

Nicole Sinno
Professor Raymond Smith
Race and Ethnicity
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Issue Brief: Middle Eastern American and Women/Gender Issues

Key Words:

Arab American, Middle East, Veil, Generation Gap, Identity, Gender Roles, Assimilation

Description:

This brief focuses on the intersection of Arab Americans and women and gender issues. Today, nearly two thirds of Arab Americans affiliate as Christians while one third are Muslim, yet both groups share certain cultural customs that impact the lives of Arab women living in America. This brief discusses the factors that influence the process of American assimilation, specifically the conflict that Arab American women face in balancing their American identity with their Arab ancestries.

Key Points:

- According to the U.S. Census, Arab Americans fall under the category of non-Hispanic white, despite the fact that Arab American experiences, cultures, and perspectives differ substantially from those of whites
- Arab American women encounter issues of self-identification in response to pressures to honor their Arab culture while also embracing their new American identity.
- Arab American women are discouraged from participation in the public sphere in favor of their domestic responsibilities.
- The choice to wear a veil is one example of several culturally rooted dilemmas that Arab American women deal with.

Brief:

Since their arrival into America in the 19th century, Arab Americans have often been characterized as an invisible racial and ethnic group, their ambiguity due in part to the fact that the Census Bureau classifies them as “white,” along with all other non-Hispanic, European whites. The imperfect categorization of Arab Americans has fortified the perception that Arab Americans constitute a homogenous group, when in fact Arab Americans represent a fusion of religious, geographical, political and social backgrounds that rarely cause for identification with Anglo whites (see fig. 1).

With 3 million having assimilated into the United States, Arab Americans trace their ancestry to 17 Arabic-speaking countries in North Africa and western Asia, immigrating in two distinct waves (Read 2003, 209). Between 1880 and 1924, twenty million immigrants, including many Christian Arabs, immigrated to America in search of economic opportunity. In the 1960s, immigration from the Middle East included a majority of Muslim Arabs and increased dramatically largely due to the instability of the Middle East (El-Badry) (see fig. 2).

As immigrants assimilated to their lives in America, many still held cultural and social ties to their homeland (Naber 2010, 39). Even today, middle easterners, particularly Arab American women, face the challenge of finding a balance between their new American identity and their cultural affiliations. Cultural stereotypes portray Arab American women as “veiled Islamic traditionalists” who remain prisoners in their homes, despite the fact that only 24% of Arab Americans are Muslim (Read 2003, 207).

For many Arab American women, self-identity is a delicate fusion between their personal reconciliation with their Middle Eastern ancestry as well as their residency in America. Arab-American women born in the United States perform just as well as white American women, both demonstrating equally high levels of education, income, and labor force participation rates. Yet, Arab cultural customs continue to reinforce traditional gender roles, especially those regarding women's responsibilities in the home and family (Read 2003, 208).

Gender norms prioritize women's family obligations over their economic considerations. Strong traditional values dictate that from a young age, Arab American girls should dress modestly, refrain from dating, show respect for their elders, and begin helping out at home as children. Women who have immigrated to the U.S. are generally expected to maintain these expectations (Arab American Culture). Although Arab American women are allowed more flexibility than women in the Middle East, Arab American women are expected to keep their traditional Arab culture alive and thriving in their homes and routines, whether this is done through gatherings at community spaces or worshiping inside mosques (Mankiller 1998, 35).

One pressure that Arab American women face is the encouragement from much of Western society to stop wearing the veil. The choice to wear or not to wear the veil is a important decision in a Muslim American woman's life, as it is a choice that will not only reflect her inner sense of identity but also affect the way others view her. Arab Americans and especially American Muslim women face increased stereotyping, acutely after the September 11 attacks and Paris attacks, terrors which brought Islamic radicalism to the forefront as a critical security concern (Erlanger and Bennhold 2015). Women who choose to wear a veil or hijab risk becoming targets for racial mistrust and Islamophobia, and are seen as being powerless victims of the Muslim religion (Starting).

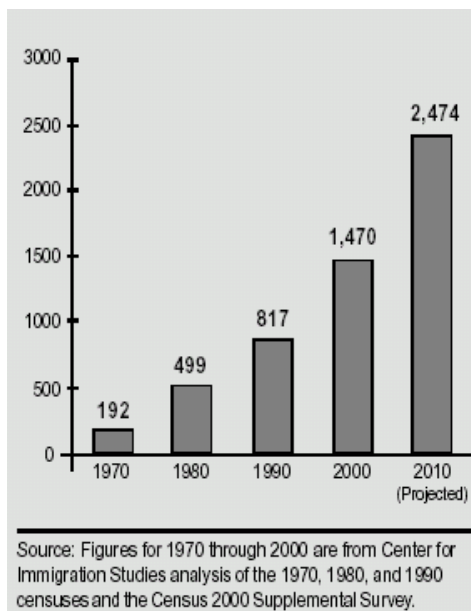
Many Arab Americans find that cultural customs like the veil inhibit women's full integration and success in American society. Others view female domesticity as a means to preserve Arab culture and ethnicity (Read, 1994). These attitudes tend to vary substantially by socioeconomic class, level of education, and generational status. Second and third generation Arab women demonstrate fainter connections to their Arab roots, and tensions between older and younger generations ensue. For example, Arab parents feel threatened by the extent to which their children adopt American culture, while Arab American women continue to resist expectations such as the pressure for them to marry at a young age (Fakhreddine).

Among the fastest growing ethnic American population today, Arab Americans continue to preserve their traditional culture and pass it on from one generation to the next. Yet as the roles of American women continue to evolve, we observe as many Arab American women come to new realizations, slowly accept a new culture for its liberating forces, and create a new type of self-identification that merges both old and new.

Figure 1.



Figure 2. Middle east immigrants in the U.S., 1970-2010, (in thousands)



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Relevant websites:

- Arab-American News: <http://www.arabamericannews.com/news>
- U.S. 2000 Census on Arab Americans: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-23.pdf>
- Arab Households in the United States: <https://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acsbr10-20.pdf>
- Arab American National Museum: <http://www.arabamericanmuseum.org/online.resources>
- Arab American Institute: <http://www.aaiusa.org>