Taking the Best of Two Worlds and Building from It: A Study of American Women Married to Middle Eastern Men

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Introduction

> You want to interview women who are married to Middle Eastern men to discuss our marriages? What, do you want to know if my husband beats me and plans to run away with the children?

The idea of a project on cross cultural marriage came to me as a result of confronting the many stereotypes about both cross-cultural marriages in general and, more specifically, marriage between an American woman and a Middle Eastern man that I encountered when I announced my engagement to a Palestinian man. These cross-cultural marriages face many obstacles but one of the greatest is the presumption of inevitable failure due to ideas prevalent in the popular media. The woman quoted above was echoed by several of the women who participated in the study. The women in these marriages are all too familiar with the stereotypes and are frankly tired of being viewed as victims of their own marriages. In popular literature and movies, like *Not Without My Daughter*, these marriages are set up as doomed from the beginning. So I chose to explore marriages that were succeeding, contrary to the popular myth. What unique challenges are present in a marriage between an American woman and a Middle Eastern man? If given the chance to speak from their heart, what would these women truly say about their marriages? What advice might they have for other women who were contemplating following them into such a marriage?

The approach these women took to their marriages varied greatly. On the one hand, there was the "practical" woman. She said, "I get nervous when I read about women who just kind of make a quick decision because I think it's hard to understand culture until you live in another culture." She said, "I thought I would go visit… My

parents thought I needed more information to make a good decision, which I agreed. So my mother and I went to visit the Middle East…" This woman fears the challenges she might face, and must investigate and study her husband's culture in order to make a good decision. She would encourage other women in her shoes to do the same.

On the other hand, there was the "romantic" woman who said,

> We met in January and got married in March. It's hard to find words, even after all these years to describe it… The minute I laid eyes on him I said, "Well there you are. Where have you been all my life?" I was that thunderstruck. And I remembered, it's the weirdest thing, and it sounds so dramatic, but it was just reality… It kind of gives me goosebumps to this day...It was almost like everything in the room was fuzzy and faded out except his face. It's like when you find out you're pregnant and you might feel a little funny for a few days and it never really gets to the front of your radar screen. And then it's like "Oh yeah." It was just like that. I've only had two moments like that in my life; it was when I was pregnant and when I met my husband.

For these women, there was no need to "check out" their husband's culture. They plunged right into their marriages, following their hearts.

Both of these women have been married for over twenty years. What might these women say about what makes for success in marriage? What adaptations have they made along the way to make it work? Where do they draw the line to say, "I'm not going to change this part of me?" When are the stereotypes and expectations of marriage accurate and when do they fall short? The purpose of this study is to move beyond the popular culture stereotypes about such marriages in order to hear about how real women have worked to sustain their cross-cultural marriages. I conducted in-depth interviews with eight happily-married women from across the Midwest and East to explore the ins and outs of life with their husbands.

Literature Review

There is very little social science research on the topic of cross-cultural or intercultural marriages between American women and Middle Eastern men.[1] There is some research on the broader area of intercultural marriage or research specific to a particular ethnic mix, but no academic studies were found that dealt specifically and exclusively with American women and Middle Eastern men or American-Muslim marriages. There are studies dealing with marriages between Americans and Koreans, white non-Hispanics and Hispanics, blacks and whites, or cross-cultural marriages of Middle Eastern and Dutch or "mixed" marriages in Israel, for example (Lee 2007; Negy 2000; Romano 2003; Weller 1988). However, in terms of a true academic study of American/Middle Eastern marriages, there is a paucity of literature.

Cross-cultural marriages can imply varying degrees of mixture: across racial lines, dual nationalities or across religious or ethnic lines. There are variations to each of these dimensions in terms of degrees of differences. For this study, I am examining marriages that are across national and often religious lines.

There are academic studies of cross-cultural marriage that examine it in general, without pointing to one cultural mix in particular. These studies focus primarily on how to counsel couples who are in or contemplating entering into a cross-cultural marriage. For instance, Ken Waldman and Luis Rubalcava (2005) addressed marital counselors who may find themselves with an intercultural couple as their clients. They begin by explaining that the frequency of intercultural marriage has increased in the United States and continue by noting that this type of marriage, due to the differences in culture, has a

[1] I am using the terms cross-cultural and intercultural marriage interchangeably.

higher rate of divorce. They recommend that counselors should be prepared to encounter such couples as clients and they should understand the unique differences in counseling them. They state, "Therapists who are able to illuminate empathically the unconscious cultural differences may help the partners to heal the ruptures created by those cultural differences" (2005:228). They continue by discussing how an individualistic culture and a collective culture implanted norms upon the couple during childhood but how each partner sees their viewpoint as the "way things should be or are." They demonstrate how a couple may not even be aware of their cultural ways of organizing behavior and attitudes, but these systems of organization can profoundly impact how they interact with each other. Waldman and Rubalcava give examples of couples from collective (Mexico) and individualistic (US) cultures and how the counselor was able to point out the differences in organization of ideas. For example, they point to a case study where the cross-cultural couple in marriage counseling is struggling with their own ideas of familial responsibilities versus standing on one's own two feet. The American wife complains that her Mexican husband shares all of his valuable possessions with his siblings and must regularly visit his mother. The wife sees his sharing as disregarding or devaluing the hard work she has put into earning these items and his attachment to his mother as excessive. He, on the other hand, sees his sharing his possessions as part of growing up in a large family and his attention to his mother as showing normal care and concern as her favorite son. The article points to the principle that neither one of their viewpoints is right or wrong but merely reflects differences in socialization between a collective and individualistic society.

Another literary approach to cross-cultural marriages is the personal experience genre that labels such marriages as "doomed from the start" or offers advice for "how to make it work". Whereas, academic studies are more directed to professionals, these other works of literature are directed towards couples either in or contemplating marriage to someone from another culture. These guides address everything from black/white relations in the US to how to raise children in a mixed faith marriage. However, most of these books have a very clear bias either for (Giladi-McElelive 1987; Johnson 2007) or against (Khashoggi 2004; US Government Printing Office 1995) cross-cultural marriages.

In fact, it was one of these books, from the doomed category, that served as a catalyst for my interest in conducting this study. *Intercultural Marriages: Promises and Pitfalls*, written by Dugan Romano, is a book for couples in cross-cultural relationships who are considering marriage. Romano's credentials for writing this book consist of her own cross-cultural marriage that ended in divorce. Even though the book is subtitled *Promises and Pitfalls,* the promises, according to Romano, are heavily outweighed by the pitfalls. In fact, she devotes nineteen chapters to the pitfalls of these relationships. She has chapters on such "trouble spots" as food, class, religion, and money matters. In each chapter, she points to a couple who fought about each item in her long laundry list of potential problems to illustrate how such a marriage is doomed. Although what she states could be true--cross-cultural couples have a tendency to fight over these things--the question could also be "what (healthy) couples do not argue?" Even a culturally "homogenous" couple might fight about money, how to raise the children, male/female roles in the relationship and where to live. After reading her book, I thought, "Any

couple could have these problems." Although questions such as "Where shall we live?" become more exaggerated when the couples are from different continents, even a homogeneous couple from Pennsylvania could argue over, "Should we take the job in California and leave our families behind?" I found her conclusion that cross-cultural marriage is doomed to fail because couples might argue to be erroneous, exaggerated, and very pessimistic.

There are other texts that point to the possibilities of these marriages. They counter Romano by saying that although they may take more work, these relationships can succeed. They use the analogy of the couple's identities as forming a concentric circle and encourage couples to learn to live within their adapted common space (the intersection of the circles). They talk about the couples' motivations for such a marriage and provide exercises to help them discover how their cultures play into their decision making and behaviors. One such book, *Mixed Matches: How to Create Successful Interracial, Interethnic, and Interfaith Relationships,* by Joel Chrohn, is a very "how-to" book, full of case studies and exercises, to help couples examine their conflicts to find meaningful solutions. In his book, Chrohn points to five key points in a successful "mixed match." These points are to "face the issues, clarify your different cultural codes, sort out confusion about your identity, be aware of the social context, and find your own path and help your children find theirs" (1995:25).

If we look to Middle Eastern and American marriages specifically, more popular literature can be found. This literature largely falls into the category of the doomed marriages and adds a new fear dimension about parental abduction of children (Khashoggi 2004; Mahmoody 1992; Al-Nahi 2006). The women writing these books

reach a wide audience. Unfortunately, much of this literature only further perpetuates widespread American stereotypes of Middle Eastern men as violent and domineering (with American women presented as helpless and naïve.) The heroines of these books become heroic only as they accept their naivety and become as equally deceptive and violent as their husbands in their failed marriages. This genre is accessible to any willing audience and quite popular.

By far, the most widely recognized title in this genre is *Not Without My Children*. The success of this novel spawned many others (Doyle 1994; Ali 1995; Mahmoody 1992; Muhsen 1992). In this story, Betty Mahmoody tells of her failed marriage to an Iranian. She explains how she went to Iran with him and their daughter but later escaped with her daughter from her abusive husband. The novel, published in 1989, was made into a Hollywood movie in 2001 giving the story an even larger audience. Mahmoody went on to create an organization, "One World: For Children," that works to protect children in bicultural marriages.[2]

The book and movie were met with a wide variety of reactions worldwide. Some writers (deBoer 1993) held the story up as a solid explanation of the clash between East and West. Others criticized this analysis and pointed to the negative stereotypes in the text towards Eastern culture. Betty de Hart (2001) makes the point that this text and others in this genre have important ideological work to do. First, they must demonize the husband. Whereas the Western wife was pulled into the relationship by his good looks and "macho behavior," she soon realizes that her husband has two personalities. Underneath his good lucks hides a violent, untrustworthy man. The change "happens

[2] There was a Finnish film made in 2002, "Without My Daughter," that presents the father's version of the story.

overnight and is very sudden and unexpected to the woman" (2001:55). She notes that even as the marriage crumbles, so does the husband's country. So what drew the Western woman to the relationship was essentially all a mistake or a lie. DeHart continues that even though one might suspect that Middle Eastern women would be a support to the Western woman, she is left on her own as Middle Eastern women are also hideous creatures who are essentially jealous of the Western woman. DeHart says such novels classify the Western woman as "foolhardy." They become victims due to their own actions and serve as warnings to all other Western women not to marry Middle Eastern men. Western women who contemplate such a marriage are also further warned that neither Islamic law (which favors men) nor Western law (which is impotent) will protect these women and their children from their husbands. The novels become melodramatic as the women suffer to bring their children home. Yet, through their suffering, the women gain a new found strength and purpose. They end with a win-win situation- they have regained their children and they have also sensibly returned to their Western roots.

Why is this portrayal of the women and their marriage to the Arab man significant work? First of all, it sells books. American readers crave this sort of "evil versus good" vision of the world, particularly when the evil is the Arab other. The books reinforce the already prevalent stereotypes in American society about Arab culture and Arab people. The further message for western women, that they should avoid these foreigners because they are dangerous and such relationships come to no good end, supports the social status quo by reminding western women of how good they have it in their own societies.

A different viewpoint on this same novel is presented by Schoustra-van Beukering (2002). She states that there is more to this genre than simply "an unwelcome warning" (70). She says although one sided warnings are not helpful, the women's stories do hold value if they provide "objective information." She presents one tragic example of a British and Yemeni family whose children are tricked by their Middle Eastern father into marriage in Yemen. She also provides three examples of successful cross-cultural marriage: two examples of white European women and African men and one example of a Dutch/Indian couple. Disputing de Hart's harsh criticism of the motives behind the "failure novels" as melodramatic warnings to Western women, Schoustra-van Beukering says, "The reasons for authors to publish their personal stories may be manifold. Warning other women not to enter into a mixed marriage does not necessarily come first. On the contrary, sharing an experience can have encouraging aspects as well. Let the readers draw their own conclusions." (Schoustra-van Beukering, 76).

Neither DeHart nor Schoustra-van Beukering address the question of whether the Jekyll-Hyde shift of the husbands presented in these works, from a seemingly modern, western man to a traditional, authoritarian and violent spouse, is actually a reality. It is commonly accepted by many that when immigrant men return to their home countries, they become more traditional and give up their more western patterns of behavior and values. However, when Roer-Strier and Ben-Ezra (2006) examined relationships of Western women married to Palestinian men where the couple returned to live in Palestine after living for sometime in the West, their results contradicted this prevalent assumption.

They found that their data suggested a variety of adaptation patterns as well as other influences on those patterns.

In addition to analyzing academic studies on cross cultural marriages and popular literature on relationships between American women and Middle Eastern men to see what stereotypes and challenges these couples face, it is equally important to understand what the Middle Eastern man's experience of family life and marriage are from his own culture. These men grow up learning a particular configuration of gender roles and expectations that they then bring to their own marriages with American women, who themselves learned a different gender configuration. To gain insight into the differences between Middle Eastern and American gender norms for women, I explored literature written by and about Middle Eastern women and their lives. I paid particular attention to what Middle Eastern men and women have been taught about marriage and family life in society.

I researched what a typical homogenous Middle Eastern marriage would look like in Middle Eastern literature. I studied novels, short stories and ethnographic studies in order to develop my understanding of male-female relationships. I began by examining how Middle Eastern culture is much more collective than American culture. American culture is highly individualistic in terms of decision making and even personal space. In Middle Eastern culture the nuclear family frequently lives very close to the extended family or in an extended family. The extended family is consulted (or offers their opinion) on every decision from jobs, to raising the children, to what is cooked for dinner tonight. I could see this as being very challenging to American women who are accustomed to some degree of autonomy. The texts I read showed the reaction of Middle

Eastern women and how they responded to this collective culture (Abu-Lughod 1993) as well as how an American seeing this collective society in action firsthand experienced it (Rugh 1997). These works told amusing tales of Middle Eastern women dealing with their powerful mother-in-laws. They demonstrate the high ranking of the mother-in-law as well as how Middle Eastern women are able to cope with their lower status when it comes time for the husband's parents to make decisions. They also show an appreciation on the part of the American observer for how siblings immediately step in to help out with younger children and how these younger children seem to readily accept the help of others. The American author commented while watching an older sibling help a younger sibling in Syria how her own youngest child would have rejected such help in favor of doing it "by himself" (Rugh 1997).

These stories led me to develop interview questions on how decisions are made in the mixed homes of the participants. I asked about the interactions they had with each of their sets of parents. I explored with them whether the collective culture in which the husband was raised caused any struggles for the wife due to her more individualistic culture.

On the theme of women and work, I examined in the literature how both personal and national needs for female employment affect the decision of whether women were employed in Middle Eastern countries. Personal and national needs affected a woman's ability to work given her education and training potential for positions available (Hijab1997). I examined how certain professions were more accessible and more acceptable for women (e.g. education, business) whereas others, which might put women

at risk of personal contact with men (e.g. nursing), were not as acceptable in certain Middle Eastern countries compared to the United States (Tucker 1993).

I also read ethnographic accounts and stories by Arab women in their own voices. The purpose was to gain insight into styles of interviews, editing and reviewing questions of voice. Recent advances within feminist and qualitative research methods have established the importance of allowing subjects to speak for themselves, rather than having the "invisible" researcher voice their lives for them. I read a study of five Egyptian women that discussed wedding traditions, female entrepreneurship, and Egyptian customs (Atiya 1982). I also read a collection of stories written by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian women (Kadi 1994) that examined questions of identity, politics, language, culture, and childrearing. The Arab-American and Arab Canadian stories were interesting because they posed many questions of identity as well as thoughts on how the children of my participants might find themselves living in the United States. They commented on their struggles to fit into American society and to define their identity. One woman said:

> But I have grown weary of my silence and paranoia: my fear that if I wear a Palestinian emblem, a *kaffiyah*, use my few words of Arabic, say my name and where I am from, I will open myself to suspicion or hatred. I am tired of being afraid to speak who I am: American and Palestinian, not merely half of one thing and half of another, but both at once- and in that inexplicable melding that occurs when two cultures come together, not quite either, so that neither American nor Arab find themselves fully reflected in me, nor I in them. (Kadi 1994: 67-68)

Their stories raised questions for me how the children of my participants might face similar struggles. These stories brought up many questions about identity, society's

acceptance or lack of acceptance of the women, childrearing and politics for both the multicultural as well as homogenous societies.

Finally, I specifically looked at the Palestinian question, partly because of my own marital situation and also because American-Palestinian marriages are common among the cross-cultural marriages I was exploring. I reviewed an autobiography (Tuqan1990) as well as a study of Palestinian mothers and daughters (Gorkin 1996). These could not have been more opposite in nature. Fadwa Tuqan lived a sheltered but self-described emotionally depressed life. The study of mothers and daughters examined the harsh conditions of women struggling to raise the next generation of daughters to be mindful of their past but under the influence of Western ideals all the while trying to make sense of the Occupation. This literature helped me to examine the importance of agency and voice. In Gorkin's study, the researchers fought intensely over the types of questions to ask and the location in which to ask them. After gathering the data, the researchers then edited their findings. Therefore, the voices of the women came second hand. In the autobiography, the author herself determined the direction of her story and the amount of personal information to include. This made me mindful of the editing process and how that might affect the women's voices. From these stories, I also considered several questions to be directed toward the wives of Palestinians regarding their husband's experience growing up and their family's ability to travel to Palestine. It also called to mind questions of how much the American women felt the need or desire to share information about the Palestinian struggle with their children. Since, presumably, the American women grew up with little or no knowledge of the conflict, how would they

feel about sharing the facts about the often violent struggle with their American born children?

Out of my literature review, I built my list of questions. I categorized these questions into the following areas: women in relationships, women and work, women and politics and women's identity. I used the literature review to gain an understanding of women's lives and marriage in the Middle East. In the sections that follow, I explore how women are raising their children, including celebrating holidays, within their mixed relationships. I discuss the topic of women and work and how their work affects the dynamics of their family and decision-making. Finally, I examine how the political situation in the Middle East and the United States affects these marriages.

Methods

I interviewed eight women, using a life history model. A life history model uses open-ended questions that allow women to develop their own narrative about whatever aspect of their life that the interviewer is choosing to explore. Such interviewing is often more informal and takes on the character of a friendly conversation rather than an interrogation. In presenting the interviews, I have chosen not to closely identify the women in order to protect their confidentiality. In some instances, I fold together the experiences of two or more women into composites (of a sort) as I explore particular dimensions of their lives. While this means that the reader cannot, for example, follow the voice of one particular woman through all arenas of her life, this sacrifice was necessary in order to keep the women's identities hidden. I decided not to interview their husbands. I wanted to allow the women to speak candidly without their husbands present. I also understood that there might be cultural and language barriers if I were to interview their husbands. My questions began with how they decided to marry their husbands and continued to how they were managing as wives and mothers in these cross-cultural marriages. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

I recruited women to participate in the study by beginning with American women I knew who were married to Middle Eastern men. I worked outward to women in my profession of international education and contacted international offices and language departments at universities. I knew that one quick way to connect with these women would be to contact mosques to see if anyone would meet the description and be willing to be interviewed. I contacted the mosques all over the Midwest via internet, telephone calls and simple cold sales calls (showing up at the door, introducing myself and stating

my purpose.) I was able to meet several women from a variety of mosques through this method. One obvious, but unintended, result of this search method was that all of the women's husbands in this study were Muslim. I interviewed women from all over the Midwest and as far east as New York and New Jersey. I attended the Islamic Society of North America's national convention to connect with women, but was unsuccessful in interviewing anyone there because I could not figure out how to identify American women married to Arab men. In a few cases, scheduled interviews fell through due to unanticipated family circumstances (death, illness). I was also introduced to participants by other participants, friends and family members. After completing eight interviews, it became increasingly difficult to locate new subjects using these snowball methods, so I decided it was time to begin analysis. In addition, I also realized I had accumulated rich material in the interviews I had obtained.

In choosing a location for the interview, I considered many factors: proximity to the women's location, availability of space open to the public for private use, and privacy for the women. Our interview sessions took place in hotel rooms, libraries, mosques, classrooms, coffee shops, restaurants and homes. The least conducive environment for the interviews was the restaurant and coffee shop. The background noise from these locations made it very difficult to later transcribe the tapes. The best location was the participant's private home where I was alone with the interviewee and she was more relaxed in her own home.

The mosque posed a problem. Since I was in the mosque, I was wearing a headscarf during the interview and I had never met the woman before. At the end of the interview, the woman asked when I had converted to Islam. When I told her I never had,

she was confused because she saw my scarf and thought I was Muslim. I think that this made her slightly embarrassed about some of the answers she gave (e.g. how it was important for a woman in such a relationship to convert because if she did not then there would be too many problems). However, I reassured her that as a researcher, I had not taken her opinions personally. After this point, I decided if I were to interview anyone else at a mosque that I would need to identify myself more clearly at the beginning so as not to embarrass the participant.

The interviews covered a wide range of topics. I arrived at my questions mainly from my literature review. My topics included how the women met their husbands and how each of their families and friends responded to the marriage. Each woman and I talked about what traditions they were trying to pass along to their children. We talked about holiday celebrations. We discussed how domestic and international politics has affected the women's relationships with their husbands and with their American communities (such as families, friends, or neighbors). We talked about the women's education and work experience. We talked about how decisions were made in their relationships as well as some of the surprises the women had experienced in their marriages.

In the initial interviews, I strictly used my list of questions. I asked the questions word for word the same with each woman. However, as I continued with the interviews, I allowed the women to enter into a more fluid conversation. This was especially true for the women who had been married for more than 10 years. These women had their own stories to tell. I would ask them a question and let them talk. I did not want to interrupt them to meet, what I felt, was my own agenda. If I heard them mention a topic I was

planning on covering later, I would decide that they had already answered that question. However, as I began transcribing the interviews and analyzing them, I realized that this had been a critical mistake. I knew the women were dedicating a large amount of time (1½ to 4 hours) to the interview so I did not want to trouble them with further questions that I believed they had already answered through their free flow discussion. Although this provided very rich dialogue in enjoyable story telling style, it made it much more difficult to compare the women's answers in the final analysis. If I were to repeat this study, I would be stricter about using the list of questions with each of the women. Instead of being shy for taking their time or directing the interview, I should have taken greater charge of the direction of the interview.

I was concerned about protecting the women's identities for this project for various reasons. First, they would potentially be discussing very intimate details of their married life. I did not want my research to cause the women any embarrassment if someone they knew saw the study and recognized them. Secondly, at the time of the interviews, the after-effects of September 11th, especially the Patriot Act, were sending waves of terror through American-Middle Eastern communities. The women (and their husbands) were very concerned about retribution from their community of residence and the American or other foreign governments if they were identified as potential participants in the study. After September 11th, "Arab-looking" individuals had been attacked or killed by members of their communities; Arab men and women were being arrested, held for questioning, and deported. Arab-Americans were afraid that any information they provided the American interrogators might be shared with officials in their home countries, thus making it impossible for them to return home or possibly even

causing harm to members of their families who remained living there. The paranoia and fear within the community was deep; it has not abated.

In their study of Western women who return to the West Bank with their Palestinian husbands, Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra (2006) report,

> "The interviewer described herself as a social worker in Switzerland, currently living in Jerusalem, conducting research on international couples and being herself a partner in an interfaith and intercultural marriage. The personal experience of the interviewer added to the study sensitivity to and an awareness of issues related to intermarriage, which was helpful in developing the interview questions and in gaining access to the participants in the study. The participants seemed to regard the interviewer as an insider, which lessened their suspicions of being scrutinized and judged" (2006: 45).

Just as in Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra's study, my study gave me an insider's advantage. As an American woman married to a man from Gaza, I had an advantage. The women were more comfortable talking to me about their marriages because they understood that I would not judge them for their decision to enter into their cross-cultural marriages. Likewise, as "one of them," I went into the interviews with some understanding of the issues that would be important to them. I understood from the onset what challenges they might face and had some sense of what they would most like to discuss. In fact, by the end of the interview with some of the women, I felt we had entered into a secret sisterhood and I have often gone back to their stories to better understand my own marriage.

In general, I asked to interview the women alone. I was going to great lengths to protect their privacy as well as seeking their fully honest answers. I was concerned that if anyone else were present during our interviews, then the woman's honesty might be compromised. However, there were two occasions where there was someone else present

during the interviews at the specific request of the woman. One woman brought along a friend. She said that her friend was contemplating this type of marriage and she thought it might be useful for her friend to hear the interview. Both of these women were very young and I really felt like the presence of her friend compromised her answers at times. For several questions, she'd look at her friend and giggle before answering. The other woman came to the interview with her adolescent child. The child tried to remain inconspicuous, but when it came to questions on how they were raising their children, the woman interrupted the interview to ask her child to sit outside. The child cooperated with the request, but stood with his ear at the door until she let him come inside and sit in a corner under the table where she could not be distracted by his presence. I do not think her attempts to hide him made her much more comfortable. However, it was the women who invited these others to the interview and although I was concerned, I thought they might not participate if I were to say "no."

A few of the women would only agree to an interview after they spoke with their husbands. There were a few women who expressed an interest in participating, but later returned to me saying they were no longer interested.

After transcribing the interviews I spent a great deal of time reviewing the transcripts looking for commonalities and differences among the women's responses. This analysis and early drafts began to bring out themes of tensions, adaptations and non-adaptations. Broader themes emerged and these became the organizing themes for this work (i.e. women and work, holiday celebrations, politics and childrearing.)

The Women

As previously stated, I interviewed eight women married to Middle Eastern men for this study. The women ranged in age from early 20s to early 50s. All of the women married their husbands while they were in their 20s. The women grew up in a variety of locations, from the Midwest to the East Coast. They grew up in large cities (e.g. Milwaukee, Chicago), on farms or in rural areas of Indiana and Iowa or in smaller towns in Pennsylvania and New York. Three of the women grew up in homes with both parents present. Three said their parents were divorced and two said their fathers had died or abandoned the family. In terms of racial background, six of the women were Caucasian and two were Latina.

The women's husbands came from Egypt (2), Morocco (2), Jordan (1) and Palestine (3). Most of the men came to the United States to study. A few came to be reunited with family members who were already present in the US. Five of the men grew up with both parents, whereas two men were physically separated from their fathers due to politics and work (but their parents were still married). One of the women reported that her husband's parents were separated.

The women lived with their husbands in states located in the Midwest and East Coast. These include Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, New Jersey and New York. The participants have been married to their husbands for a wide range of years: three were married less than 10 years, two were married 11-20 years and three were married more than 20 years. The couples met in a variety of ways. Most of the women met their husbands while studying at university. Three of the women actually said they met their husbands in the university's library. A few met at dances or social functions and one met

her husband at a subway station. Mutual friends or family introduced a couple of the women to their husbands.

The men spoke Arabic (or French) as their first language and English. None of the women seemed confident in their ability to speak Arabic. All of the women said they had attempted to learn Arabic during at least one point in their relationships. However, most complained that it was just too difficult and gave up. One of the women studied in France and spoke French to her Moroccan in-laws. The Hispanic women interviewed spoke Spanish growing up as children. All of the women were attempting to teach their children whatever Arabic they could. Also, those who spoke French and Spanish were speaking these languages to their children. All of the women emphasized the importance of their children being bilingual or multilingual. Some of the women were frustrated by their husband's lack of participation in teaching their children Arabic, so these women turned to satellite television, mosques and relatives wherever they could to expose their children to Arabic.

Two of the women had no children. However both of these women expressed an interest in having children in the future. Two of the women each had one child with their husband, but their husbands had children from a previous marriage.[3] Three of the women had two children and one woman had three children. The children ranged in age from 2 years old to early 20s. There were six sons and five daughters total among the women. Only two women had both a boy and a girl.

[3] One woman indicated that her husband had a daughter from a previous marriage to an American woman. I do not know the nature of the other husband's first marriage. She did not specify if her husband's first wife had been Middle Eastern, American or other. She only mentioned that her husband had children from a previous marriage.

All of the men in the study were Muslim. Accordingly, all of the children of these marriages were also Muslim. All but one of the women has converted to Islam. Before their conversion, three of the women were Catholic, one was Methodist, one was Pentecostal, one was Presbyterian; the religious upbringing of the remaining two women was unclear. Two of the women converted before they married their husbands. Two of them converted to Islam shortly after getting married. A few of the women said they decided to convert after the birth of their first child, commenting that it would be less confusing for the children. One woman converted later on in her married life. One woman remained Christian but said she has studied Islam and supports her husband's beliefs and practices.

In general, the couples were highly educated. Of the women, one had completed high school, one held a Bachelor's, another was pursuing her Bachelor's and five had Master's degrees. Of the husbands, one had no college, two had Bachelor's degrees, one had a Masters, two had doctorates and two were doctoral students at the time I interviewed their wives.

Two of the women were housewives. One woman was a student. One works in educational administration. Three women are involved in business as entrepreneurs or customer service. Finally, one woman worked in the allied medical field. For the husbands, two were graduate students. One was a cosmetologist. One husband was an engineer and another was a lawyer. The remaining three husbands ran their own businesses in a variety of fields from stores, to restaurants, to a landscaping business.

Raising Children

Having and raising children holds very high importance in Middle Eastern culture. Passing on the family name is essential. When a couple's first son is born, their personal names change to reflect the birth; they become "Um/Abu" (Mother/Father) and the name of the child (for example, Um Said, Abu Mohammed). American women who participated in the study mentioned superstitions as well as some extreme measures that would be taken in the Middle East in terms of ensuring women's fertility.

One woman laughingly admits to the following practice that she unwittingly participated in during a recent visit to her relatives in Egypt. She said:

> Well, we had (i.e. ate) a lot of pigeons, which I guess was a sign of birth. Everyone was giving us pigeon wherever we went. We ate a lot of pigeon. And I didn't know about it until last year when I mentioned it to somebody. "Boy, did they change their diet here? Now we're eating lamb and beef." They started laughing so hard. It's for virility and fertility. So a lot of the superstitious stuff you have no idea. I think that is one of the disconnects. It's like traditions, which are two centuries old, and you don't know about it. I didn't know about pigeons. It's more for the guy, I guess.

While this woman recounts a funny story of superstitious traditions regarding fertility, another woman recounts a more frightening story in terms of "maintaining the family name." She said:

> We were in university housing and one floor below (us) there was a couple and they were in their early 60s. One day she (the wife) came up to me and she knew I was a nurse. She wanted to know how she could restore her fertility because her husband found out that their son was sterile and he went into a panic about family name. So he planned to take another wife just so he'd have the chance to have another male child. Which, he, in fact, did. And she, I think she divorced him. It was kind of scary for me because it showed how things could just unravel.

These superstitions and traditional belief patterns are discussed in anthropological studies (Abu-Lughod 1993; Atiya 1982) but, as academic works, most American women would not be familiar with these studies. Instead, as these women pointed out, the American wife only stumbles upon knowledge of these customs and superstitions by accident.

Strikingly, one of the most poetic moments of the interviews came as the women talked about their children. Most of the women interviewed had at least one child through their husband. Some also had stepchildren from their husbands' previous marriages. A few women did not yet have children but spoke of their desire to have children in the future. One woman without children said:

> Well, we're trying. You know, when I was young, I thought I wanted 6 kids. But now, I'm 29 (years old). I'm not going to have a kid every year, and I don't want to be having kids after 35 or 36 (years old), so I've always talked about adopting. We even talked about adopting a little Muslim child, or a child from South America or something… I would love to have at least 2 or 3 kids. And then maybe adopt a few kids.

As adoption is unusual in Middle Eastern culture, I asked the woman, "How does your husband feel about that?" She replied:

> He's so funny because he just doesn't pay attention to me. I always say that, if he doesn't comment, then his answer is "yes". I think he thinks more about the money issue--if we had money. But there are so many kids out there that have no one.

Could her comment, "…he doesn't pay attention to me" be read as strengthening the common stereotype of Arab men as not listening to women or is there a more important point to be gathered from her comment? If we look closely at the entire comment, we see a power struggle created and resolved within it. She warns her husband, as he does not pay attention, she will still do as

she wants to do. Has she taken control of the situation or is he implicitly allowing her to take control of the decision making by "not paying attention"? Who is in control here? It may be more difficult to determine than what meets the eye. This is a good example of what many scholars have pointed to in examining the power dynamics of gender in Middle Eastern societies. While it may appear on the surface that men exercise all the power, in fact women have considerable informal and behind-the-scenes control over what happens in their families. Abu Lughod (1993) called this the power of resistance and noted that the Bedouin women she studied employed it regularly in their lives in order to achieve their own ends.

With the importance of children and the superstitions that surround this issue, it would not be unheard of for women to feel pressured into having children "early and often." Several, but not all, of the women admitted to receiving pressure from their husband's family to have (or to have more) children. When asked if she was ever pressured to have more children, one woman said, "Yeah, all the time. But not so much any more; I'm 45." Another said, "We had always wanted to have three, but we have two sensational ones. So I'm just delighted that they are healthy and they seem to be growing up in a good way." Another woman said, "I felt the pressure to rush into it. And then I had a lot of trouble with all my kids so I basically couldn't have anymore. ..They all thought I was really old at 28. But here (in the US) it was just about right at 28. It was just about the right age to get married."

The women told stories of the children struggling to fit in at school. Most of the parents with older children talked about Ramadan and fasting. They discussed how some teachers were receptive to learning from the children and invited their parents into the

classroom to use this as a teaching opportunity. Other women noted that some teachers responded to the children's fasting as if they felt the parents were irresponsible to encourage a child to fast. One woman said that her child, who fasted for the first time last year, faced many questions from the teachers when he did not go to the cafeteria during lunch hour. She said, "He fasted the last year so a lot of questions started coming up then. Since he didn't go to the lunchroom a lot of the teachers and all the parents made a big deal about him not eating." It is perhaps understandable that the teachers would have known that her son was not going to the lunchroom, but what is striking is that other parents heard about it and expressed concern for the child. One mother relates that "Mohammad would get teased by people. They would hold food in front of them. On the other hand, he would find some very kind kids who would say, 'Here's a cookie for later and, when you're able to eat, I want you to have this.' So you found guys who would taunt him and guys who would show empathy."

Besides Ramadan and fasting, Muslim children also had to deal with different standards and expectations than their classmates and friends when it came to dress and modesty. The *Qur'an* instructs both men and women to dress modestly. "Modesty" was interpreted in various ways from culture to culture and family to family. For instance, one mother commented that "(her) daughters wore bikinis and stuff, but when we go to Egypt, there is definitely more modesty there because the girls there are more modest." In general, men covered at minimum from their navel to the knee. Women, on the other hand, saw modesty as anything from covering their head to feet (exposing only their hands and face) to dressing as one might dress in a business environment with modest skirts or pants and jackets. For the American women who adopted *hijab* (or

headcovering), they consciously chose to do so with an understanding that their choices would influence their children's sense of modesty. Interestingly, the women who did not wear *hijab* commented that they knew their husband or children hoped that they would change their mind and adopt *hijab.* These variations about modesty and dress within families and between Muslim families and American culture (which in the eyes of several Muslim families placed too much pressure on people, especially women, to expose and objectify their bodies) caused tension for the families in this study.

Another woman told a story of conflict resolution in a middle school gym class for her child. She said:

> When my son was in middle school, they had to dress out for gym. There were two issues here. Number one was the community showering. He was 13/14 years old but he had a big problem with that. And the uniforms were shorter. He was being somewhat ostracized by the gym teacher. And, of course, I don't hear about this until school is two weeks in and this is becoming a serious situation. And he said, "Mom, I'm having a real problem in gym." So I called the gym teacher on his behalf; he had tried to explain (to the teacher) but often times they don't want to listen to the kids. And I said, "There is something you need to understand right here from the get go. I don't care if he takes gym or not, I really don't. He doesn't care if he takes gym or not. It's in the curriculum so we'll send him. However, you will not say one word about what he wears for gym class. Not one word. He has clothing requirements that he wants to live up to and he will be allowed to. And I don't want to hear one word about it from you. I don't want to hear that you are allowing other kids to say anything. And number two, he will be allowed to shower in the stall, by himself that has a door, without one word from you." I did receive a bit of negativity at first during that conversation with the gym teacher, and I said, "This is not open to discussion and I'm telling you that you're looking at lawsuit territory, you better be very careful. You better be very careful what you say to me and be very happy you're talking to me and not my husband."

This mother won her argument with the gym teacher. She attributed her success in winning the argument to her fluency in English, American culture and jurisprudence. In

fact, she claimed she had an advantage as an American woman over an Arab woman who might not have these same faculties in winning her argument with the American gym teacher.

Another woman discussed the ignorant reaction of her son's 3rd grade teacher. His teacher had made the comment that her son did not play well with the girls in the class. The teacher had drawn the conclusion that this was "due to his culture where he came from." The mother was less than pleased with this potentially erroneous conclusion, pointing to the fact that many 3rd grade boys do not play with girls. Additionally the culture her son "came from" was American!

Other women discussed the issues of holiday celebrations at school. They told of how they tried to bring their children's holidays into the curriculum (or how they failed in the attempt). As one woman put it, "It seems as if this last year everything was Christmas or Hanukah. It seemed like a fight every year." The women try to help their children identify with their husband's heritage by getting that heritage officially recognized in academic settings. Women talked about convincing school boards to add Muslim holidays to the academic calendar and giving presentations on the meaning of these holidays, customary clothing, food and traditional forms of celebration. One woman recounted how her husband made a presentation on Ramadan to their children's class.

Just as colorful were the women's descriptions of their children's lives in the neighborhood and on playgrounds. One woman laughed heartily as she reminisced about her young daughter's pride in Islam. When new neighbors moved in, her daughter:

> [w]as outside and some neighbors had moved out of their house and were renting it out. She was outside kind of stomping around and shouting "We are MUSLIMS." I could hear her. I was inside the living room and thought what is she doing? The neighbor was

> like, "Whatever trips your trigger." I'm sure he didn't know what she was talking about- I'm sure. It was so funny. So that was an early thing that I noticed.

This was a child's spontaneous expression of her self-identity. Her mother just laughed and enjoyed her daughter's pride in her religion in this lighthearted moment. Although her immediate response was to wonder about the new neighbor's reaction, in the end, it was her daughter's enthusiasm as well as the neighbor's acceptance that made this a happy memory for this mother.

Another woman described a more strained moment in her neighborhood. While the neighborhood kids were having a water fight, an adult Polish neighbor began swearing at one of the Arab children, a friend of her son's. She confronted the neighbor about swearing, to which he responded,

> "Well he needs to go home." And (she) said "Well he's my guest." And he was going into his apartment, he says, "well he needs to go back where he came from." I said, "He was born here just like you were. He's a citizen just as much as you are." Which is funny because I think he's a first generation American. But he's an older man.

In this situation, as in others, when it was adults versus children, the women were more willing to step into the situation to defend the children. Also, as the first woman's child is accepted by the neighbor and the second mother's child's friend is not, we see how the neighbors along with these families make decisions about whether or not to adjust to these cross cultural families. Here we can see how the xenophobic reaction of the Polish neighbor is manifested into hostility to the second woman's child's friend (and by extension, to her child as well). She is aware of his unwillingness to adapt to the child's heritage and notes the irony that this Polish man himself was the first-generation of his

family born in the United States. The first woman laughs with relief and happiness to see her child is accepted by their neighbors.

The women also discussed their experiences with taking (or sending) their children overseas to meet his father's family and learn about their history. Except for the youngest child of one of the women, all of the children whose mothers participated in this study had spent some time living or visiting their father's country overseas. Without exception, all the women praised their children's ability to live in their father's country. They were impressed and pleased with their children's ability to pick up Arabic (and in some cases French for children of Moroccan fathers). From first grade through college years, some children studied in their father's country and returned with a deeper appreciation of their father's culture. In fact, more than one mother said, if asked, their children would "claim their identity as Arab and not American" based upon the child's experience overseas.

One mother recounted her initial response to her husband's suggestion that their children go overseas for an education. She said:

> When we first got married, he said to me, "Now when we have children, of course, we're going to educate them overseas." And I was like, "What, I didn't sign up for that! You think I'm going to have children just so you can send them away from me?" But now, I wouldn't have it any other way. And the more he explained, he just kind of blurted it out and I thought "I don't think that's going to happen." But the more he explained to me that they need to understand everything about who they are and where they're from, the more I began to accept that. And in learning to know his family members and through their sincerity and acceptance, it was a nonissue.

This encounter brought up some interesting issues. First, there is the issue of differing expectations. Both of these parents envision different sources of education for

their children. Also, they both took these expectations for granted. As the wife said, "when we first got married"; there is a rupture in their communications in that they had not apparently discussed their assumptions prior to marriage. Next, as the mother states, her husband just "blurted it out." She was not prepared to accept his assumptions. Only after a lot of thought, time, and "sincerity and acceptance" of her in-laws did his assumptions become the preferred method of raising their children for both parents. This points back to several of the five key points outlined by Crohn (1995). This couple needed to face the issue of how and where to educate their children. They were coming from distinct cultural codes. First, his approach of simply stating how he wanted things "by blurting it out" offended his wife's sense of autonomy and decision-making. Secondly, the husband felt a deep desire to share his culture with his children and felt an overseas education was the best way to accomplish this goal. Eventually, they were able to resolve their differences to help their children find their own path.

The children's experiences overseas brought up many other questions during the interviews. Undoubtedly, it was during these times that the families became more aware of the differences in the many aspects of culture with how they were raising their children in the US compared with how the children overseas (e.g. their Arab cousins) were being raised.

More than half the women commented on the dangers of raising children in American society as compared with raising children in the Middle East. All the mothers expressed concern for their children's safety in the Middle East, especially those women whose children went overseas without them. Yet, many of these same mothers cited violent lifestyles in the US from which they were pleased to remove, at least temporarily,

their children. One woman, commenting on her separation from her young child while he lived with in-laws overseas, went so far as to say:

> I've often heard people say, "How could you let your baby go away from you for so long?" and I've said, "It's ripping my heart out. Do you think this is an easy thing for me? But let me tell you something, every fiber of my being, if I ever had to make a choice, God forbid, if he should die in that situation or fry his brain on drugs (in the US) I would take this situation. Because at least he'd have a chance on life.

This mother actually held a very dark prospect for her child: death in the Middle East conflict or a life of drugs in the US. Another respondent (without children) echoed this mother's fears when she said,

> When I have children, I don't want my kids to grow up here (in the US)… If I had kids we'd move and then come back when they are older. I definitely don't want to raise my kids here. … Because it's a bad influence. It's just bad, in my opinion, for a Muslim child to grow up here. In my opinion, it's a bad influence.

Repeated attempts on my part to get her to clarify what she meant by "a bad influence" were unsuccessful.

One woman even repeats what her own son told a friend in Jordan. The friend asked her son something to the effect of, "What do you think of Jordan?" Her son replied that he felt safer in Jordan than in the US. His mother was taken aback by his response because, until she heard him make this statement, it had never occurred to her that her son may not feel safe in the US. She said, "It was amazing to me because I had no idea that a kid at 9 years old would feel like me as an adult. But he was that aware and I felt bad for him that, where we live here, it's not safe." This family trip was clearly an eye opening experience for mother and child on issues of safety in both cultures.

I asked the women about the dangers of their children not fitting into society. One woman told how the kids in school decided to gang up against the "Arab kids." Another woman tied children not fitting in to larger issues of violence in society and the ultimate choices children might make about how to respond to their not fitting in. She discussed the London bombing and talked about how she was trying to make sense of what the bombers had done. She pointed out that these kids all felt isolated, left out, and excluded from society. She said:

> So they don't fit in anywhere and I'm just trying to find out what's the motivation behind this? … To me, I don't think it really is religion. I think it's rebellion, it's rejection. … Sometimes, I think that it's just that you have these authoritarian families, authoritarian governments and then, these kids, they arrive here and they have no place because their parents are saying "you can't do this; you can't do that." They don't fit anywhere. So, I guess, I'm a real critic of patriarchy and authoritarianism…it's disastrous. I think it is bad for the kids. That's the theory I'm kind of working on.

These overseas trips also brought up the need to decide on whether or not to explain the political situations of their husband's countries to their children. When I asked the women if they shelter their children from Middle Eastern politics, except for the women with the youngest children, most said sheltering could not be done. One mother said, "(My child) had a gun in his face once." Another simply stated, "We haven't sheltered them because they've lived it. What would be the point in that? They've *lived* it." Only the woman with the youngest children, who protected them from the news by "turning off the TV" and "not having cable or satellite," stated "They don't even know what is going on here. At six years old, they don't need to know." Overall, the women did not seem to find it practical or helpful to try and shelter their children from the news.

As the mother of the nine year old discovered to her surprise, kids pick up on events around them whether or not their parents discuss the events with them.

Other tensions, brought under the lens of the mothers on these overseas trips, were the interactions between their children and their in-laws. Some women talked of minor aggravations such as sugary bottles. One mother explained:

> I remember that they (her in-laws) perpetually wanted to give her something with sugar in it. I'd say, "She's a baby, she doesn't need sugar. She's a baby/ a toddler." They wanted to give her rice with a little milk, which I was fine with but they wanted to sweeten her rice. I was like, "No sugar. No, she doesn't need any sugar." And so he (her husband) talked to his mom and said "Don't put any sugar. He was trying to mediate, but it also like was not that big of a deal.

Other women just pointed out general spoiling of the grandchildren. One woman said her son "just milked the attention, but that's what grandparents are for." Another talked of how her daughters were the only girls in their generation, so they were showered with gold on every visit. Yet another woman recounted the tale of when her sisters-in-law, while babysitting her infant daughter, pierced her ears. The initial shock and frustration that she felt was evident in her tone and she said, "Oh, my God. They pierced her ears!" But she went on to state, "I was going to get them pierced eventually when she was little. I didn't have a problem with it."

The women who had been married for a longer period of time and whose children were older discussed teenage style issues. As they said, "As the children grow older, the problems grow bigger." Since all of the children in this study were being raised as Muslim, there was no dating for any of the children. Yet, these mothers had some tough explaining to do to their teenage children who pointed out that their (formerly) Christian mothers had dated as teenagers but now they were not allowing their children to date. It

was the proverbial "Do as I say, not as I do" problem. One mother explained to her children, "I wasn't even aware that there was Islam when I was your age. (So you cannot hold me to that standard.) But now that I'm aware, I'm going to hold you to that standard." The women also emphasized that the teenage years are a time to get to know oneself and not focus on dating. They pointed to the belief that sometimes the *Qur'an* will prohibit something and, in this life, we may not understand the reason for the prohibition, but we should accept its wisdom.

Another woman points with pride to her daughter's coming of age in her religion. She said, "The hard thing with our daughter is that I don't wear a scarf. When she goes overseas, she wears a scarf when she goes to pray; she's very religious. She's very religious but she's not a nutcase. And she's the one that made me feel that I am a Muslim. Just the way she carries out her daily prayers and her faith in God. The way she carries herself in society. To me, that helped me to become Muslim." This woman converted to Islam after her marriage; she did not grow up within the faith. In watching her own daughter take on the role of a religious Muslim woman, she has come to understand what it means to be a religious Muslim woman and can model herself after her daughter. Many of the parents talked about how they have come to see their own worlds with different eyes because of watching the struggles of their children to adapt to their hyphenated identities.

Another question we discussed was the parents' hopes for their children's marriages. For this question, I received a wide variety of answers. In general, the women reported that their husbands would prefer that their children would marry Arabs or, specifically, Egyptian/Egyptian American, Palestinian/Palestinian-American or

Morrocan/Morrocan-Americans depending upon their husband's nationality. One woman joked how she hopes for a wealthy son-in-law but commented that her husband would prefer someone who knows the entire *Qur'an*. (Memorization of the *Qur'an* is seen as emblematic of a very devout Muslim.) Another woman commented that her husband would have initially preferred his children to marry from his nationality but has evolved to preferring someone who is Muslim, to finally, someone who will agree to raise the children Muslim. One woman (who falls into the "romantic" category) said she preferred that her sons marry Arab women so they will not have the same cultural struggles that she and her husband have had. She said she would prefer that her son marry someone who knows the Arab role of women and takes that role for granted so that she and her son would have fewer misunderstandings. Only one woman (who belonged to the "practical" category) seemed to prefer that her sons marry "American" girls. She claimed many of the Arab girls are pampered and spoiled princesses whom her sons would not tolerate. She said she thinks her sons would want a woman "who'll mow the grass and shovel the snow." She also said that her sons have already commented that they would not want to marry "Pakistanis; the food is too spicy." Finally, the women who have been married the longest all agree that they think that the choice will be left up to the children to decide. (No one, apart from joking, would see an arranged marriage in her children's future.)

The Latina women expressed some distinct views about childrearing. There is a strong sense among these women that their Latina culture is just as vital as their husband's Arab culture and also must be passed to their children. They all spoke of teaching their children Spanish as well as Arabic. They spoke of their pride in their roots

and their desire to pass this pride along to their children. One Latina woman even commented on an encounter she had with her daughter. She said her daughter

> [t]hought she was Arab. She thought she was Arab because she (thought) she was born in Jordan. I was really peeved by that. I said, "Daddy was born in Jordan. You were born here. And it upset her. And when I told my husband, he was like, "Ok *buba* (term of affection for a child)." And he left it alone. But I wasn't going to leave it alone. So I pulled out her birth certificate and read it to her that she was born here. She was depressed about it awhile. I said, "I was born here. *Buba* was born there. You were born here." I don't know why. I guess the thing was, she was getting confused between Arab and Muslim, which is common with both adults and children. I don't want that to happen to my child. I'm making it as clear as possible. I don't want her to be confused especially if we go there. To the point where my husband asks me sometimes "What do you have against Arabs?" But I say I don't have anything against Arabs, but I'm not one and neither are my children. They are half Arab; they are half Puerto Rican; they're American. They are all Muslim. And that I won't give up on. He doesn't seem to think that it is a big deal, but that's the biggest deal.

There is a lot of information in this comment. Her husband will always stand confused as he tries to see from her point of view. For him, as for most Arabs, religion and culture are one and the same. It is very difficult for them to make any distinctions. In fact, non-Arab Muslims frequently complain that Arab Muslims confuse culture with religion. As a Latina woman, she is saying that, "my child was born in the US. She's American. She's a part of me." This is an issue of nationality, citizenship and pride frequently expressed by Puerto Ricans. Growing up in the U.S., she is accustomed to separating religion and nationality or cultural identity. She concludes by saying "it's the biggest deal." For her, if she were to let it go, she would be losing too much of herself in the marriage and she won't allow that. Thus the American wives can also establish boundaries beyond which they are unwilling to go.

Another Latina woman said:

> I grew up in this country looking different and talking a little bit different, like my English has some Spanglish mixed in… I want them to go to Morocco to see the Moroccan identity in the world…I lost a lot because I was born and raised in America. My grandma and family call me a "gringa." So I'm different both here and there. I'm in limbo. It's hard because sometimes I have issues with my own identity.

This is an echo of the Arab-American and Arab-Canadian women I studied (Khadi, 1994). Those raised as first generation felt a simultaneous tug of war between their mother and father's culture and their own. They never quite felt a complete part of any one of the cultures they are exposed to.

It was interesting to hear this last woman's point of view because she grew up in the United States as the child of an immigrant. She knows first hand what her child will experience neither fitting in "here nor there." She goes on to say, echoing the first Latina woman, "They should know family. They should know their literature. And they should go into the language… I think they should connect with their ancestors." Both of these women want to emphasize that they have their own culture complete with language and values that they want to pass along to their children apart from their husband's language, value and culture. It should be noted that the other (Caucasian) women did not mention their own identity during the interviews. With only one important exception, the other women did not indicate that they stressed their heritage with their children. Instead, they focused mainly on how their children were identifying with their Arab roots. The only Caucasian exception to this rule was a woman who through genealogical study found that her family had come to the US in the 1600s and she had relatives who were convicted in

the Salem witch trials. She spoke with pride of their family trips to New England where they saw and discussed her family roots.

Yet even with all these questions about the identity of the children both in the US and overseas, the relationships of the children and both sides of the family, the parents' hopes for their children can best be summarized by the words of Danila, a participant in Roer-Strier and Ben-Ezra's study:

> My children will accept different kind of living, of thinking. I don't think that my children will be racist… I think they are used that there are so many different ways of living, of thinking, of friends, yea. I think it is good for them. I think they will have a wide view, I hope so. I think this is the most important, to accept other things, others. (2006:51).

One of my participants echoed this thought when she said, "They (her children) are so aware that everybody has a history… They have so much empathy; I think it is from their travels."

In this chapter we have seen the importance of childrearing for these families. Families will even resort to confusing superstitions to "encourage" women to have children. The women have felt pressure to have children or have more children from spouses, extended families and the ever present "biological clock." Once the families have had their children, they are faced with some unique challenges in raising them in America. The families maneuver through schools and neighborhoods to explain customs such as Ramadan and fasting. They search for their identities while finding their own answers first to questions about modesty, dating issues and stereotypes with classmates and teachers and then conveying those understandings to others outside the family. Finally, the women confront their fears about bringing or sending their children overseas

and discover things about themselves, their children, their husband's relatives and the U.S. that sometimes take them by surprise.

To cope with these challenges of childrearing, the women consciously or unconsciously employ several tactics. We see their humor. They pride themselves on their knowledge of the American system when confronting and educating Americans to their families' lifestyles. The Latina women and one Caucasian woman dig deep into their cultural roots and stress how they are trying to impress upon their children not only their husband's customs but their own customs as well. Finally, one couple utilizes several of Chrohn's points of advice for mixed couples while working through their differing ideas on where to educate their children. The couples hope their efforts will pay off in the end with open-minded and well-rounded children.

In the next chapter we will examine holiday celebrations. It is important to examine this topic because as the families work through identity and adaptation issues, holiday celebrations affect the women as individuals, in their nuclear as well as in their extended families and larger community. Although these days are few in number in comparison with the calendar year, how these women and their families recognize these days is vital to understanding the women and their changing sense of identity.

Holiday Celebrations

Hollywood always makes a big deal about the holiday season and the mixing of families and family traditions. And why not? The audience can not seem to get enough of laughing at family gatherings during the holidays. Family antics make for good lighthearted entertainment. In many families, how the holidays are celebrated and with whom tell a great deal about the power dynamics in the family. These tensions are only exaggerated in multi-faith families or families for which one partner has converted from their childhood religion to that of their spouse. For this reason, I spent time reviewing what holidays the women celebrated, with whom, how those celebrations have changed over the years and how their husbands respond to *Eid*[4] celebrations in America. What happens for the holidays when two distinct cultures merge? How are the holidays celebrated when the wife has converted to Islam but is living in the US? How does she celebrate the holidays with her natural and marital families? When do they choose not to adapt to longstanding traditions and what are the effects of that choice on their families? There are two key elements to this discussion: "Which holidays do they celebrate and how?" And, "How do the women's parents/siblings respond to the "new" daughter/sister and her new traditions?"

There is one example I'd like to explore first since it is the clearest example when viewing these questions. Some women had converted to Islam prior to getting married to their husbands (quite possibly even before meeting their husbands). For all of these

[4] The *Eid*s are the two major Muslim holidays. One (*Eid al Fitr*) celebrates the end of the month of fasting of Ramadan and the other *(Eid al Adha*) occurs on the 10th day of the celebration of the pilgrimage to Mecca as pilgrims meet on Mount Arafat where they believe Adam met Eve and pray for forgiveness and commemorate Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son at God's request in a dream.

women, no matter how their families interpreted their conversion to Islam, they could not say that it was the woman's husband who had influenced the decision. Then, even further, as the women decided not to celebrate any non-Islamic holidays, their families would say it was their decision and not something their husbands had forced upon them. This group of women only celebrated Ramadan and the two Islamic *Eids*. They did not celebrate any secular holidays (e.g. birthdays, Mother's Day, Thanksgiving). When I asked how their families handled this, one woman said, "I'm not sure they really 'accept' it, but they bite their tongue." She said:

> I'm always telling them, "You need to realize this is me. I'm trying to find out…" I don't know how to explain it. I've always been real literal and I've always been very extreme. And then I come into Islam and taking the extremist views and they think Islam is extreme. But I say "No, this was how I was before (my conversion)." They forget and I have to remind them, this is the way I was before. Don't you remember me? They seem to have forgotten (the way) I was before Islam. But they started attributing all of these characteristics to Islam. So I try not to be the way I was, so they don't think it is Islam.

Even though no one in her family can say it was her marriage that "changed her", this woman still describes a tight rope that she is walking as she tries to understand her new religion within the constraints of her own "literal" temperament. Even before her marriage, she changed her customs of holiday celebrations. In the eyes of the family who knew her before her marriage, she has changed who she was.

For the other women in the study, holiday celebrations were all over the map. The timing of the remaining women's conversions to Islam did not seem to significantly impact which holidays they chose to celebrate. The remaining women converted to Islam (or did not) within a year of being married, after the birth of their first child, just recently, or not at all. Some of the woman had never even told their family (i.e. their

parents/siblings) of their conversion. Only one woman at the time of the interview had not converted to Islam but remained a Christian.

In terms of secular holidays, Thanksgiving was commonly celebrated by all of the families except for those families where the women converted to Islam prior to getting married. It should be pointed out that, for some Muslims, celebration of Thanksgiving as a US national holiday and not specifically a Muslim holiday is a point of contention. As a holiday that was not celebrated and recognized by the Prophet Mohammad, some do not accept it as an acceptable holiday for Muslims to celebrate today. Others, viewing it as a day of giving thanks to Allah, a positive attribute found in Islam, see it is a permissible holiday to celebrate. Typical of most Americans, there was clear variety in how the families celebrated Thanksgiving based upon their individual family's preferences and traditions. For example, one woman pointed out that she is a vegetarian and only takes a bite of the turkey, whereas another woman said that she and her extended family celebrate Thanksgiving without a turkey.

Following the previous concern with secular holidays within Islam, some women and their families celebrated the Muslim holidays plus Thanksgiving and stopped there. Some continued with the patriotic theme and added the Fourth of July to their celebrations. Others added birthday celebrations, while others said they did not celebrate birthdays. A few celebrated Halloween with one woman saying it was "hit or miss for Halloween." Halloween is especially problematic for some Muslims since its pagan origins are in direct conflict with Islam. One woman commented on how her family's celebration of Halloween has changed over the years. She stated:

> Halloween, that was kind of hit or miss. And when we did it, we tried to make it clear to the kids that it's kind of like a chance to be

> creative to make a costume. And to visit other people in the neighborhood. It was more of a social event. As they got older, my husband thought we were sending the wrong message because of the pagan origins of Halloween. So then, he got to have more reservations.

Easter was not mentioned as a holiday that any of the women said they celebrated except for two women who "colored eggs" and/or celebrated "the Spring Bunny" to allow their children to celebrate something as their classmates had colored eggs and candy. As one woman pointed out when I asked, "What holidays do you celebrate in your family?" she said, "Well. It depends upon what mood we were in." Therefore, each family chooses, sometimes from year to year, which secular holidays to celebrate, according to their current "mood."

As the men are in the U.S. longer, they gain confidence in their identity. Meanwhile, many of the women grow in their marriage as well as their new religious identity (for those who converted). Therefore, the families must re-examine their ideas on the importance of holiday celebrations. As one woman previously said, "I'm still trying to find out (about Islam)." Meanwhile, another woman said, "As a mother, what you want is peace and tranquility as a family. That's what I'm all about. I don't like rough waters. I don't like it in my marriage. I don't like it with my children. I don't like it in my home. I just like things to be peaceful." So the women routinely revisit their concepts of holiday celebrations as they and their families grope with their individual and collective identities while at the same time trying to find a peaceful way to communicate their needs to their extended families.

To some extent, all of the women celebrated Ramadan and the *Eid* with their husbands. Ramadan and the *Eids* did not pose any conflicts of adaptation for these

women. They all seemed to adapt well to celebrating the Muslim holidays with their husbands and children. The Muslim women fasted with their husbands during Ramadan. Even the Christian woman said she fasted with her husband and justified it by saying that she believed fasting was helpful for the body. The women brought their children to *Eid* celebrations at the local mosque, stadium or restaurant.

Knowing that their children would hear a lot about Christmas, the women planned trips to Chuck e Cheese, amusement parks or restaurants or a family gift exchange for the *Eids*. The husbands were accustomed to celebrating Ramadan and the *Eids* with large *iftars* (breakfasts) with visiting relatives and passing around money to female relatives, the needy and children. However, the American community surrounding the Muslim families is often working during these holidays, so the families must adapt their celebrations. Many of the women tried to adapt their husband's idea of celebrating these holidays (visiting relatives, eating sweets, giving money to children) to a more "American" form of celebrating. Some Muslim women commented on how they tried to make the *Eid* especially meaningful for their children. One woman commented:

> I go to the Dollar Store and I get balloons and whatever. I don't even do it with the Muslims. I get my nieces and we play pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. And I get a bunch of balloons in the house and my kids have fun that way and we celebrate. The sad thing is that my kids need to know and appreciate the *Eid*, because they see everyone celebrating Christmas and Easter.

This is a very non-traditional way to celebrate the *Eid* which would appear foreign to the Middle Eastern husbands.

One mother commented that as the children got older, it simply became too difficult to keep up the extra activities for the *Eid.* She said of her children's *Eid* celebrations:

> They usually have to go to school. They've got homework. Once they got to high school, they're just like, "I'm going to school for an hour, pick me up and then take me back." It's too much of a hassle to miss exams or to not be there for a mandatory after-school extracurricular practice. They don't want to deal with it because what's the alternative? When they were little and they wanted to go out we would go to Chuck e Cheese and to amusement park, a movie or a restaurant. But once they got older, it was a headache. They only get further behind. So it's difficult.

She saw the activities from her children's childhood *Eids* diminish as they grew up. Meanwhile, the women provided whatever support they could to their husbands who sometimes complained that *Eid* in America was missing something from the way it was celebrated back home. One woman said, "He (her husband) said it's not the same (as back home), but it's still nice." Yet, another woman, who noted that she herself does not come from a deep religious background, commented on how her husband's celebrations of the Eids have changed over the years. She said:

> He's pretty serious about it. He didn't used to be when we first started dating. As the years have gone by and he's gotten older and wiser and he's got a child to whom he wants to teach the traditions, he's gotten a lot more serious about it. So he's pretty serious about it now. So we've had some lively discussions sometimes because he's pretty serious and I'm less serious. I'm pretty serious about not being serious about it.

This is a remarkable comment for a few reasons. First, we see the sense of humor of the woman juxtaposed against her husband's changing attitude as he grew older. It is frequently said that people become more set in their ways as they age, and this woman has picked up on this with her husband's desire to continue and pass along family traditions. She has adapted to his changing needs, even though they disagree on the "seriousness" of the holidays, releasing some of the tensions between them by being "serious about not being serious." The tension between them does not revolve around

celebrating the *Eid*, but around the nature of their own religious commitments—his have increased over time, while she has remained less religious. This is actually opposite of the norm in American society, where it is women who are more likely to adhere to the practice their faith.

Surprisingly only one woman commented on the ongoing struggle within North America, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and Saudi Arabia in terms of the actual day of celebration of the *Eid*. Nearly every year there is a controversy about when the *Eid* should be celebrated. Based upon varying schools of thought, the *Eid* either takes place on a set date and time based upon lunar calculations, or its date is decided only based on actual eye witness sightings of the crescent moon. This creates a lot of disparity in celebration because depending upon what school of thought you belong to, your family overseas, your neighbors in the United States and even divided within individual mosques, you can find people celebrating the holidays on different days. (Today, ISNA has decided to follow Saudi Arabia, but a few political factions still divert from this decision.) She commented:

> Sometimes, especially because there's usually a fight over when the *Eid* really is, and so sometimes it will be different between New Jersey and New York. One will follow Saudi Arabia and the other one won't. Sometimes, the one (mosque) we go to follows Istanbul. So they try to get it together but if they can't they'll follow NYC and NJ will decide to follow what the *shouror* of NJ decides. If it's not the same day, my husband will go to Patterson. And sometimes we'll all go to Patterson and then we'll all go to the other one if it's been on different days.

Although all celebrated the Muslim holidays, the manner in which they celebrated them varied from family to family and with the passing of time.

The most contentious of the holidays by far was Christmas. As one woman commented, "Christmas is everywhere." Each family must respond to it in the most comfortable way they can find.

Some families celebrated Christmas yearly. In these families we see the husbands' response range from looking forward to celebrating Christmas to adapting to his wife's culture through gritted teeth. The only Christian woman said a friend asked her husband if he celebrates Christmas. He said, "You should. It's really nice. I love Christmas; you get presents." One woman comments, "I told my husband that I'm just not going to ask my (child) to give up Christmas. It's a magic that no kid should have to give up. So we practice it." It would appear from their comments that Christmas was and always will be celebrated in their homes. For these families both the husband and wife agree to celebrate Christmas. In these families, only one had a Christian wife.

Another woman celebrates Christmas but apparently to the chagrin of her husband. When I asked her "How do you celebrate the holidays?" she stated, "Carefully." She said her husband disagrees with the children accompanying their grandmother to Christmas Eve service but the worst point for him is the Christmas tree. She pointed out that the tree is not a religious symbol, but he "still has troubles with it." She said they usually go ahead with a small tree to please her youngest daughter and her mother. But she said her husband goes along with the tree with a case of the grumps.

On the other hand, many families began with some type of celebration which they seem to scale back as time goes by to the point of no longer celebrating Christmas at all. One woman said, "Initially, we tried to respect my family with Christmas. We tied it to traditions. We didn't want any gifts and we asked not to be a part of that. But I always

tried to have some small, hopefully heartfelt, gift for my mom. Out of respect for her, but it was always uncomfortable. But she sort of let me off the hook. Now we just wish them a Merry Christmas and that's the end of it." One woman commented on how they used to have a Christmas tree, but no longer do. She said now, her oldest children tease the youngest saying, "You NEVER had a Christmas tree." Finally, one woman said they never celebrate Christmas in her home, but if friends invite them to their homes to join their celebrations, they'll attend. She also expressed gratitude to her mother for sending her children a package at Christmas time. She said:

> My sons always used to love to see a package from their grandmother at Christmas because it was a very difficult time of the year because they knew that when they got back to school after Christmas break that everyone was going to be saying, "well I got XYZ for Christmas." So they would at least have something that my mother would have sent them. So that was always kind of nice that she remembered them at Christmas.

This shows adaptation on the part of "grandma" as well as maturity on the part of this mother. The grandmother understood her daughter and grandchildren's dilemma when the children return to school from break and so eased their pain with a small Christmas package. Meanwhile, the children's mother, who had converted to Islam, shows maturity with her willing acceptance of the gifts and is not threatened by her mother's gesture. She did not see her mother's gesture as an attempt to force her to continue to celebrate Christmas.

While flexibility and variations remain for many of the holiday celebrations depending upon the family's religious preferences and interpretations, proximity to extended family and competing desires between finding their own way and allowing their

children to experience what their classmates or American cousins are experiencing provided more tensions for these families.

One woman seems to express some frustration with Christmas and her struggles to raise her children outside of it. She said initially they celebrated it but they no longer do so. But she talks of the family stress with her sister at Thanksgiving. She said the first year she decided not to celebrate Christmas, her sister invited them to decorate a tree at her house over Thanksgiving dinner. The invitation exploded under the stress of her expectations of support for her child and her sister's expectations of a concelebrant. She retold the tragic story as follows:

> So we're all back for Thanksgiving and my sister, Julie, said, "I really want for you to come out and see the house… My husband and the kids just put up the tree. I said, "Julie, this is the very first year that my son is not going to have a tree. I really can't do that to him. He's going to be too upset. He's like 5 years old and we just told him we aren't going to celebrate Christmas. And my mom made a point of not having a tree up yet and it's like Thanksgiving- it's too early. You never used to put the tree up so early." And so Julie and her husband got mad. Her husband was like, "No one is going to tell me when I can set the tree up and they're not welcome in our house. It's our tradition and it's our religion." I thought that was a little extreme because I was just like, "Samir, he's 5 years old and I just told him he's not going to have a tree this year." And now, we're going to go to Aunt Julie's house and put ornaments on the tree and it's just like putting it right in his face. Now she understands it, but at the time…

She continued, "These guys pretend that they're supportive but they don't really get it. They don't get it. They don't get how hard it is to raise kids Muslim or in a minority religion. It's so Christian. In fact, they're fanatical about it. Yeah, they've forgot the whole religious meaning of it." The pain in this woman's comments is evident. This family's episode could be right out of a Hollywood holiday movie, but with more tragedy than comedy for this woman and her family. She recalls how her mother had

made adjustments for her family, but her sister and her husband were unwilling to adapt to her family's needs.

Today, she seems to have eased through this pain. She said they celebrate Christmas at her mother's house. Or, if they are not able to do so, she will take the kids overseas while they are on break. Alternatively, the kids may spend Christmas at the movie theaters.

This area of holiday celebrations, probably more than any other area, calls upon the entire family (nuclear as well as extended) to adapt to each other and the couple's decision to marry. While some families' celebrations remain the same from year to year, for others, it's a constant dance of "Do we adapt to each other's customs or not?"

Celebrations depend upon religious consideration and interpretations of these religious ideas (both Muslim and Christian). They vary based upon the woman's desire for their children to fit in with the surrounding society as well as their desire to carve their own niche. For some women it was a matter of passing along their childhood traditions while, for others, it was seen as a responsibility to carve out a new tradition for their children. These women must find ways to adapt to new traditions (whether or not they convert), create a way for them and their families to celebrate the holidays as well as cope with their childhood families' reactions to their decisions.

In this section we have seen how the women and their families maneuver through the holiday celebrations as they come to terms with their identity and family dynamics. While some holidays (e.g. the *Eids* and Ramadan) are not points of contention since they reflect nearly everyone's identity, they are celebrated freely but differently than what the husband was accustomed to back home. On the other hand, we saw how most of the

families struggled with Christmas as a hold-out to the surrounding culture's customs. Fathers could not identify with this holiday they had never celebrated, but most of the woman did relate to it from their own upbringing and so, the children were caught somewhere in the middle. Finally, we saw the variance of secular holidays being celebrated as "hit or miss." However, no matter what decisions the families made on holidays, they were singling themselves out from the broader culture and so had to justify their decisions to themselves, their families and their broader communities. While some women seemed to manage with few hurt feelings, others were left to feel that they were standing on the outside looking in.

In the next section, we will explore women's thoughts about working and how their husbands react to them working. We will see how this affects decision making in the household and even look at some dynamics of the couples' childhoods in terms of their own parents' employment and support or absence of support. How women manage to keep working after getting married (or do not) provides some insight into how these couples manage the balance of power in their households.

Women and Work

In a traditional Arab household, the men are the breadwinners and the women focus on keeping the home and raising the family. This is changing slowly in the Middle East, but certainly not at the same rate as in America. Many American women grow up with the expectation of working alongside their husbands as well as running a house and raising the children. When these cultures and expectations meet, what happens?

Looking at women in the workforce brought out many interesting details about the women's lives, in terms of economics and decision-making. Were the women who worked outside the home given more leadership in decision-making or did the household still run along the patriarchal lines to which the men were accustomed? What level of education had the couples received to prepare them for life and career? How did the couples view higher education? And to what length might the couple go to find employment? Would one sacrifice their career for another, give it up for the other or separate temporarily to find work? How do they adapt to sometimes-conflicting career goals? Some very interesting observations were discovered in discussing work and how it impacted family life both for this and previous generations.

All of the women in the study had worked outside the home at one time or another. Most continue to work outside the home. Of those who do not, one does not work at the request of her husband whereas another stays home through her own choice. The women work, or had worked, in a wide range of fields. A few were students at the time of my interviews. Others worked in the field of education in the area of

administration. Some were involved in nursing or allied medical fields. Still others were involved in some type of business dealing with entrepreneurship or sales.

When asked if their husbands supported their employment outside the home, most of the women responded that they did. One woman said, "He doesn't know how people survive in this society if they're not working." Another woman said that her husband now accepts her employment but, initially, it was difficult for him. Until he was able to get on his feet, they did not have any choice; once that time passed, she just continued her employment. She explains:

> It was a real hard thing for him at first. When he came here he had a language barrier, the economy was in the sewer and there were not jobs. He owned his own business overseas, but where do you go for references? So he couldn't find a job and it just about did him in. But I just kept saying to him, "It's ok. We need to survive. It's not about me, it's not about you, it's your fate but you will find a job. Don't worry about it." But it was difficult for him. The decision to keep working just took care of itself. There was never a huge discussion, we just wanted to be able to afford things for our family and that's how we can do it.

Another woman said, "He supports it. He knows that I have more education but, more than that, I had more experience… so he always put my career before his. We moved around a lot; it kind of affected his stabilizing but he eventually did (stabilize)." Only one woman indicated that her husband would not support her employment. She said, "I did (work) until we were getting married. I had my own… business. He didn't like it; he felt it was insulting… He told me he wanted me to quit." However, at a later point in the interview, she implied she intends to return to work in the future.

Most of the women in the study seemed to believe that their careers would be viewed as acceptable in their husband's country. One woman said, "Part of the reason I got a Master's degree is so that I could teach when I was there. It would be very

acceptable to teach at a university over there." Other women said that working for women is acceptable, but others said that, after getting married and having kids, the balancing act becomes difficult. Said one woman of her sister-in-laws, "They work until they have a family and then they're done." One woman who worked overseas commented, "I guess given my social circles, I was atypical in that I didn't have a maid and I didn't have family helping me. Usually for people who worked, they had either a family member caring for their children or they had a maid." Another woman said, "In Morocco, there is a high regard for education and a lot of women who do work outside the home in prestigious jobs and of course lots of women who just work to survive. The only thing is that they understand there are a lot of issues with day care in the United States." Yet, another woman commented that, "In Egypt, at least in the levels of society we traveled with, people are educated. The problem is there are no jobs as soon as you get out of college for anyone. So women are usually the ones working in the banks and such."

The women's understandings of the potential for working in their husbands' home countries are reasonable. Women in the Middle East do work outside the home, even after marriage (Hijab 1997; Tucker 1993). Living in an extended family provides the childcare support that frees women to work. Women also play significant roles in family-owned businesses or work on family agricultural enterprises; however, these women may not see themselves as "working." Their duties are simply seen as part of their responsibility to care for the family. Between 1980 and 2000, the proportion of women working in the labor force rose in all Arab countries—in some doubling or tripling (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia 2002:3). The percentages

of women in the labor force in 2000 ranged from lows of 14.8 in the U.A.E. and 15.0 in Qatar to highs of 31.7 in Tunisia and 34.7 in Morocco.

For most of these women, the acceptance or availability of work for them in the Middle East is only based upon what they have seen from relatives or their own theories. (Only one of the women participants had actually lived and worked in the Middle East). It would be equally likely that were these couples to live in their husbands' countries of origin, the women might find themselves not working and limited to the home. According to Kati (in Roer-Strier and Ben-Ezra's study):

> The big, the only thing that has changed in our relationship from when we have been in America is that I'm home now and I'm the nonworking person. I feel that I don't have the control my life that I used to have … I would like to go back to work in the future. I don't know if my husband will like that very much. He's like "you've got enough to do at home." I'm like, "yeah, but there are other things besides this house and these kids that I could do in my life (2006:47).

This particular woman is living in the West Bank, where the employment situation, for both men and women, is incredibly tenuous at present because of the Israeli occupation and restrictions on movement. Unemployment rates are high there, so even if a woman were educated, her family and husband willing to allow her to work, her chances of finding paid employment are not good.

At least two of the participants in my study indicated their clear intentions to move to the Middle East. They may need to be prepared to stay at home if necessary. It will be another area of adaptation or non-adaptation for these women.

Meanwhile, it is evident that the issue will not end with this generation. The children of the participants will also struggle with the question of whether women should work outside the home. One working mother, commenting on her son, said:

> My son, on the other hand, is super conservative. I think, his grandmother, the feminist, must be rolling over in her grave. He's like "Men should go out and work and women should stay at home." And I just say, I wonder who is going to marry him because I don't know any girl growing up now, half of them don't even know how to cook, they all go out to eat.

The men work as professionals (e.g. engineers and attorneys), and entrepreneurs (store and restaurant owners), in service industries (cosmetology & landscaping business), and in construction. Others are students. Most of the men came to the U.S. for graduate school so they are highly educated. Some of the men came to be with their wives or other family members or to start a business. However, most came to get an education. They not only came to get an education, but they followed through with that desire, ended up meeting their wives and remained (or returned) to the US. There were two husbands who had doctoral degrees in engineering and law, one who held a Master's degree, two with a Bachelors and only one with no college education. Two more were PhD students at the time that I interviewed their wives.

The wives were also highly educated as a whole. Five out of the eight women had Master's degrees. One held a bachelors degree while another was studying for her bachelors. Only one woman had no college education. So it could be said that the women were not as highly educated as their husbands (none held PhDs) but as a whole, they were highly educated women.

As other researchers have reported, when married couples have similar educational levels, they experience greater overall marital success because they have fewer differences to overcome (Weller and Rofe, 1988:250). So the women's educational level was important not only in terms of her career opportunities, but also in terms of her marriage's health. When it came to decision making in the house, most of

the women said that if their husband had a decision to make, he would consult them before making it. This is in stark contrast with Middle Eastern practice where, that if a man seeks counsel, he will most likely turn to his father, uncle, brothers or even father-in-law over his wife. As one woman, pointed out, "We both have advanced degrees." When it came to making a decision, she and her husband felt they were on equal footing.

All of the women's mothers had worked outside the home at some point. Some of the women indicated that their mothers had worked part-time whereas others said that their mothers were the heads of the household and therefore were the only support. Over half of the women came from homes without their fathers in the home, or their fathers had died while they were young. Most of the women's mothers worked in clerical/office positions. Some were in the field of education. A smaller number were in the fashion or hotel industry. Finally a few of the women indicated that their mothers had worked outside the home but did not elaborate on their mother's occupations.

The women were divided in their response to their own mother's employment status. Some women spoke with pride of their "feminist" mothers. One woman brags of her mother as follows:

> She was definitely a feminist. She worked outside our home…She always wanted a big family… It took her seven years, but she got her bachelors. All the while, she was working full time. I think from the time my youngest was in first grade, my father lost his job so she always worked. She thought it was something she had to do to keep the retirement going… Yeah, she always worked. When we were little all the moms were home. As we got older I think almost all of the women were working.

They were proud of their mothers for the work they achieved outside of the home. Others, however, spoke with a hint of sadness about the need to compete with their mother's career for attention. Comparing her working mother with her stay-at-home

mother-in-law, one woman said that her mother probably never wanted to have children and that she was not the nurturing type as was her mother-in-law. Contrasting her mother and mother-in-law, she said:

> My mother, if she had grown up now, she probably wouldn't have had any children. But in the 50s that is what you did. You got married and had a family. She doesn't know how to deal with kids and she doesn't know how to relate to them and she never really has. She has always been career oriented and work oriented. She had a family and I don't doubt that she loved us. But "I'll bake you cookies and read you a bedtime story" she just was not that type of mom. Whereas, you can imagine my husband's mother was all about that.

Meanwhile, most of the women reported that their mothers-in-law did not work outside the home. Only one woman spoke at any length of her mother-in-law's employment. Her mother-in-law is a seamstress. She spoke with kindness of her mother-in-law's generous gift of hand-made clothing. She said, "She made a dress for me. After our wedding she made me an ivory dress to greet the guests. She made several skirts and blazers for me." She also described with admiration her mother-in-law's attitude towards her income. Her mother-in-law

> [f]urnished most of the house on her income. She would ask her husband's permission. She bought an entertainment center-not like ours, but one that would fill up the whole room. She would ask his permission but used her money to buy it … I think that's the way it goes, Arab style, he feels as if he had bought it but it was her money. I think that's the same way my grandmother did it. In fact, I think that is what my husband wants to happen. But I say that isn't going to happen. Either you run it, or you let me run it.

This woman describes an interesting balance of power. The Arab wife might earn the money, but her husband should be highly involved in the spending of it. Another

participant, while talking about decision making during my interview with her, expressed a similar idea. It was not in regards to money, but she did comment:

> Like Arab men, he (her husband) is very opinionated. But you have to figure out a way to make him think it is his idea if you really want something and he hasn't come around… So over the years I have kind of figured it out. I guess it's the way they are raised that they have to be the man of the house and yet he also realizes that's a lot of responsibility on him. I don't know. That's circuitous.

Both women comment on how decisions were not made based upon economics of who is the breadwinner, but instead around patriarchal standards. Here, the first woman describes her Arab mother-in-law and illustrates how she circumvented her husband to make him believe the decisions (furniture purchase) were his idea. Meanwhile, the daughter-in-law while admiring her mother-in-law and her grandmother, says, "No, not me. I'll make the decisions and won't ask your permission to do so". She acknowledges this was how things were done, but sees that things are different for her generation. On the other hand, the second woman (who was older and married longer) is more willing to play this roundabout game. She tells her children when they want to ask their father for something, "No. Now is not the right time. Wait." She almost seems to anticipate a battle that she either does not think she will win in the long run or she just accepts that this is how her husband wants things done. She acknowledges that it is cumbersome and perhaps even that it puts too much of a burden on her husband, but she accepts it and does not challenge the concept openly with her husband.

It is not uncommon for men in the Middle East to travel abroad for employment, leaving wives and families behind to cope in their absence. In effect, the women become "single" mothers heading households. Most of the women interviewed claimed that their

fathers-in-law had left their home country to find work. One woman's father-in-law did abandon his family whereas another was a political exile. So their mothers-in-law were frequently forced to raise the children single handedly. This is interesting for a few reasons. First, it raises questions about how the women managed without their husbands. The women described these times as "lonely" and "lean" for their mothers-in-law. Usually, the fathers-in-law were sending money home but occasionally the mothers-in-law's brothers would help pick up the slack to help support the family.

The other reason this might be interesting is comparing the usually temporary "single mothers" of the husbands with how the women were raised. At least five of the women (60%) said they were raised without their fathers. Between 60-70% of the women's husbands had grown up for at least a portion of their childhood without their father's presence. It was unclear from the responses if one of the father-in-laws had lived outside his home country. Even if this man's father had not left his country to find work, then at least seven of the eight women said that either they and/or their husbands grew up without their father's presence. I am not prepared to comment as to how that may have affected the couples' decisions to get married or the dynamics of their marriages, but I find it interesting to note. It might be said that these arrangements led to some hidden desire for the women to "find a father figure."

I think there are problems with this theory. First, if that were true, than why did not all women who were from split homes seek out a "father figure?" For instance, Betty de Hart in discussing the Western women's attraction to an oriental man says, "At their meeting, the man's oriental background is part of his attraction to her. His coloured skin, dark, piercing eyes and macho behaviour make her heart pound. His oriental background

forms both a physical and a psychological attraction. Pamela Green writes: 'That I was attracted and married to an Egyptian may be caused by the anchorage that his strict and patriarchal cultures offered me…'" (2001:55). De Hart is illustrating how a culture that encourages the men to decide on family matters is (initially) appealing to the women; women raised without fathers might be seeking just this sort of "anchorage." As de Hart later points out, when the women decide not to adapt to this patriarchal structure, things start to fall apart. She says that in the recently published tell-all novels, "His strength and decisiveness turn into dominance and authoritarian behavior. His protectiveness and courtesy become jealousy and possessiveness that obstruct the woman's freedom" (2001:55). She criticizes this one-sided depiction of marriages and from my interviews, it can be seen why. My interviewees demonstrated a wide variety of adaptations to their husband's cultural inclinations towards authoritarianism. When the women chose not to adapt to his authority, then either he adapted to hers, they developed some sense of humor and balance, or they struggled.

Or the flip side, why might the women who were from intact homes have been drawn to men from the Middle East who might be patriarchal? Does that indicate a weakness in the women's fathers? There is no evidence for this interpretation in my interviews. None of the women who grew up in intact homes complained about their fathers.

However, I think the fact that many of the men and women were raised in single-parent households does raise other questions. If most of the participants or their husbands came from split homes, whose behaviors do they model as intact couples? Has being raised in a single parent household affected how these couples live and interact? If

so, how? A few of the women told me that their husbands would not accept a job overseas without their wives and they said they thought the separation they had experienced from their own fathers was the reason for their husband's attitude. I did not interview the husbands and so could not corroborate this.

In this section we have explored the working habits, educational levels and attitudes towards women and work in the Middle East generally and, specifically, in these marriages. According to studies on cross-cultural marriages, the similar educational levels of the couples in this study point in favor of the success of these marriages. Most of these female participants and their mothers (at least at one time) worked outside the home. Generally, the husbands supported their wife's employment. We also saw how the women handled decision making in the household. To the surprise of several of the women, decision making frequently was more explicitly done by the husbands whether or not the women worked outside the home. But, despite this patriarchal standard, some of the women had figured out how to maneuver within the system. Finally, we examined how employment and other issues (abandonment, divorce, and political exile) meant that the women and their husbands had been raised by mothers with no father in the household. We discussed what potential influence this might have had on the couples' decisions to marry and how it affected their married lives together.

In the next section, we will turn to the large impact that politics plays on these couples and their union. This is important as their marriages, as symbols of mixing of sometimes conflicting cultural and political values, are played on the micro and the macro scale. As we will see this is one area where all the couples struggle. While some of the other areas (children, work, holidays) may not generate disagreements for some

individual couples, politics is one area that all the participants agree that has affected their married lives and created problems. Even for those who went into their marriages with eyes wide open (e.g. our "practical" woman, who was told when she entered into her marriage that "She'd never be able to escape history"), the trials they face on the political arena have to some degree shocked and directly impacted all of the women.

Women and Politics

There is a proverb frequently expressed in American culture, "Never discuss religion or politics with family or friends." However, in Middle Eastern culture, politics and religion are discussed daily among family, friends and even strangers. Arabs, when confronted with the American proverb and attitude note: "Why can't you discuss religion and politics? They are at the center of everything: where you live, what you do, who your friends are. How can you NOT discuss them?"

As Arab children grow up hearing these discussions, they learn not to become threatened by disagreement over these topics and not to take these disagreements personally. So what happens when an Arab man marries an American woman? How do American women react to political and religious discussions? How does politics affect the couples' lives? How have the women adapted to discussing politics with their husbands?

During the course of the interviews, the women and I discussed politics and their relationships with their husbands and society. We discussed Middle Eastern history and how they kept appraised of current events (e.g. whether or not they owned a satellite dish to get news from overseas). We talked about how they were viewed by American society as wives of Middle Eastern men and what issues their children raised as a result of their heritage. We discussed if they or their families were ever told to "go home where they belong" due to the intense anti-Arab political environment in the United States in recent years. We discussed how the women's worldview had changed through their marriage to Middle Eastern men.

There are a number of events that have taken place in the Middle East that would affect these couples and how they are viewed in American society. The Iran hostage crisis, the first war in the Persian Gulf, September 11th, and the U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have all shaped American views of the Middle East. Also, very specific but equally important to understanding some of the families, is the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Depending on the husband's country of origin and even a couple's position in society, current events in the Middle East have had a profound effect on the couples.

The topics the women and I discussed in terms of current events evolved with the passing of time as well as the geographic location of the women. Most of the women I interviewed were from the Midwest. However, some of the women were from New York or New Jersey and their responses to questions on September 11th were much more profound. September 11th had a direct impact on their lives whereas the women in the Midwest were less focused on September 11th, specifically, and spoke of other issues such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Columbine, the London bombings, and Hurricane Katrina. Another common topic was Palestine.

One way to measure the women's and families' involvement with politics is to consider whether or not they have a satellite dish in their homes. Many immigrant families use the satellite dish to stay in touch with their home country, its culture, news and language. Most also use the satellite to help pass the culture along to their children. Many families feel exposure to another viewpoint in the news is healthy for everyone but especially important for immigrant families from the Middle East. One woman said, "If you can see the same story from four or five different viewpoints, somewhere in the

middle is the truth." Many of these women, their husbands and their families feel very alienated when they watch the US news, so the satellite dish provides the different view they are seeking. They and their families prefer to see another slant. The women also like to teach their children to think critically and they believe that multiple viewpoints allow for the development of critical thinking for their children. All of the women who have been married for more than fifteen years state they have, at least at one time, owned a satellite dish in their home. The women who were most recently married all said they do not have (or no longer have) satellite dishes. Some cited financial reasons for not having a satellite dish. Another said she was a television addict and dropped the satellite dish to spend more time on other activities; another simply said she did not watch much television. Whether it was a product of maturity on the part of the more senior women or a product of owning a satellite dish and potentially being more aware of world events, the women who were married for more than fifteen years and who had a satellite dish generally seemed more comfortable and freer to discuss their political feelings during the interview.

One of these women laments:

> I get so short tempered with American media when you hear terms like, "Islamic extremist: Islamic *jihad* and Muslim insurgents." They don't know what they are talking about and these are foreign terms to most people here but translation: BAD. Translation: terrorist. I told my husband years ago… that I get so frustrated. I said if you see Muslims on American news all you ever see is praying or throwing rocks. What does that spell? Extremism. That's very frustrating. That's very, very frustrating. Because we live, we work, we have family issues, and we have money issues just like everyone else. We are no different than you are. So sometimes it can be a challenge to live in the world.

For the women who were married to Palestinians, the issue of politics was an especially sensitive topic. These women's husbands had grown up under curfews, *intifada(*s) [Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza], closures, violence and a military presence. The husbands were raised under a great deal of stress from military incursions, threat of arrest, threat of losing their homes and property and even their lives. And today, while the Palestinian husbands are living in the U.S., they are still impacted by the current political situation in Palestine. The family they left behind is always close to their hearts and mind. The husbands must watch helplessly as family members continue to suffer during the current *intifada*. Their families' suffering includes death, bombings, curfews, closures, food and fuel shortages, unemployment, the Wall [Israeli separation fence being built to close off the West Bank], and living in extreme poverty. Meanwhile as the men watch their families struggle back home, they live very isolated lives in the United States. With America's allegiance to Israel, Palestinian men suffer in silence, or if they choose to share their sufferings with others, they must first garner sympathy while explaining their suffering. The American wives and children, in turn, are also affected by the situations "back home."

One wife of a Palestinian said:

> I think (for) most Palestinians it's just really painful. In the length of time that I've known my husband, I've seen what has happened to his family. It enrages you actually that this can go on. I think it's depressing because, like I said, I think he always thought he could go back at some point. Even a visit is difficult. Why don't we just say it's painful, depressing and you feel helpless and frustrated.

Are the American women torn between sharing the news with their children and sheltering them? As Roer-Strier and Ben-Ezra reported on American women who moved

with their husbands to Palestine, there was an ever present nagging in their hearts to protect their children from witnessing the violence and a love for their husbands and in-laws to remain in the West Bank. One woman stated,

> You know, there are worse things than death. When I've had to see my children go through some of these things, and have their classmates killed and bullets coming through our house. Yeah, it has been really hard. And my four-year-old was wetting the bed every night. And she was just so scared, she just screamed and was shaking in her bed, and refused to sleep apart from me. It was terrible. I felt so guilty and I was like Is this fair? What am I doing here? But I'm afraid that I'm gonna get there (America), and not want to come back. And then what am I gonna do? I love my husband, he's a wonderful man, and he's a good father, a good husband. And damn! These decisions are hard to make… is it fair to take your children away from their father? (2006:50).

Would women in America experience a similar pull between sheltering and sharing the news with their children? The older women were more comfortable discussing politics with their children. I wondered if the women felt the need to shelter their children from the news, or if they saw it as important to share with their children current and historical events that have a daily impact on the lives of their father and his family? Did women who had gained experience with their husband's custom of discussing politics, take the next step and discuss it with their children? Or was that too much of a stretch from their comfort zone?

I asked the women if they allowed their children to hear what was on the Arabic channels or if they involved their children with the Palestinian issue. One woman said, "My husband's family is not one to get involved in street riots and all that. But they do have very strong feelings and you cannot be protected from it. It's part of where you live. They are building the Wall through [village name deleted]. That's where they live. What we have tried to do, alternatively, is to discuss what we have heard through phone

conversations." Another woman, in a soft but angry whisper commented "I think it's important to know what their level is because when you take them to visit… they see a lot of guns. Guys running around and vehicles and, you know,… they're not used to seeing guns." These women did not believe it was possible to shelter their children from their husband's political life. They understood these issues to be their children's issues and shared them with them. Another woman said she would not allow her children when they were young to watch the bloody scenes on television, but she explained to them how "[a]fter World War II, the land was split between two people. Almost like how you would describe two children fighting over a toy at the playground." Here, we can see how this mother felt it was important to explain the events, but kept in mind age-appropriate information. It is important to keep in mind that these women probably did not receive such a political education at a young age from their own mothers as they were doing with their own children. On the other hand, the children's family members overseas were all too familiar with these stories. In order for the American children to maintain some level of connection with their Middle Eastern cousins and family overseas, the American women felt they had to explain politics and current events with their children and diverge from their own upbringing.

I asked the women how their husbands handled the news from back home. The women told how the news from home frequently depressed their husbands. They said their husbands were often angered by the American slant on the news. They said their husbands also felt helpless to assist their families (especially the men from Palestine). One woman who was married to a Palestinian said her husband

> [f]eels really frustrated and helpless as so many do. He wishes there was more he could do because he was involved in politics

> before he came here. … I think he'd like to step back into that role again. He really loves that kind of thing. … So he's frustrated. He feels helpless that there is nothing he can do from here. Believe me, if there was anything he could do, he would do it. He would absolutely do it. But there is only so much you can do. … I think that somewhat is the male creature as well. I think in some ways they want to go out and win the war. And he can't and he knows he can't so it's sometimes difficult for him.

None of the women's husbands came from Afghanistan or Iraq, but several came from Palestine. They discussed how the current *intifada* has impacted their families. One woman shared how her husband had been home during this *intifida* and how he described the changes. Another woman, who was married to a Palestinian, described the Wall that now surrounds her husband's family home.

Another dimension of the political side is how the American wife is treated in the U.S. during times of political stress with her Middle Eastern husband's country (or the region in general). Donnan (1990), speaking about Northern Ireland and Pakistan, argued that for societies in conflict, marriages, which cross the lines of the conflict, threaten the status quo of hostility. This hostility is, in fact, felt by the American women and was expressed to me during the interviews.

I asked one of the women, "How do you think the current political situation has (or has it) affected your married life?" She responded:

> Well, I certainly understand more about the position that this puts my husband in, which, in turn, is putting all of our family in now that we have children who are Arabs. So I'm much more interested in paying attention to how they treat Arabs. So I'm much more interested in getting the heck out of here, quite honestly. We talk about it a lot. I just feel like we (Americans) indiscriminately dislike all. So I don't want to be a part of that. I want my children to be comfortable where they live. I don't think this is the place they can be comfortable. Which, in turn, makes it uncomfortable for me and, obviously, it is already uncomfortable for my husband.

This woman does not believe that it is possible for her society in America to adapt to her marriage. Therefore, she and her family are making plans to leave out of concern for her husband and her children.

Likewise, several of the women expressed how their marriages have made them more attuned to world events. When asked where she goes to get news from the Middle East, one woman said:

> Pretty much the satellite and whenever we speak to someone overseas a lot. (We) get on the internet once every week or two and pull down the articles in the newspapers. I used to read the *Jordan Times* quite a bit in English, but I don't read it as much as I used to on the internet.

On the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, one woman commented about the American response with the following insightful statement:

> My opinion on the war was that we did the very typical thing that Americans do. We want to find a bad guy. We want to find a fall guy. And when we gave Bin Laden about a month and we couldn't find him then we had to go for the next easy bad guy that we could find and that was Saddam and everybody hated him anyhow and so it was an easy target. We just needed somebody bad so that everybody could feel better like we tried to fix it or something. Even though we didn't; we made it worse.

One woman said:

> I think it (my marriage) has been an incredible learning experience for me. It has opened my eyes up to the world in general by exposing me to something as different as this. I have a little bit less patience--probably a lot less--with those Americans who are very narrow minded and they are not willing to look outside the box. It's made me think that every American child, as part of his education, should be required to go visit some kind of third world country because I think it puts them a lot better perspective and it's made me more aware of the world.

About September 11th, one woman said, "I wasn't deep into the issues. My husband has taught me a lot about what's going on- the history."

The political situation overseas and at home has been made personal for the women as they confront racism and their families' responses to this racism. One woman recounted her husband's naturalization ceremony to become a U.S. citizen. She said:

> When my husband went to become a citizen, I was kind of annoyed. When you become a citizen you can change your name, but you can't call your wife. So he was (at the ceremony) and he was told he could change his name for free. He said, "I'd like to call my wife to ask her opinion. But he was told, "You can't call your wife." So he didn't know what name to pick. So he picked his best friend's name instead of his normal nickname. So he puts "Mario (as his first name) and my maiden name." I wanted to kill him. So we had a not so good citizenship dinner that night. I was just barely speaking to him. But it was Mario and now everyone thinks he's Italian.

This woman was unhappy with the racism her husband was responding to in rejecting his Arab heritage.

A few of the women's husbands were from Morocco and they discussed the death of King Mohammad V. Another woman whose father-in-law was a political exile from Egypt talked extensively about how her father-in-law's situation impacted her husband's point of view of the world. She told how her father-in-law, who was a businessman, pushed his kids to get an education. She said he would tell them, "It didn't matter what happened politically, if you were able to leave the country and move on, you could carry your knowledge with you. You could be a doctor in any country." The father-in-law's political tragedy had a direct impact on the husband's upbringing.

The women must also grapple with how they fit into America, as people here have told them and their families "To go back home where you came from." That is truly astonishing when it is directed towards the American women. One woman said:

> Yeah. My husband and I were dating during the Iran crisis. And we had several incidents that occurred with us that we were told, he was, to go home. And there were times it wasn't safe for us because, again, here I am a blonde American dating one of these bad guys. So all the guys hated it that I was dating one of them. So they wanted to get him even more because they felt like they were losing one of their own American women and they didn't like it. That was probably the worst time for us.

This was probably the first time this woman, who grew up as a blonde Protestant in America, experienced racism directed towards her. This was a test of both her ability to adapt as well as her commitment to the relationship.

We hear the echoes of de Hart's analysis of how popular literature warns American women in mixed relationships to beware. They are advised through that literature and "their own kind" in society that they should not enter into these relationships. American society (and American men in particular) wanted to ensure that this couple felt uneasy in their relationship because it threatened the status quo. More importantly, these men did not want to lose their blonde women to foreigners because to do so, signaled the inability of American men to control "their" women. Overlaid on this as well is the full force of American racism—how could this "dark" foreigner dare to desire a "blonde" American woman?

Other women recounted stories of their children being harassed as the political situation heated up. This was no truer than in the aftermath of September 11th. There were discussions of how some kids wanted to gang up on and beat up the "Arab kids" after school. A mother relates:

> Well, one day (my son) is getting in the car and he asks me, "Mom, is it ok to beat up someone without them beating up on you first?" I'm thinking to myself, this sounds like something major. Of course, I know there is some reason for this question. It turns out that this kid and a group of kids decided they were going to gang up on and beat up all the Arab kids the next day after school… They wanted to tell these Arab kids that they don't belong here and to go back wherever they were from.

One mother said,

> My (Catholic) mom and her best friends were Italian and a Jewish woman and everyone was Protestant in that town. So they were like on the outside. And she remembers crosses being burned on the lawn from the Ku Klux Klan. So for her, she raised us to be open. So I never felt like I was truly in a minority or being judged because of something about me, but now, after 9/11, it's almost like I don't know how to raise my kids to have a real strong background to kind of shelter themselves from all of the arrows. I don't know. I never thought I'd be raising my kids in a pretty much-hated minority… (My husband) thinks because he was a strong person, they will be too. But I worry about them a lot. We're forcing them to be a minority that is hated here in the U.S.

These women have highlighted a key problem for themselves and others like them— by marrying an Arab husband, they are raising children who are perceived by the larger society as being "minorities." As members of the majority society in this country, they lack a key mothering skill that minority mothers in this country learned from their own mothers. They have no idea how to teach their children the sorts of coping skills necessary to deal with racism that are so essential for their day-to-day survival. While their husbands might possess some of this knowledge, raising children is the mother's responsibility in Arab culture, so the fathers, too, are crippled and unable to help their children cope. This may explain why some women were willing to let their children be educated outside the U.S. or more anticipating leaving the U.S. once they began to have children.

One woman recounts how her son had just returned to the United States days before September 11th after many delays. She said, "If he had not come before then, we would never have seen him. Never. So I'm so grateful..." Like many people, her life with her son would have been forever affected by September 11th, if his plans had not brought him home in August. She feared that due to the racism which erupted in this country in the aftermath of the attacks, he would never have been allowed to return home.

The aftershocks of September 11th hurt and puzzle these women. One woman said about September 11th:

> People in our county were beaten and their businesses were vandalized. That is part of our community and we felt bad for them. And we felt bad for us that we were afraid even though we were comfortable in our home environment, we were kind of afraid. That's not a good feeling. We also felt very angry that that even happened. Why did that happen? Why did it have to come to this, for one thing? But why, why do people kill and maim in the name of religion. It is wrong. It's absolutely as wrong as to bomb an abortion clinic in my opinion. It's so wrong. It's forbidden to commit suicide. So what have you accomplished?

However, this racism is not only expressed by Americans against Arabs. It also goes the other way. One woman recounts what an Arab woman whom she had previously considered her friend said:

> I remember one woman, she's Egyptian, we were really close. We all had dinner at each other's house and potluck and the whole bit. And our girls thought they were really close. And one day she said to me (after 9/11) they become anti-American and stuff, and I'm the mother of Samir and she says to me "I've finally come around to feeling it might be ok for our girls to marry someone whose mother is not Egyptian." I think, "Well, you can't have my son." How big.

This statement clearly ruined the amicable relationship between the families. It illustrates the following point about mixed marriages: "Mixed couples and their children may be

abused by groups on both sides, harassed, or even molested for 'betraying' their 'culture' or 'race.'" (Breger and Hill 1998:23). Mixed couples live in a cultural borderzone, caught between the competing demands of their respective cultures. Their best defense is to expand the intersection of their concentric circles of identity (following Crohn) and widen theirs and their children's common space and support networks.

Some women alluded to positive aspects of September 11th for their families. One woman simply said she married her husband "Because of 9/11." (It was not clear to me if she meant she married him then as a statement of support or if they married then because they were afraid he might be deported or put in a camp like the Japanese detention camps of World War II.) Another woman, who lived close to ground zero, said she and her family were brought closer together as a result of September 11th. She said neighbors and friends came to check on them out of fear for their safety. Another woman says, upon hearing of the events, she called her brother because she was afraid that someone might come to her house to jump her, but nothing came from her fears. These women recounted how the events forced them to work together, and encouraged empathy and concern from family and friends. Finally there was just the ease of discussing politics; after the attacks, these women had no choice but to become vocal about the politics affecting their families.

Abu-Rayaa's unpublished dissertation study (2000) of Arab- Jewish couples in Israel found that cross-cultural couples "respond in one of four ways to outside political pressure: a) identification with the oppressed, b) greater unity between the couple, c) avoidance of accusation, and 4) political amnesia (ignoring anything that has to do with politics)." (cited in Roer-Strier and Ben-Ezra, 2006:43-44). I found examples of each of

these reactions to political pressure on the couples. We have examples of women who identified with the oppressed even to the point of deciding to move to the Middle East. Each of the couples also seemed to pull together to face any challenges. And there were women who took on the defense of "political amnesia" who decided not to discuss politics.

Three of the older, longer married wives were comfortable discussing Middle Eastern politics with me during the interview. They have actually been drawn into activism. They told me how they politically engaged others in their schools, communities, and work and tried to dispel stereotypes and misunderstandings. One woman said, "For me it was more like getting involved, paying more attention to ADC (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee)… It (9/11) was a big impetus in our area, which led to a lot of interfaith things, if nothing else. I hooked into that (with a professional community grant) which was cool."

They also spoke with pride of their children's ease in discussing politics with confidence. One woman said:

> [My children] are so aware I think because of the dichotomy of their lifetime, they are so aware that everyone here in America has a history. They have so much empathy. I think it is also from their travels. When they see the poor. But they still see too that everyone has a story and everyone has a history.

They are not raising their children to "never discuss politics or religion" or "to be seen and not heard." They proudly retold how their children engaged them in a variety of discussions from the meaning of *jihad,* to Hurricane Katrina, to Palestine, to current events.

One woman said of her child:

> My 15 year old asked me, "What's *jihad*?" We've always thought of that as a struggle, but then you see the war. But my kids, I guess, I had always thought they knew by osmosis what it was. And all the negative stuff that was coming out of the press. And my husband is always encouraging them to read. They see that some people have a lot of power to interpret as they like. So my husband directs them back to the *Qu'ran*.

Whereas these few dynamic women felt confident discussing politics, most of the women were reluctant to talk politics with me or even with their husbands. When I asked her opinion of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, one woman told me directly that her husband "doesn't like for me to discuss it." So our political discussion was limited. Another woman said she was "ignorant; this was the area of men talk; who would want to embarrass themselves by entering into a discussion where they neither had knowledge nor were welcome to join?" These women preferred to pass the discussions off to the men and stay out of it. They have chosen not to adapt to the men's ideas of discussing politics with family and friends. Instead, they feel quite comfortable following the American injunction to "never discuss religion or politics" instead of adapting to their husbands' idea of "why shouldn't you be discussing it?"

It is interesting to look at the profiles of these three women. They include the longest as well as the most recently married. (The third, whose husband, reportedly, did not want for her to talk about politics, had been married for about 10 years.) These women were, however, all comfortable talking about Islam and their conversion. They were also the only women to wear *hijab* (headscarf) on a regular basis. These women seemed to be comfortable with politics being the world of men whereas the world of women was internal or religious.

In the end, whether the women decide to never discuss politics or to discuss them freely, their lives are more directly affected by current events than before their marriages. After September 11th they are also affected in ways not felt by ordinary Americans without "the Arab connection." As the women grow in their cross-cultural marriages, they gain in the knowledge of the world. They have learned not only about their husband's worldview, but they are also confronted by racism here in their community and in their husbands' community as well. As the women confront this racism, most of them take on an activist role to defend themselves, their husbands, and their children.

In this chapter we have seen how the two cultures (Arab and American) view discussions on politics very differently. The Arab views on political discussions have influenced the American wives. The couples have stayed in touch with the news of the Middle East through satellite and the internet. We also have explored how the women face discussing the political situation with their children. Special challenges face the wives and families of Palestinians living both in the U.S. and in the West Bank. The wives of Palestinians handle more immediate questions from their children on dealing with violence and poverty. When asked how the political situation in the U.S. and the Middle East has affected the women's married lives, all the women spoke of facing racism within both the American and Arab communities in the U.S. This racism propelled some of the women to take on the role of activist in defending their family's rights and identities. A few of the women remained reluctant to become involved in the political arena. However, even these women had all taken on the *hijab* after their conversion to Islam and therefore became easily identifiable as "other". Hence, they too faced and fought against religious stereotypes in the United States. In the United States

today, as in many Islamic countries, when a woman decides to put on *hijab* in her everyday life, this religious act is also loaded with many political statements. So even if these women were uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss politics, in their everyday life they are making a political statement through their decision to put on *hijab*.

All of the women would agree that the area of politics plays an inevitable part of their marital lives. Its importance has changed the women's worldviews, expanding their understanding in the process. However in some fashion, it has simultaneously alienated them from their American community and even from their former selves.

Conclusion

I began this project with three questions and would like to return to each one of them in order. To begin, what unique challenges are present in a marriage between an American woman and a Middle Eastern man?

All marriages have their ups and downs with happy moments and moments of crisis. People in cross-cultural marriages all face issues of defining their identities. However, what makes the marriage between an American woman and a Middle Eastern man especially unique is the cultural, political and sometimes religious differences that set them apart from the main society. These couples and their families may face racism and stereotypes from American society as being "extremist, terrorist, backwards, American haters"; they face equal treatment from Arab society as "non-religious, poor parents to Muslim children, and feeling [of being] ignored." As the women have found in their marriages, not everyone subscribes to these stereotypes and some people are open to change. So these couples must enter into the marriages confronting the "issues" of those around them while discovering their own identities and giving their children whatever support they can find to gain self-awareness and acceptance.

We have seen how these women face racism as they raise their children up to be "a pretty much hated minority in America" and, must do this with few experiences of their own to draw on or resources to turn to garner support for their children. Being ill equipped to deal with the challenges of racism is an added burden to the mothers (and fathers) who are in a daily give and take on their own identities within the context of a cross-cultural marriage. These identity issues come up for the women and their families

as the couples maneuver around decision making for the family. These decisions include holiday celebrations and work opportunities for both the husband and the wife.

Finally, another key factor to understanding the unique challenges for these couples is the international political climate which both directly and indirectly affects these couples. Through their marriages to theses particular men, the women face a sense of culture shock even while living in the United States. For many of them, it is only through their marriage and raising their children that they feel the sting of racism first hand. They are little understood in terms of their political and religious beliefs. The explosive conflicts here and overseas affect them in unique ways and they have few confidants who they can trust to understand their struggles. Although, the women might not have ever denied racism in the United States, their marriages have shown them a different United States and different world, one only slightly resembling the one they knew as little girls.

Secondly, if given the chance to speak from their heart, what would these women truly say about their marriage? Every woman shared stories about the joys and frustrations of their marriages. However, it became clear that key to the success of these marriages, like all marriages, is the ability to adapt. These couples are continually faced with the decision to adapt or not to adapt. Chrohn (1995) would say this is the key element of "sorting out confusion about your identity." However, as Roer-Strier and Ben Ezar (2006) discovered, this adaptation is multifaceted. There is wide variation in someone's willingness to adapt to values, customs and ideas around them. And willingness changes over time. As one participant in my study said of her husband:

> I see a lot of Muslim men who have a love/hate relationship with this country. And they don't know how to do it. They'll hate one

> thing and then they'll do it in like five minutes later (or something equivalent). I'm like, do they see the contradiction? I think I have to be very strong because I think my husband is still confused about coming to this country and is it the right thing for him?

Further, adaptation in these relationships not only implies adaptation of the couples themselves. It extends much further than that. Others must choose to adapt to the marriage or not. For example, as we saw for holiday celebrations, the in-laws play an important part in the decisions of these couples. Neighbors must decide if they will welcome (e.g. the child who screams "We are MUSLIM" in her neighborhood") or reject ("Go back to where you came from"). Schools must decide if they will welcome discussion of Middle Eastern holidays, traditions and culture, or continue with their stereotypes ("3rd grade boys in your culture do not get along with girls" and "why is your son not eating at the cafeteria with the rest of the students?") Finally, the larger society must decide if it is willing to adapt (or even learn from) these couples. Indeed, at times these marriages are political statements. They push the hot buttons of society and challenge or reinforce the daily stereotypes of each other's culture.

In answer to my third question, what advise might they have for other women who are contemplating following them in such a marriage, the women had a variety of answers. Again we see the practical versus romantic side. One woman comments, "Take your time. Travel." Another said to her friend, who accompanied her to our interview, "Do it- go get married; it's what's best for you." Many women spoke of the need for understanding and staying true to oneself in the marriage. They said things like, "Don't dress up in someone else's costume and become someone else. Your husband is in love with you for your present person. Don't change to make others happy." "Understand yourself and your culture." "Do not forget who you are and the influences of your

childhood." A variation of this comment was, "Be willing to compromise on some things, but don't let him forget his new family (you) is as important as his own original family." These comments remind someone contemplating such a marriage to take their identity very seriously in their discerning process. However, they also imply that this part is not just a fleeting moment on their wedding day. The women advise that this is an ongoing struggle to understand and maintain one's identity.

The women also spoke about values saying for example: "Talk about your values; make sure you are aligned in a few things that can last a lifetime," or "[e]nsure you hold the same values no matter what religion you are." "Talk over your dreams, values and individual life goals." "Have an open mind. Allow the differences to be a positive part of your life." "Take the best of both worlds and build with them."

Finally, one woman said, "Be prepared for an exciting time." And another, quoting Islamic values, said, "See him with your heart, not your eyes" and "Turn away from what you dislike in him and toward what you like." These comments suggest a sense of humor and forgiveness.

These are just a few sound bites from the women about what should we take away from this study. In their words, is important to truly know oneself and have a solid sense of identity. A sense of identity that is not stagnant but subject to evolution, open to adaptation, but not to overbearance. They would recommend an open discussion of values for these couples. Finally, they offer being prepared for an exciting, romantic and forgiving relationship.

These marriages, like all marriages, have struggles. This study has shed some light onto how these couples have found success in facing these struggles. Whether on

the romantic side or the practical one, all of the women agreed that these relationships called for flexibility and a constant willingness to be molded by the relationship. One woman commented "(she) discovered how nice it was to share in the world with someone else. Having his (her husband's) experience allowed me to be more exposed to the world around me."

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