

ARAB MUSLIM WOMEN REFUGEES IN THE MID- ATLANTIC UNITED STATES: FAMILY ADAPTATION, SOCIAL, AND RELIGIOUS SUPPORT

Background

In the modern world, one of the most challenging increase of violence, human experiences is being a refugee. The number of refugees is increasing dramatically because of the war, climate shift, and racial cleansing (UNHCR, 2012). Refugees are pushed to leave their country to find a new life.

Refugees leave their country as individuals or families. Although individuals have much better chances to cope with their new lives, families are the main factor in resilience and psychological well-being (Mafle'o & Kaise, 2009).

Although Arab or Muslim refugees have settled in the United States for decades, related studies are still limited. In spite of the fact that the United States, historically, has accepted the highest number of refugees compared to other countries (Xu, 2007), the field of research remains underdeveloped (Al-Qdah & Lacroix, 2011).

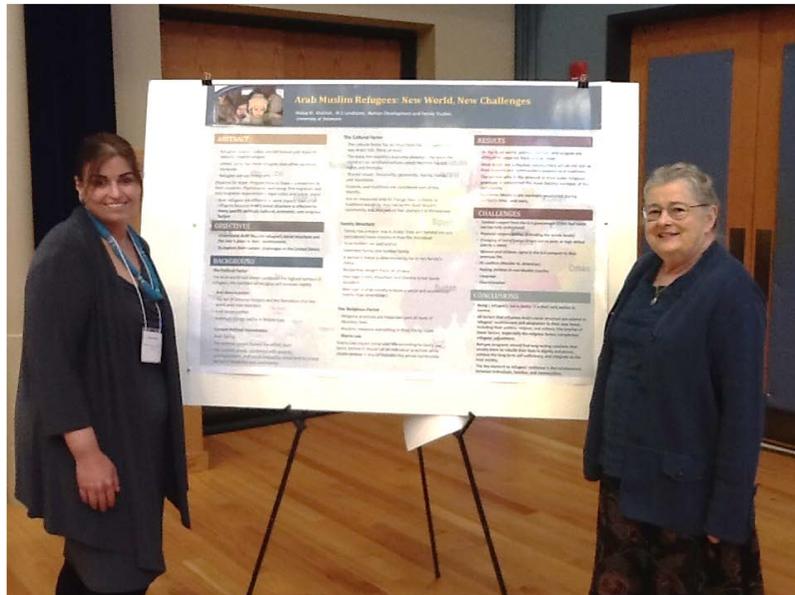
Arab Muslim refugees are different in some aspects from other refugees because Arab social structure is considered one of the most complicated social structures. Arab social structure is affected by many specific political, cultural, economic, and religious factors, and each of them has an important role in shaping the way individuals think and act. The purpose of this explorative study is to have better understanding of religion continuity, the role of Islam in family adaptability and resettlement, the type of challenges faced because of being Muslim, and the role of Muslim communities in their lives in the United States.

Sample

The focus of this study was on Arab Muslim refugee females in the United States. Since its focus was on the family, as seen through the female perspective, any female was accepted. In some cases, the male insisted on staying with the female during the interview, and therefore, his presence was accepted, and was asked to participate in the interview. The male's feedback was compared to other collected data. The interviews were done mainly in Arabic, and sometimes the participants added comments in English. The interviews were transcribed according to the language used in the interview. Eleven were included in the sample.

Methodology

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to interview the participants, probe for additional information and to maintain comparable information on all respondents and covered different aspects of Arab Muslim refugee family life (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992). Structured interview questions were used as an outline to be followed through the interview and most of the questions were open-ended to encourage the participant add their perspectives. Additionally, closed-ended questions were used to guide and maintain the conversation.



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Findings

Although Fatima constantly struggles with being away from the rest of her family and her country, being safe with her children provides her with great comfort and the emotional support to stay strong. As Fatima stated:

My mother always says to me: What do you miss in Iraq, explosions and troubles? But I still want to visit them, even for a week. My mother told me I would not be comfortable. After our conversation, I think I am safe and my children as well, so I try to comfort myself. (C, 18, 61). Second, children were the reason to search for a better life. Eman said: **"We came here looking for a brighter future for my children"** (H, 40, 135). Mona and her husband shared a similar opinion, that education in America has a significant level of credibility worldwide, which will help their children to secure a better future: **"I hope my children study and get their qualifications from here. It is a security for their future to get their degrees from America"** (F, 33, 110).

Rea explained how her family was challenged financially after the welfare cut their financial support because she started to work a part-time job **"Life is not easy; you need time to prove yourself in any job and to build your future... There are no schools for the children who are under five years old. This is a massive problem, which hurt us badly. In the beginning, the money that welfare paid was covering preschool expenses, but they cut the money after we started to work...."** (E, 27, 91)

Churches and resettlement organizations have played a major role in helping new refugees throughout the resettlement process. Of the two, churches are more involved in helping refugees, and the services they provide serve to construct a positive image in the minds of refugees about Americans and, in particular, about Christians. To exemplify this perspective, regarding her resettlement to America Heba stated: **My first impressions of Americans upon my arrival to this country occurred in the airport, when my family and I met with our sponsors from a church. They helped us with many things as we started our new lives here. For instance, they drove us to all our appointments and helped us shop for our groceries as well. They really showed us that there are no differences among human beings and that we can have different religions but still help each other and live together peacefully.** (D8, 21). Fatima had a similar experience with another church upon her arrival to America: **"I thought this was a strange country and that it would be difficult. But the church that sponsored us took us to the mosque without us even having to ask. They told me not to be afraid and said that everything was going to be fine. They respected each person's beliefs and treated us with high respect. Later, they asked me if I would like to visit their church; I said yes, and they asked me if I had any kind of restrictions, because of my religion, in going to their church. Later, I attended their church each Sunday to watch their worship services, and they were very welcoming. I was totally comfortable and I didn't feel any pressure from them."** (C14, 45). The church built the first bridge with this Muslim family by taking them to a mosque without the family even having to ask. The way that many Christian churches have treated the Muslim refugees has caused them to love and respect Christians and to connect with them on a moral and a human level. However, regarding resettlement organizations, participants held different views about their care and effectiveness. On one hand, Rea found them very helpful and considerate, as they prepared her apartment with groceries and Halal food prior to her and her family's arrival. She said: **"We have some relatives who work with the resettlement organization. The resettlement organization, with cooperation of the church, was a great support to us. When we arrived to the apartment, which prepared by the resettlement organization, they had bought groceries from a Muslim grocery store. They brought us all types of halal food"** (E30, 102).

On the other hand, Saeed was not fully content with the resettlement organization's services: **"The resettlement organization did not provide us with any real assistance. They were simply employees who were paid to do their jobs, so they were just following procedures. I got my job through an Iraqi friend who told me about the posting"** (G34, 114).

Likewise, American holidays are important events that Arab Muslim families often celebrate with their friends. For Eman, friendship was vital to her life and she was introduced to American holidays through her American friends, who also helped her to prepare for the customs and traditions of each event: **"Friends have an important role in our life . . . we celebrated the 4th of July with our American friends. Also, for Halloween, our American neighbor is going to take us shopping at Walmart to buy costumes and decorations"** (H40, 136). Similarly, Fatima celebrated American holidays with friends who came from different ethnicities. Each holiday, they tried to participate in American rituals and customs as part of their integration into American society: **"I have friends from all backgrounds. During American holidays, we do the same things that Americans do. Four or five families get together and celebrate. At Thanksgiving we have a turkey, and during Halloween I prepare costumes for my children. We are trying to live a normal life"** (C21, 70). However, not all the participants had the same views about celebrating American holidays as some preferred to acknowledge the holidays without participate in these celebrations; still others said they would only participate if they were invited.

The Muslim community is an important part of a Muslim's life. Some participants were happy to build friendships and to socialize with other Muslims, while others maintained a limited relationship by only participating in major Islamic events. An example of one who maintained strong Muslim connections is Eman, whose main source of help when coming to America was Iraqi friends: **"Friends have an important role in our life. Our Iraqi friends were the ones who helped us when we came to America"** (H40, 136). Similarly, Fatima explained how they were helped by some Iraqi families who responded either to information provided by the resettlement office or the mosque, **"When Iraqi families in the area knew that a new Iraqi family had arrived, they came and helped us. They knew about us through the mosque. There was a paper on the mosque's board stating that new Iraqi families had arrived and that whoever wanted to contact them should do so. Also, our resettlement office contacted some old refugee families who were still in contact with the office."** (C19, 65)

Such families helped them emotionally by sharing sympathy and compassion: **"I feel relief when I share my story with others and when they know about the details of my story; they sympathize with me and have compassion"** (C20, 69). Therefore, Fatema took part in empowering new arrivals by encouraging them and acting as a role model: **"When we hear there is a new family, we welcome them, encourage them, and tell them that we used to be like them"** (C21, 72).

Learning the English language was a very difficult a task which was causing them to feel frustration and hopelessness. Fatima said: **" Our biggest challenge was the language. I thought it might be the way I dress or because I am a Muslim. I had a difficult time because of the language that I suffered emotionally"** (C, 18, 62). Saeed expressed his disappointment for not being able to learn the language because he was surrounded with non-English speakers all day: **"Learning the language is one of the biggest challenges. When 90% of your coworker does not speak English, you will not learn the language"** (G, 38,130). In match with Fatima's experience who described how she was able to learn the language from interacting with Americans: **" one of the main things that help me to learn the language was the way American communicated with us. When I was trying to speak, they would encourage me, explain to me, make me feel safe, encourage me, and they never laugh at me"** (C, 18, 63). In conclusion, language was the main challenge that all refugees had to go through. This challenge was exceeded with encouragement of other refugees, who went through same experience, and their American friends.