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Youth Culture and Movements: United States

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Youth cultures are distinct in that peer groups dominate social relationships. Of notable significance to Muslim youth is how interpretations of Islam influence the socialization of women. However, much of what is deemed appropriate behavior for girls in the name of religion stems from select interpretations of religious teachings in particular cultural settings. Interpretations of Islam, and the range of its application to youth behaviors in the United States, constitute the focus of this entry. While the topics covered are not necessarily exhaustive, they illustrate key issues regarding women and gender among Muslim youth in the United States, including the matters of dating, youth movements, and parent-child relations.

Dating

Youth culture in the United States centers on relations between boys and girls, with dating often the theme of movie plots, music, and school activities (for example, dances). Whether the Muslim family is liberal in its interpretations of Islam or heavily involved in organized religion, the main objection to dating by Muslim parents stems from the link it has to premarital sex, particularly for girls. Parents are likely to state their dislike of dating in general, but stress specifically their concern for daughters, upon whom restrictions are often more intensely enforced (Ajrouch 1999, Mohammad-Arif 2000). The tendency to apply strict religious teachings to a girl's behavior, predominantly her sexuality, stems from the patrilineal organization of the family, where obligation and group membership derive from identifying a child's father. It is also necessary to consider, however, that notions of “good girl” behavior do not apply exclusively to Muslim youth. As many groups based either on religious affiliation or national origins struggle to maintain an identity and produce a sense of belonging, socialization advocating “good girl” behavior weighs heavily in that effort. While similarities exist between Muslim youth and other ethnic groups in the United States, those parallels often go unrecognized due to a tendency to view Muslims as the cultural “other.”

Applications of Islam to boy-girl relationships in the United States often include parents looking the other way when it concerns their sons' dating behaviors. A study focusing on children of Lebanese Muslim immigrants living in Dearborn, Michigan found that although girls' social activities are strictly monitored in Dearborn, boys frequently act under less supervision, and are given more freedom and autonomy to make choices about dating (Ajrouch 2000). This double standard links to beliefs that boys have little to lose should they engage in premarital sex (they cannot become pregnant), but is lodged in religious mandates about modesty.

Youth sometimes proactively seek out Islamic teachings because of this double standard, learning that the religion advocates similar standards and expectations for both boys and girls. This knowledge may influence Muslim youth in the United States to embrace a religious identity as a strategy to counter parental rules based on cultural traditions (Schmidt 2002). As such, some young Muslim women in the United States choose to wear hijāb (head covering) in the search for a Muslim identity (Naber 2002, Mohammad-Arif 2000, Shakir 1997). Those who make that choice often describe feeling protected, respected, and safe from unwanted male advances. The work of Nadine Naber (2002) illustrates how girls from

Arab Muslim families adopt a “Muslim first, Arab second” approach to identity in order to challenge parental restrictions on public interactions and marriage choices.

The response among young women toward the United States norm of dating ranges from dating without their parents' consent or knowledge to organizing gender specific activities. For instance, a group of Muslim high school students in San Francisco, California organized a “Muslim Prom,” where Muslim high school senior girls joined together, without boys, for an evening of dressing up, dancing, and eating, stopping only for evening prayers (Brown 2003). Also, a Muslim version of dating sometimes emerges in which a boy and girl may rendezvous, but time spent together always includes an adult chaperone, and the intent of dating involves plans to eventually marry. Dating for the simple pleasure of enjoying the company of the opposite sex is generally unacceptable (Haddad and Smith 1996).

Youth movements

The importance of gender relations to youth culture is also evident in youth movements. While movements based on Islam among youth whose parents or grandparents emigrated from an Islamic country are rare in the United States, youth organizations do emerge within religious institutions in an effort to increase interactions among Muslim youth. Depending on the institution, activities range from conservative events such as religious lectures to more liberal associations such as picnics and dances.

One persistent youth organization, founded in 1963, is the Muslim Student Association. It was established at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign by a group of foreign Muslim graduate students who organized as a means to foster support for one another (Mohammad-Arif 2000). Forty years later, this organization exists on college campuses across the United States, now mainly comprised of United States born and/or raised Muslim youth wishing to carry out Islamic programs and projects. Campus activism frequently involves coordinating to fight for justice and reform in the United States political system (Schmidt 2002). Muslim youth also often organize on college campuses to protest against United States foreign policy (Naber 2002).

Observers of youth movements on college campuses note the tendency to build a religious affiliation into an ethnic identity (Schmidt 2002). In other words, an Islamic identity emerges, void of culture, distancing Muslim youth from both mainstream American culture and the culture of their immigrant parents (Hermansen 2003). Hermansen highlights disquieting trends within Muslim youth movements including a lack of intellectual analysis of their situation, promulgation of rigid norms (for example, hijāb for women, beards for men), and discouragement from studying the humanities or pursuing social science careers. Gender relations figure prominently in such movements, particularly the tendency for Muslim youth to announce their difference from American youth by ensuring gender segregation at campus events. Separating young men from young women allows Muslim youth not only to differentiate themselves from their non-Muslim American peers, but also to claim moral superiority in that they adhere to religious teaching about modesty and protect themselves from potential sexually charged situations. Hermansen suggests that such tendencies may result from adolescent anxieties.

Islam has also inspired youth movements among African American adolescents. One such movement, for example, called Five Percenters, emerged in the 1960s in Harlem, New York as a splinter group from the Nation of Islam (Nuruddin 1994). Adherents believe that they are the 5 percent of humanity who understand true Islam and are dedicated to living a righteous life. They view Islam as a natural way of life as opposed to viewing it as a religion. A focus on the young black male is central. While this movement has been applauded for the self-esteem it nurtures among adolescent males, representing a subculture that speaks directly to disenfranchised youth, it builds in part on an explicit ideology that men are superior to women. This ideology is found in official declarations such as the belief that only men can attain perfection, and that the highest level women may reach is one step below perfection. Women are also viewed as dangerous in that while they may use their “magnetic” qualities for good, that is, to bear a child, they also may use those qualities for sexual promiscuity. Interestingly, African American youth often outgrow the Five Percenter ideology, in search of “mature” outlets for political and spiritual energies. Many of those who were Five Percenters in the mid 1960s and 1970s became mainstream Muslims as adults (Nuruddin 1994).

Parent-child relations

Youth culture generally encompasses young people between the ages of 12 and 20.

While many youths are relatively compliant, youth cultures among Muslims in the United States are notable for the tensions that exist in relationships with parents and with dominant cultural norms. For instance, among South Asian Muslim youth in the United States, tensions between immigrant parents and United States born children often result in a double identity for youth (Mohammad-Arif 2000). As South Asian Muslims in the United States often live in upper middle-class suburbs, youth respond to pressure from their American peers, sometimes engaging in activities about which parents do not know, such as meeting friends of the opposite sex, or listening to rap music. They retain a desire to please parents, but they also acquire “American” traits such as independence and autonomy. Interestingly, once South Asian Muslim youth attend university, they often shed the need to fit in in favor of a quest to get back to their roots. Contrary to trends in the homeland or in Europe, South Asian Muslim parents in the United States value a university education for both daughters and sons. While restrictions on social activities and a stated desire for arranged marriages is prevalent among South Asian Muslim parents, they express a determination to ensure that their daughters receive the same opportunities for university education as do their sons (Mohammad-Arif 2000). However, the preferred areas of study include those where children may be assured of economic success. Children often enter the parentally sanctioned fields initially (for example, medicine), but then later switch to the areas they find most personally satisfying, much to the dismay of their parents.

Those young women who learn to navigate the two cultures, that of their parents and that of the dominant culture, will undoubtedly benefit from both worlds. However, the situation may arise where they embrace one culture over the other. Muslim girls occupy a unique position in that conforming to parental values constitutes a deviation from dominant cultural norms yet conforming to dominant cultural norms likely challenges parental values. Girls from Muslim families living in the United States must negotiate between two worlds, and two sets of cultural values that often seem incompatible. Whether a person is a child of immigrants, third generation, or a member of a family that converted to Islam, the influence of religion on gender roles, however indirect, permeates the youth experience.

As a final note, it is difficult to speak of Muslim youth in the United States as one monolithic category. National origins range from the Middle East, to Southeastern Asia, to Africa, to converts within the United States. The interplay between religion, culture, and race produces a myriad of situations such that it is impossible to posit a universal Muslim youth culture.

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