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Barriers to higher education within the Arab community

When I first entered the SALAM Islamic Center in Sacramento, I was greeted with numerous smiles followed by, “السلام عليكم”¹ -- a common Islamic greeting. This was not my first time conversing with Arabs, but this was my first time intimately conversing with Muslim Arabs - a significant difference in the community. On one hand, I clenched my recently purchased hijab from Ross that took me several attempts to place on my head; on the other, my notebook with loosely translated Arabic questions.

Upon my arrival, I immediately felt the culture shock. A young teenage boy gleamed over and said: “Sister, your entrance is that way.”

My entrance?

I was confused. Eventually, I learned the men and women in this Mosque prayed in separate rooms. I was asked to remove my shoes and join the women in the back to observe their prayer session. Throughout the entire session, two sentiments battled within my head. First, uncertainty. As a researcher, I was committed to not allowing bias to influence my judgement. But as a Mexican-American Catholic, seeing gender segregation as glaring as that prayer session continued bothering me, no matter how hard I tried suppressing the emotions. Albeit, I do acknowledge that gendered roles do possess a nuanced presence in all cultures and religions.

However, another sentiment continued reining my uncertainty: comfort. Being a cis-gender woman, sitting with mothers, daughters, and children reminded me of the lively, familial feeling I grew up with. On the woman's side, several children ran up to different women with their toy trains, while the women responded with giggles and shooed away the children like beloved aunts. Another time, an elder moved her prayer rug closer to the Imam² and with no words exchanged, the teenage girl immediately moved to another spot to accommodate the elder woman. She continued praying away from her mother. Lastly, a woman appeared mid-prayer with her hair exposed on the back, unbeknownst to the woman. Quickly, a flock of women rushed to hide the hair, shoving her hair under the hijab as if they were doctors working together

¹ Phonetically pronounced, “A-salam alaikum”; translates to “Peace be upon you”

² Imam: the person who leads prayers in a mosque like a Priest

to save a patient. The woman continued praying, not even wincing to the group of women who ran to her back.

Overall, the culmination of supportive women, children laying on their smaller prayer rugs, and even bare feet on the carpet evoked a level of intimacy I had long forgotten due to being away in college. More importantly, I felt protected among these women who implicitly cooperated within their inner circle. Hence, my confusion when a parent named Halima - an incredibly charismatic and outgoing woman with an even more outspoken daughter - told me that several of these moms are scared to converse with their school administration, let alone argue, due to language barriers.

Even Halima herself, a college graduate and mother from Jordan with proficient English skills, felt this intimidation when speaking with her children's teachers throughout their upbringing. She recalled an instance in which a group of boys targeted her daughter in elementary school and the school only responded by scolding the group of boys. Incredibly angry for her daughter, Halima overcame this fear and confronted the school. Unfortunately, this is not the case for many of her friends, who are just as overprotective of their children but have limited English skills.

This concept of limited English barring immigrants from communicating with the school administration is a common trend in all immigrant communities. However, unlike my Latinx family who did not possess a college degree and were concerned about their immigration status, all of the Arab families I spoke to did come from middle-class backgrounds with stable legal status. Moreover, English is taught in schools within the Middle East and all the parents felt sufficiently comfortable having a conversation in English with me, even without a translator present. Hence, this indicated to me a deeper issue than language discrepancy.

Part of the answer was alluded to after a conversation with a local community college professor from the Arab studies department. When asked about his opinion of barriers to higher education within the Arab community, he immediately shut down the idea that financial or immigration status were significant barriers within the community. He even jokingly suggested that many of his Arab students take Arabic for "an easy A" as a means to indicate his students were highly intelligent and just as informed about the transfer process in community college.

Every Arab person I spoke to strongly emphasized the requirement of education for their children. All the parents and their college students insinuated that education is extremely important, no matter their gender, and some even indicated that education equates to social status in their households. Even more interesting, all the parents in my study possessed a degree from a foreign country, tutored their children, and involved their children in extracurricular activities, but hardly understood the A-G California requirements or even knew their child's class schedule.

What motivated this discourse was my recent discovery that Arabs have to identify as “Caucasian” in the U.S. Census Bureau. I wondered how many similarities there were between non-refugee Arab households and Caucasian households. In the context of education, the answer appeared to be *very similar*; i.e. all my parents in the study had college degrees, tutored their children, attended PTA meetings occasionally, and even subscribed to school newsletters. In fact, several parents, including an Egyptian college graduate, articulated that he had certain family members who strayed away from speaking Arabic in an attempt to be more “American.” Even the Imam himself noted the similarities in his conservative political beliefs between him and Christians living in Sacramento. He, in addition to another father, emphasized their distaste of being seen as a “victim” in America.

Stumped by this realization, I had to re-examine my notes. It was then that I saw the common pattern, across all my parents, that barred both Christian and Muslim Arabs from higher education: discrimination. Either directly or implicitly, all my parents told approximately one to two stories of forms of discrimination they encountered within the California public school system. An example can be found with the Iraqi father. This parent was an Iraqi father who fled to Dubai from Iraq during the U.S.-Iraq war. Both his daughter and son were top students in Dubai and spoke English well; yet, when he moved to California and first enrolled his children, the school automatically recommended enrolling the students into ESL classes. This also happened to the Imam who remembered being confused when the administration asked to test his children’s English skills who were all raised in the United States.

The Iraqi father recollects his worst encounter when a teacher jokingly suggested putting all the brown kids, including his son, together and away from the white “popular” kids. This father also mentioned how his daughter’s hijab was pulled off in middle school and the administration gave his daughter a warning, which to this day he is unsure what for. A common thread among the parents was frustration with the school administration. For the Iraqi father, this motivated him enough to move his daughter into homeschooling, in addition to the Imam. The Imam enrolled his children into the California public school system because it was online this past year. But now that California is looking to reopen its schools, the Imam is actively looking for a homeschool system to protect his children; it is worth noting that part of his motivation to move his children stems from the stories of parents in the Mosque and their “horrid” encounters with the school administration.

In conclusion, discrimination seemed to be the major educational-related barrier for Arab households. In fact, for many of the households, discrimination played a significant enough role to influence major decisions - such as moving students to online learning - within these households. For parents who will keep their children in the California public school system, discrimination is constantly on their forethought, as was the case with Halima.