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Family Relations: United States
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The family is the major social institution in the Muslim world, as well as among Muslim Americans. Other institutions, political, religious, and social, may compete for importance, but seldom succeed. Women play an extremely important role in the family, but males have privilege through a kinship system of patrilineality, also found in most of Asia. Islam, originating in Saudi Arabia, reflects patrilineal privilege and often enforces the kinship system in family laws, especially in countries experiencing an increase of religious ideology. This entry examines the effect of the traditional Muslim family system on women of Middle Eastern and Asian origin in the United States.

Muslim families in the United States differ along lines of socioeconomic background and individual histories and experiences. Factors such as residence in a close ethnic community or scattered in the suburbs, the number of relatives or people sharing the same country of origin who assist or restrict activities, economic class, education, generation, and pre-migration patterns are all variables that may affect behavior even more than religious identity. However, the ideology of family rules includes being large and extended, is based on intimate social reciprocal obligations, and for most is patrilineally organized. Visiting among the members is expected and frequent. Women play a big part in this sociability, by planning, negotiating, influencing children's marriages, spreading information, hosting, and preparing food.

Chain migration, where one member in a family migrates to the United States, then brings other members of the family, contributes to this pattern. Families are important for economic survival in a new country. Upper-class immigrants sometimes migrate without families and form fictive kin groups. Social gatherings tend to be large, and the hostess is never exactly sure how many guests will attend. Umm Hassan comments, "Every weekend, I feed all these people. My daughter and I are tired from bringing them coffee and tea and fruit all day. My husband's niece and her husband leave, then his nephew comes" (Walbridge 1996, 310).

Kinship rules and the effect on family and women

Understanding the rules of patrilineal kinship is essential for contextualizing women. Sometimes confused with patriarchy, which means male power, patrilineality is a comprehensive kinship system in which a person, son or daughter, becomes a member of the father's descent group at birth, and shares many special rights and obligations with that group. A person's behavior reflects favorably or unfavorably on that name and group, not merely upon self or parents. Through rules of patrilineality, Muslim men are permitted to marry out with more ease than women, since the children are seen to follow the man's religion and culture. It is expected that the children of women who marry out will follow their father's line. The honor or reputation of the family acts as a strong mechanism of social control. The mother's family is not unimportant. However, since it is often an emotional support group, migration may increase its importance if the father's family is dispersed.

Being socialized as a member of a group rather than of a nuclear family is a basic difference between Muslim and many other American families where the emphasis is on individualism and individual space. This is at variance with the idea of shared obligations, which may come at the price of individual pursuits. When a young Muslim was asked why she went to

the movies with her cousins rather than her friends, she replied, “But they are my friends.” Other Asian, Mediterranean, South American and Third-World ethnic groups such as Chinese, Indians, Italians, and Mexicans with large families also share this experience.

Male privileges in Islamic patrilineal systems include the possibility of multiple wives in the Middle East, more inheritance, fewer restrictions on sexuality, and more power given to males, especially elders, in the patriline. The latter power is termed “patriarchy.” Parents are called the father and mother of the eldest son, Abu and Umm Ahmed for example, and a son's birth receives much attention. Fathers are treated with respect in public and often receive preferential treatment at home. Wives should not contradict husbands in public. There are generational differences as well. When asked how it was growing up as an Arab Muslim girl, one elderly immigrant woman whose father used a belt on her says, “It is different today. A girl of five might as well have been a woman then… My Dad was definitely the boss. My mother would say, ‘Don't you know, God is first and your husband second.’” (Aswad 1997, 233).

The males of the patriline are seen both as the protectors of women and as the enforcers of behavior. Outsiders see the resulting modesty and disproportionate public restrictions placed on females, especially young unmarried girls, yet do not observe the support system. The control of female sexuality and the insistence on female virginity before marriage relates to the need for sure knowledge that a child belongs to the father. That this is more a cultural than a religious norm is clear from the fact that the same sanctions and pressures are placed on, for example, Christian Asian women.

The custom of patrilocality, by which men in the patriline try to live near each other, has traditionally accompanied patrilineality and serves to reinforce male power. In Muslim cultures, women may be separated from their lineage and sources of protection and social support when they move to their husband's locale after marriage. The custom of cousin marriage within the patriline (marriage of a girl to her father's brother's son) eases this separation since the father and his brother will try to live near each other. While patrilocality does not always pertain to the United States, women often experience similar feelings of separation in a new and alien environment. In the United States, first cousin marriage is prohibited, but cousins can marry in the Middle East and then transfer to the United States. An early survey of a Muslim Arab immigrant community found that 50 percent were married to relatives (Aswad 1974, 67). Marriages are strongly influenced and sometimes planned by parents, who feel it is their duty to secure a good marriage for their children by examining the credentials of a mate and the economic situation of his or her parents.

Economic factors and women

The Middle Eastern and Asian patriline is involved in economic ventures such as land control and store ownership, and often affects the political realm. It is difficult for women to struggle against male power because it is embedded in a vast range of lineage obligations, not just patriarchy. In contrast, women may gain power if they are members of a strong or rich patriline. Instances where they have even occasionally replaced their fathers in government, such as former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan who inherited much of her father's power, are often confusing to Westerners.

During the immigration process, the power of lineages may break down and allow new opportunities for lower-class people as well as for women. Migration may also disrupt the structure and composition of families, making life difficult emotionally and economically. Sometimes children are left in the home country. Situations of warfare in the Middle East or South Asia also bring great strains on families who are separated because of immigration to the West (Aswad 1992).

Economic class affects family interaction. In the United States, many upper-class immigrants live in suburban areas, and had fewer family members when they first migrated. The 1965 immigration laws gave preference to relatives and professionals with skills needed by the United States. Immigrants made links with persons from their regions of origin, religion, and/or class and occupation, such as doctors and successful business people. Among these upper-class immigrants, there are many educated professional women. Pharmacy is a popular occupational choice among immigrants and later generation Muslim women.

Muslim women have successfully used their social networking in numerous businesses. Among Iranian Muslims in Los Angeles, Dallafar found women actively participating in their ethnic economy using their class, ethnic, and gender resources to open small businesses. Many of these are run from the home, or are family-run enterprises (1996, 123). For

many women employment is full-time and they often have multiple roles such as seamstress, cashier, and public relations. In many cases, rather than being secondary to the husband, they are "central to the survival of the small ethnic entrepreneurial business" (ibid.). Dallafar points out the importance of women's social and family networks, which they use in the home and transfer to a business environment. This networking is evident in small stores across the United States, and also among those who have been successful in the real estate business and major companies where they serve clients from the Middle East. Among working-class families in industrial areas, immigrant Muslim women historically have worked in clothing and to a lesser degree on assembly lines. Most families try to influence their daughters to follow professions that restrict interaction with non-related males.

Muslim men are still considered the providers and protectors of the family. Those without educational or language skills in the United States suffer feelings of diminished status. They may feel guilty or embarrassed if a wife works or receives welfare. Most, however, support their daughters' education, although it may be less valued than a son's.

Muslim women of the lower classes have received welfare in the United States, and, as in other cultures, welfare has affected gender relations since it usually goes to women. Some lower-class men welcome governmental assistance, and before it was mandated that welfare recipients must seek employment, saw it as a means of assistance while their wives stayed at home with the children. Others worry that welfare unduly strengthens the women's role: "Welfare will fulfill her needs rather than her husband. She will think she is financially independent without me. It will weaken or destroy my role" (Aswad 1996, 186). Generally Muslim Lebanese immigrant women feel it threatens the male role more than those from Yemen (ibid.). Having many children is a status symbol among Muslim lower classes, and requires women to be at home. Poor women have come to view welfare as a method of contributing to income and achieving more economic leverage in the family while trying to carry out their duties of raising a family.

Youth behavior, dating, and socializing

Muslim customs are at variance with a culture where marriage involves dating, love, and a great measure of freedom of choice in choosing a mate, even though the ideology of that freedom may be exaggerated. There is both a generational and a cultural gap for Muslims. Today most parents fear their children will marry non-Muslims, though attitudes change according to historical periods. Until the late 1960s the emphasis was on assimilation into the United States. Anglo names were common and many Muslims married non-Muslims. Educated Muslim male professionals of the 1960s often married non-Muslim women whom they met in college. As the number of Muslims in the United States has increased, the emphasis has moved for many from assimilation to self-identity as both Muslim and American. With this has come an increased emphasis on Muslim children, especially girls, marrying within the faith.

The behavior of Muslim American children reflects not only on the honor of the father's family, but also on the mother who is expected to raise her children in the correct fashion. Sometimes the strongest strains may be seen in the family between girls and their mothers, when daughters enter the more permissive American culture. Sons are given more leniency in dating than daughters due to the expectation of female but not male virginity at marriage. A son's ability to marry outside the faith more easily than a daughter's is also a factor.

Muslim children are expected to obey and respect parents, but girls are more restricted. Opinions about this vary. Farida says, "From the time you are born until the day you die you always respect your parents. No matter what. If you take a beating from them, you take a beating." Hanaa disagrees, "If I feel I'm right, I stick up for myself. If they yell, I yell right back." The asymmetry of sexual control over women is particularly felt in the area of dating. Farida says, "If I could change one thing, I'd change how the Muslim guys get more freedom than the girls" (Eisenlohr 1996, 254). Hanaa agrees. "I tell my mother that I would let my daughter have more freedom." Lubna adds, "A lot of Arab girls aren't allowed out at night" (ibid. 255).

Some feel that rules are stricter now than they used to be. "In the 1950s and 1960s," says one woman, "Arab boys and girls here could date, and not just in groups. The boys may have started dating American girls, but then the girls followed suit, dating Arabs and sometimes non-Arabs… None wore scarves, and many girls wore shorts; my sister still does at 65 years of age. Now with the immigrants from the Middle East, there is much less going out by the girls." (Aswad 1997, 233). Her own marriage had been arranged by an imam to a man 20 years older than she, but she did not arrange her sons'

marriages, both of whom married non-Arabs and non-Muslims. Socializing across sexes today often tends to be among kin or friendship groups, especially among recent immigrants. Brothers have the responsibility to guard their sisters, but often assist them in keeping secrets.

Mothers, daughters, and brothers

Mothers have power usually not seen outside the community. Their success in raising children is important, and through their traditional role in planning marriages they acquire power over sons as well as daughters. They are usually the mediators between father and children. Shryock comments, "Most Arab immigrants accept as a fact of life that a man should be head of the house, even if 'the mother is the neck that moves the head'" (2000, 586). Widows are to be cared for by their eldest son. Women find power through women's groups and visiting patterns that engage in gossip and knowledge of relationships, of which men are often ignorant. Occasionally they dominate husbands, but most try to embrace a balance of influence, hard domestic work and increasingly outside employment, negotiating, and manipulation, characteristics shared by many women in the world.

Daughters bear the greatest responsibility for good behavior. They bond with sisters and female cousins, and seek their brother's assistance with their parents on issues of dating or marriage. Brothers have privileges over sisters. Usually they protect them and may side with them against parents. Others exploit this power and mistreat their sisters, sometimes without parental rebuff. Zobeida says, "My brother helps me. When my parents say no, he says, "Why are you doing this? Let her do this" (Eisenlohr 1996, 260). Nehmeh adds, "I have three brothers who don't live at home, but I see them just as much as if they did. One might say 'If I find out what you're doing and I don't like it, then you're in trouble'" (ibid., 259).

Mistreatment and divorce

Some girls have threatened suicide and others have run away. If an issue of misbehavior becomes public, and is not worked out by other members of the family, clergy, or community social agencies, male members of the patriline, usually a father or brother, may abuse a girl. In the extreme, they may murder her. This seldom occurs in the United States but remains as a threat. Rarely does a woman harm or murder a man. Family relations are considered private, and domestic violence is usually hidden, as in much of the world. The greater emphasis on Islamic values has generated arguments over Qurʾānic verses used to condone the beating of wives. A predictor of domestic violence is the restriction of women's ability to leave the family setting (Hajjar forthcoming).

Divorce rates, while low, are rising and have reached 10 percent among Arab Muslims. This reflects the pressures on employed women, as well as the ability to leave an abusive husband and retain custody in the United States. Some men restrict their wife's employment for this reason. Pressures against divorce include a strong stigma, family influence, lack of job skills or other economic resources, alternative domestic arrangements, and the still present possibility of losing custody of children (Hajjar forthcoming). A recent study in Dearborn found that Muslim immigrant women felt, rightly or wrongly, that their husbands would be deported if they called the police (Kulwicki 2000).

Non-Muslim counselors should be cognizant of the moral role of males and extended families to intervene and protect females as well as their potential to harm them. When domestic violence occurs, each situation needs to be treated with special sensitivity. Muslim women seeking to gain their rights, achieve independence, and yet maintain emotional and physical support from the family face a strong system of social and emotional obligations and customs. It is not an easy balance, but one that many American Muslim women are working hard to achieve.

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