, "You should be able to cook such and such, or clean such and such. You're 8 and 9, and girls who are 5 and 6 years old in the village can do this already...."

In many of the narratives, fathers take the lead in promoting their daughters' education, not just within the immediate family but also within the extended family and the broader community. Fadwa, for instance, endures a great deal of criticism from her grandmother and other family members because her father provides her with the best education. This is the other area of Fadwa's life where religion and cultural traditions are paradoxical. Below is her explanation:

Cultural traditions do not hinder me, but some of these things leave a bad taste in your mouth.... My dad did look into the Sisters' School, the Unity School and the public school. Eventually, my father decided to place me in the Catholic school because it has the traditional aspect. At the same time, it is also known for several decades that it provides girls with very high-level of education. I learn well. Probably, some of the best math education I received was from that school. We did logic, reasoning and proving at Grade 7 and Grade 8. That is very

fascinating when you look back on it. My grandmother resented that, even though she had the highest education compared to her peers.... She was appalled to the fact that my father paid so much money for me to get a private education..... [Emphasis added]

Fadwa's father's decision to go to Canada with the intention for her to have a solid education triggers an even worse reaction from her grandmother, and infuriates the entire extended family:

... in 1994 my father made a decision... We were going to Canada and the number one reason – he had a series of reasons, like a platform, almost political platform, to explain to the [extended] family why he's going to Canada – was Fadwa's education. It's huge. My father said to me, "It's your education, it is one of the biggest reasons why we're going to Canada," which is another reason why I'm doing my Masters.... So for my father, the special person to the extended family, to go all the way to Canada, so far away from them with his young boys, because of my education, a girl.... So my grandmother said, "You are the reason my son is going away from me to a different country and it is your entire fault, and you're selfish." And she just gave me a long lecture of how it was all my

fault that her son was... leaving. I know that much. The things that I'm not supposed to know about in terms of me and my education is how much trouble my father went through with family members who... really criticized him as a father figure for letting his daughter go to Canada [and] live alone.

The above testimony confirms that in addition to the usual discouragement, there can also be additional opposition from extended family and community members to any plans to move away, particularly to go abroad to study. Generally, only a father has the personal and social clout to protect a young woman from this type of interference. Should a man decide to live on his own, there is no criticism of his desire to be independent, yet a woman normally cannot leave her parents' home except due to marriage. Conversely, if she divorces she will have to return to her parents' home. The cultural prohibition against women living on their own even to pursue an education is a great extent of manifestation of the common perception that in comparison of men and women, the latter is less competent and less moral. Therefore, women are less likely to conduct themselves appropriately. As Fadwa explained:

A female living alone would be considered immorally [and] ethically impaired as opposed to a male who's pursuing what's best for him so he can provide for his

family.... A girl, what is a girl doing alone in North America? So, you see where the culture comes into play. Yes, mentally we might be equal [and] actions might be the same but the way society evaluates us is not the same... as the way (God) evaluates us. And that's what we have to deal with.... If someone lives in a context where her reputation and her honor are very important, she might have to adhere to society's norms just to make sure that society doesn't outcast her, or ostracize her.

Morooj, who moved from Libya to Canada to study, had a similar experience as Fadwa's. Despite being an open-minded person who has been raised with much fewer gender stereotypes than most girls in her country, the social pressure from her extended family on her parents is overwhelming. Morooj says that her uncles continuously questions the "unexplainable freedom" that her father gives to his daughters. She explains that the Canadian context gives her a degree of space and freedom of choice that is definitely unavailable in Libya or elsewhere in the Arab Muslim world. She adds that being free from social dictates and pressure is a great advantage to academic, professional and personal growth.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this research project, some valuable insights emerge from the lives of Arab Muslim women who migrate

to Canada with their families and complete their higher education and establish their careers. From thorough qualitative analyses of emerging themes, it seems that paternal support is the most important factor that leads the nine study participants to enroll and excel in Canadian universities. No other factors is mentioned as often or as emphatically in the interviews. This study demonstrates that strong paternal support is indispensable for an Arab Muslim female to take the courageous step of pursuing post-secondary studies in a Western country like Canada.

The vital nature of the father's role can be attributed to a range of inter-related factors. Most of the women reveal that their fathers largely protect them from cultural norms and traditions that are antithetical to female education. These norms and traditions are deeply entrenched throughout the Arab Muslim world and they include, among many others, an obligation for a woman to forsake career and individual achievement for the honor and welfare of "the family" that is her husband's lineage into which her identity is allegedly supposed to be assimilated.

The interviews reveal several reasons that these fathers decide to provide this type of protection. One is their concern for their daughters' economic security. In this regard, it should be remembered that all but one of the study participants comes from well-educated, middle-class backgrounds. Based on the evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that their fathers aspire to ensure that their female offspring continue to enjoy the same

level of economic and social status. At the same time, it is clear from the testimonies that such desire is not simply a function of material concerns. Indeed, in many cases, there is a longstanding family ethos of promoting female education.

There is also an important spiritual dimension to these fathers' support for their daughters' education. Most of these fathers follow an authentic approach in Islam. It is an approach that gives proper weight to tenets and precedents from the *Quran* and *Hadith* which affirm the equality of the sexes and the associated need for women to receive a solid education. In line with this overall rejection of pre/non-Islamic norms and traditions, these fathers generally do not favor their sons over their daughters in terms of educational opportunities. Perhaps ironically, with regard to their daughters' education, some fathers actually demonstrate greater interest and engagement than their wives.

These fathers' interest and engagement are demonstrated in a range of forms. Many provide continuous encouragement as well as assistance with homework, as illustrated through Fadwa's experience. Many of these fathers also play an instrumental role in encouraging their daughters to attend university overseas. The prospect of a young woman moving to a Western country to study on her own usually attracts aggressive and sustained criticism from relatives and members of the community in general. As demonstrated by the narratives, most of these fathers shield their daughters from such critics.

The value of this research project is that it disrupts the typical and inaccurate monolithic representation of Muslim women. It challenges Western assumptions about these women as constituting a homogeneously oppressed group. Much like Cayer (1996), I argue that the participants' testimonies bear eloquent witness to the heterogeneity of Muslim women. By shedding light on a small but growing trend in the Arab Muslim world, this study helps to develop an alternative to the dominant discourse regarding the agency of Arab Muslim women. The narratives gathered over the course of this study will help scholars better understand how these women perceive themselves, their education, and their role in society. These narratives will also provide scholars with additional insight into the key factors that drive the educational and career success of a gradually expanding class of women in the Arab Muslim world.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

No one study is entirely conclusive; there remain many perspectives that warrant further examination. While it could be argued that the small sample size of nine Arab Muslim women is a disadvantage to the research, I suggest that studying a sample of this size allows me to have greater depth. I also note that by the tenth interview that is not used here, I begin to notice many repetitions. Yet, I acknowledge that the sample size is not representative of the population and that some might perceive this as a weakness. I wish to highlight my awareness of the following:

The Arab Islamic world is a mixture of social classes, racial, and ethnic groups, religious affiliations within Islam, nationalities, and rural, urban, and linguistic communities; any discussion of gender must account for the tremendous diversity in the Middle East and North Africa. (Josef & Slyomovics, 2001, p.1)

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Although conducting a research on Arab Muslim women immigrants is a rich and new area of research, little scholarly focus³ has been committed to the intersections of issues pertaining to Arab Muslim women in Canada that encompass education, culture, historical origins, and the adjustments to Canadian values and belief systems. Feminist scholars of women and gender studies, policy makers, and educators have largely overlooked education and the gender construction of Arab Muslim women immigrants in Canada. Even fewer studies have explored the intersections between Muslim women and the wider Canadian society and its institutions.

While some scholarly literature has focused on Arab Muslim women in the Muslim world, few have studied Arab Muslim lives in Western nations. Fewer include the narratives from the lives and experiences of Muslim women. My research contributes to the growing but limited research on the lives of Arab Muslim women

³ Haddad and Lummis (1987) is one of a limited number of studies about Muslim women and gender.

in the West in general, and more specifically in Canada. It may add to existing discourses on women and gender, ethnicity, education, and identity.

Although this research explores the narratives of nine Arab Muslim women in relation to the factors influencing their education, a more in-depth research that takes a life-history approach is needed to reveal how individual Arab Muslim women understand their gender and how that might be affected as a result of living in two distinct cultures. These narratives may emerge in and through conflicting cultural narratives that reveal diversity and variability.

The experiences of Arab Muslim women's organizations in Canada, is another potential area of research. A question raised by other researchers is to "what extent gender is similar to or different from race and class as a structured social division" (Holland & Eisenhart, 1988, p. 268) is also applicable in my research. Thus, there may be unlimited possibilities of employing this research as a platform for future research concerning Arab Muslim women in Canada.

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