

Arab-American Women & Gender Issues

Key Words:

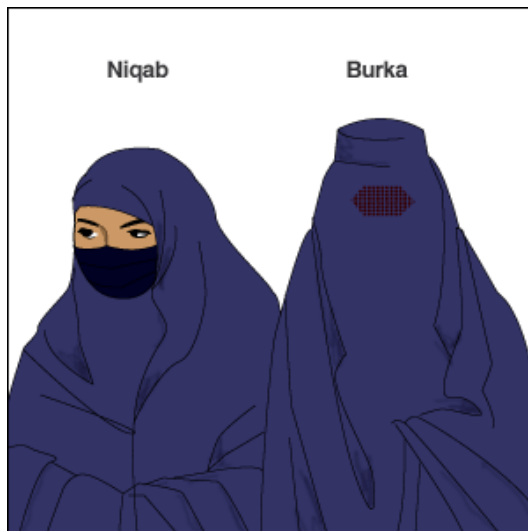
Muslim, Hijab, Employment outside the home, Terrorism

Description:

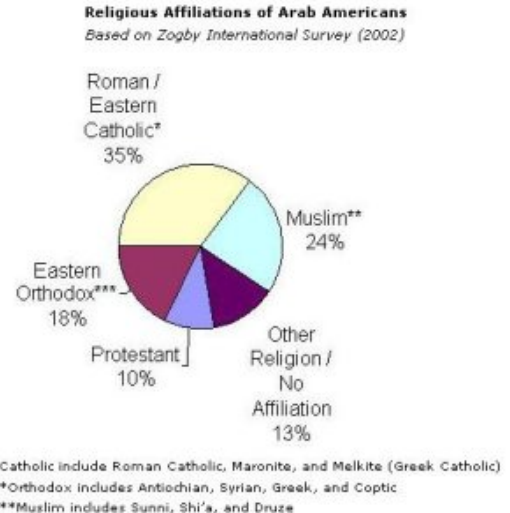
This brief aims to examine the status of Middle Eastern or Arab women in America and the unique issues they face based on gender and ethnicity. In particular, it will address the challenges of Muslim women in obtaining employment and the discrimination they face based on traditional dress.

Key Points:

- Americans of Middle Eastern descent are considered racially white, and only 24% of Arab-Americans are Muslim
- Arab-American women must fight for increased status in mosques
- Employment status of Arab-American women depends largely on their individual home situation
- Traditional, modest Muslim dress is a major source of discrimination for Arab-American women
- Arab-American women have been targeted post September 11th as “daughters of terrorists”



Different styles of modest Muslim dress
Conservative Compendium Aug 26, 2009



AINA April 16, 2007

Brief:

Often stereotyped as dark-skinned, Muslim, burka-clad victims of male violence and oppression, Arab-American women are, in reality, a largely heterogeneous group of successful and independent individuals. Interestingly, American women of Middle Eastern descent are

racially classified as white, and only 24% are Muslim, the majority of whom do not wear traditional headdress (AINA). The majority of Arab-Americans, 35%, identify as Christian (AINA). However, while Christian women living in the Middle East face many political problems, in the United States, it is largely the Muslim subgroup that faces disproportional discrimination, and therefore, this brief will focus on their challenges.

One challenge facing Arab-American women is obtaining employment outside the home. Often, whether or not a woman works depends largely upon factors within her own culture. Women in urban, highly educated families are more likely to work outside the home, while more conservative families and families of a rural working class commonly relegate the woman to housework. Should a woman be allowed to work outside the home, she must still carry out her responsibilities in the household. If she fails to fulfill these expectations, her permission to work may be revoked (Kayyali 79). However, societal factors are at play as well. It is significantly more likely for a native-born woman to be employed outside the home than a recent immigrant. According to Jen'nan Ghazal Read, this reflects discrimination in the job market against immigrants, who may have English language difficulties, more so than it demonstrates a difference between the ideology of immigrants and native-born citizens (96).

Arab-American women must also engage in a constant battle for status and equality within the mosque. In the early waves of immigration, women enjoyed the power and autonomy of organizing mosque-based charity organizations. Indeed women, while not equal to men, were instrumental in forming new mosques in America. However, increasing immigration since 1965 has brought more conservatives who adhere to a stricter form of Islam and curtail women's role in the mosque (Kayyali 80). Even a woman's literal space within the mosque is affected by gender. In many of the larger mosques, women must pray on the side or in the back because "the sight of women prostrating themselves before God is considered distracting for men" (Kayyali 80).

One of the greatest problems facing Arab-American women is discrimination against the modest dress called for by Islam. Modern women interpret the Qu'ran as requiring anything from loose fitting clothes to the burka, a long robe and veil that leaves only the eyes, hands, and feet exposed. Commonly, Arab-American women wear hijab, or a headscarf that covers the hair but leaves the face uncovered. Hijab and veils have become the most prominent markers distinguishing Arab women in American society. "In the United States, many Americans see the veil as a symbol of oppression and degradation forced by Muslim men on women," writes Randa Kayyali, but, "in contrast, many veiled women report feeling full of dignity and self-esteem and enjoy that their physical, personal self does not enter into social interactions" (80). While Islam does not require any dress for men that would distinguish them, women are often discriminated against at work and in school for their dress. In a 2008 court proceeding, Raneen Albaghdady was forced by a judge to remove her hijab before testifying. Despite her husband's explanations, the judge insisted that the hijab was a "hat" and disrespectful to the court (Turley). Similarly, Arab-American women are constant targets of discrimination in the workplace and are denied promotion or even fired for refusing to remove their headscarves (Kayyali 81).

This issue has become even more prominent post September 11th. To many Americans, all people of Middle Eastern descent are associated with terrorism, and hijab identifies women as Middle Eastern. Nadine Naber writes on this issue: "That headscarves signified an identification that transformed particular women into daughters or sisters of terrorists in general, or Osama or Saddam in particular, exemplifies one of the ways in which gender permeated nation-based racism in the context of the 'war on terror'" (294). More than facing job discrimination, Arab-

American women who wear hijab are increasingly becoming the victims of hate crimes because they are easily identifiable, in the mind of an injured and heated society, as symbols of terrorism.



StudioBendib. Muslimah Media Watch. Nov 18, 2009

Works Cited:

“Arab American Institute Still Deliberately Claiming Assyrians Are Arabs.” *AINA*.
<<http://www.aina.org/releases/20070416140021.htm>> April 16, 2007.

Kayyali, Randa A. *The Arab Americans*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006.

Naber, Nadine. “Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming!” *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: from Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*. Ed Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2008.

Read, Jen'nan Ghazal. *Culture, Class, and Work among Arab-American Women*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2004.

StudioBendib. "Saudi Cartoonist Hana Hajar Sketches a Path for Female Cartoonists." *Muslimah Media Watch*. <<http://muslimahmediawatch.org/category/comicscartoons/>> Sep 21, 2009.

Turley, Jonathan. "Muslim Woman Sues After Being Told To Remove Hijab in Court." *Legal Theory and Law Professor Blog*. <<http://jonathanturley.org/2009/08/27/detroit-muslim-woman-sues-after-being-told-to-remove-hijab-in-court/>>. Aug 27, 2009.

"Why Banning Burqas Won't Work." *Conservative Compendium*. <<http://conservative-compendium.com/wordpress/tag/free-speech/>> Aug 24, 2009.

Relevant Websites:

Arab-American News: <http://www.arabamericannews.com/news/>

Arab-American Women's Business Council: <http://www.aawbc.org/>

The Arab-American Institute: <http://www.aaiusa.org/>

U.S. Census on Arab Americans: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-23.pdf>