



ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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North America: Early 20th Century to Present
2003EWIC Volume I

“Methodologies, Paradigms and Sources for Studying Women and Islamic Cultures”
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The field of “Women and Islamic cultures in North America” is multi-layered and fluid. While some sources for research in this area are framed in terms of ethnically based categories such as “Arab American women” (Shakir 1997, Kadi 1994) or “South Asian Women” (Women of South Asian Descent Collective 1993), others are organized according to the broader religious identification, “Muslim American Women” or “Muslim Women in North America.” The ethnically based categories refer to persons from varying religious backgrounds who share sociocultural experiences significantly shaped by Islamic histories and values. The religion based category includes women from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds who live in North America and self-identify as Muslim. An alternative approach to research on women and Islamic cultures in North America is to focus on women converts to Islam.

Scholars agree that the three largest Muslim American groups are African Americans, Arab Americans, and South Asians. The Western Atlantic slave trade brought the first African Muslims to North America, but large-scale African American Muslim organizations and movements did not emerge until the twentieth century. From the early twentieth century, historically specific African American interpretations were shaped in the context of migration from the south between the two world wars and the concomitant social, economic, and racial struggles (Leonard in preparation, McCloud 1991).

The category “Arab American” refers to persons who trace their ancestry to the North African countries of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Sudan, and Egypt and the western Asian countries of Lebanon, occupied Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (El Badry 1994). Arabs began migrating to the United States in the late 1880s; the majority were Christian until the late 1960s when Arab Muslim migration rapidly increased (Abraham and Shryock 2000, Suleiman 1989).

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan are the major countries of origin for women from South Asian Islamic cultures. Nearly all South Asian immigrants to the United States are from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, and 12 percent of those from India are Muslim (Leonard in preparation). Scholars estimate that South Asians are the largest single group among American Muslims. The broader categories Asian American, Asian Pacific Islander, and South Asian Diaspora are also useful for exploring South Asian women's experiences in North America. Most South Asian Muslims migrated to the United States in the aftermath of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act.

Scholars, community members, and United States state and media representatives are increasingly invoking the categories “Muslim American women” or “Muslim women in North America (Aswad and Bilgé 1996, Haddad and Smith 1994) to frame discourses and research on women and Islamic cultures in North America. The classification “Muslim American” is relatively new and reflects the post-1960s rapid influx of Muslim immigrants and the historical and political context in which “the Muslim” has increasingly emerged as a central figure within United States state and media discourses. Historical and political shifts have alternately given rise to the self-identification “Muslim American” or “American Muslim.”

While there are no reliable national surveys that estimate the Muslim population in the United States, one study suggests that American Muslims are 42 percent African American, 24.4 percent South Asian, 12.4 percent Arab, 6.2 percent

12/20/13 The EWIC Public Outreach Project is funded by the generous support of the Henry Luce Foundation

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African, 3.6 percent Iranian, 2 percent Southeast Asian, 1.6 percent European American, and 5.4 percent other (Nu'man 1992, cited in Leonard in preparation). An alternative report maintains that 30 percent of Muslims in North America are "Americans," 33 percent are Arabs, and 29 percent are South Asians (Ba-Yunis and Siddiqui 1999, cited in Leonard in preparation).

Four types of sources are useful for research on women in Islamic cultures in North America: 1. primary sources; 2. networking tools; 3. online collections; and 4. scholarly publications.

Primary sources

Vital records. Useful primary sources are federal, state, and city records, religious documents, academic archives, and ethnic magazines and newspapers. Federal census records include data such as birth date, gender, mother and/or father of foreign birth, year of immigration, naturalization status, year of naturalization, native language, employment, and occupation. These materials provide information on women's migration patterns, generational status, and labor experiences. State archives (such as the City of Boston's Registry Archives) and city records (such as Massachusetts Department of Vital Statistics) complement census materials by including data on birth, marriage, and death. Some city records (such as Boston's Police Archives) also include women's employment records. Yet the categories used in the United States to classify Islamic cultures may pose challenges to researchers (Naber 2000). In the late nineteenth century, the United States classified Arabs within the same category as Turks, Armenians, and other non-Arabic speaking peoples (El Badry 1994). Currently, the United States census marks persons from the Middle East and North Africa as white/Caucasian but recognizes their origins in an ancestry section. It counts some Middle Easterners and North Africans as refugees and others as nationals of their last country of residence. Several scholars agree that vital records undercount Arab Americans and are inconsistent. State institutions have also classified South Asians through ambiguous and shifting categories along a continuum of "white," "non-white," "Asian Indian," and "Asian American." Inter-marriage further complicates United States census categories. Punjabi Muslim men who migrated in the early 1900s, for example, married Mexican American women, producing mixed communities of Punjabi-Mexicans (Leonard 1992).

Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) records contain information about foreign nationals who enter or attempt to enter the United States for temporary or permanent residence in a variety of categories, such as refugees, asylees, non-immigrants, naturalizations, emigration, illegal immigrants, or foreign born. INS records are useful for exploring women's naturalization certificates, family histories, and immigrant arrival records. Special Reports by the INS might be useful for research on women and Islamic cultures in North America, including: "Mail Order Bride Industry and Its Impact on US Immigration Census Reports"; "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850–1990"; and "Report on Women and Naturalization." Researchers interested in Chinese Muslim women might explore the INS special collection, "Chinese Immigrant Files." "Immigrant Passenger Lists, 1883–1945" can be found in the National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) records.

Religious records. Religious records complement vital records. Housed within mosques, archdiocese archives, congregational libraries, and diocesan libraries and archives, they assist in determining women's religious affiliations since religious categories are absent from federal, state, and city records. Religious records also provide information on birth, marriage patterns, divorce, inheritance, and death.

Academic archives. While there is no collection that focuses specifically on Muslim Americans or Muslim American women, archives are organized in terms of women's studies and/or ethnic studies. The Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies (Philadelphia) contains materials on women's histories, Lebanese Americans, and African Americans. Other helpful collections are organized in terms of particular ethnic groups. Several components of the Faris and Yamna Naff Family Arab American Collection (National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.) permit research on Arab American women. Some sections provide historical and sociological materials on Arab American histories and experiences. These include scholarly articles on discrimination and economic endeavors, books, dissertations, community directories, and statistics. Within the Naff Collection, a section called Arab American Press holds articles and magazines by and about women. Other sections that include primary and secondary sources on women are: Family Life and Values, Women, Folklore, Traditions and Customs, Literature, Music and Art, Bibliographies on Arab Americans, Personal Papers (including letters and diaries), and the Oral History Project (conducted in the 1980s).

Several archives on African Americans and African American women exist, including African American Resources (Maryland State Archives), and the African American Women's Archives (Duke University).

Currently, the Doe Library at the University of California, Berkeley is developing an archive on South Asian immigrants to the United States, Canada, and other parts of the world. This resource will include materials such as memorabilia, personal papers, correspondence, photographs, early publications, ephemera, posters, and newsletters of early community organizations. Other archival materials on South Asian American women can be found within archives organized under the category "Asian American Studies."

Ethnic magazines and newspapers . Several magazines and newspapers such as India Today and Arab American News have emerged out of particular ethnic and religious communities. Some cities, such as Boston, hold special archives of local ethnic newspapers. Some magazines and newspapers are not organized around the topic of women but include articles by and about women. Other magazines and newspapers are produced and written by and about women, such as Azizah, a magazine that strives to connect Muslim women in North America and to provide a forum for discussion while empowering Muslim women to forge their own identity.

Networking tools

Networking tools include community organizations that are religious, social, cultural, and/or political in scope. These sources are useful for making contacts within and between communities and for tracing issues facing women living within and between Islamic cultures in North America. Ethnically based networking tools are either pan-ethnic or based upon a common country of origin. Examples of pan-ethnic women's organizations are Asian Immigrant Women Advocates (AIWA), Arab Women's Solidarity Association (AWSA), and South Asian Women's Network (SAWNET). Examples of country-based organizations focusing on women are the General Union of Palestinian Women, the Iranian American Women's Association, and Asian Indian Women in America. A few pan-ethnic organizations highlight issues facing gays, lesbians, and queers, such as South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association (SALGA) and South West Asian and North African Bay Area Queers (SWANABAQ). Religion based organizations that are organized in terms of the category "Muslim" or "Muslim American" include the Muslim Women's League and Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights. While these organizations vary in their goals, they provide rich resources for research on feminist practices, the tensions between feminism and nationalism, and women's empowerment.

Community-based organizations provide alternative tools for networking with women activists and exploring sites of tension and empowerment between women and their communities. Panethnic organizations include the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC); the Arab American Action Network (AAAN); the Association of Arab American University Graduates (AAUG); Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS); and Asian Pacific Islanders for Community Empowerment (API-Force). Religion based organizations include the American Muslim Alliance (AMA); the American Muslim Council (AMC); the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR); and the National Council on Islamic Affairs (NCIA). The Nation of Islam is a significant resource for research on women living in African or African American Islamic cultures in North America.

Online collections

Rich archival materials are becoming increasingly available online. The South Asian Women's Forum, for example, includes articles on family and gender among the South Asian diaspora. Duke University's Special Collections Library provides archives on African American women within their online archival collections. This collection contains materials ranging from reports of personal experience to abstract discussions of general living conditions and events. It incorporates the perspectives of black educators and laborers, slaves and slaveholders, women's grassroots organizers and elected officials, McCarthy-era investigators, and Black Panther revolutionaries. With differing amounts of detail, these sections provide information on the lives of black women in relation to work, politics, family, and community. The American Women's History/Women Immigrants On-Line Collection provides links to bibliographies, networking tools, and primary sources on Arab American and Asian American lives and experiences.

Scholarly publications

Most scholarly work has been ethnographic and sociological and methods for writing on women and Islamic cultures in North America have been primarily descriptive (Cainkar 1996, Hermansen 1991). While Leonard (in preparation) adds that research on gender and sexuality among Muslim American women has been comparative only in the sense that research on one community is printed next to research on another community in conference or topical volumes, theoretical and comparative approaches are increasingly emerging.

The largest body of literature on women and Islamic cultures focuses on South Asian American women. Several researchers have focused on the processes by which South Asian women have reconstructed their identities in the diaspora (Desai 1999, Women of South Asian Descent Collective 1993). Some scholars have highlighted issues of family (Gupta 1999), while others have focused on issues of women's clothing (Govindjee 1997). Research on queer South Asian diasporas is also emerging that focuses on queer South Asian women's identities in the context of the reconstruction of masculinist cultural nationalisms in the United States (Gopinath 1997).

Scholarly literature on Arab American women is limited. South End Press published the first anthology of Arab American women writers, *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Kadi 1994). This anthology includes writings by 40 Arab American and Arab Canadian women artists, poets, and writers who explored issues such as family dynamics, migration, racialization, feminism, war, and love. Another work focused on the unsettled transitions of migration and their impact on postpartum concerns of Arab immigrant women (El Sayed 1986), and another highlighted stories about the histories and experiences of Arab American women in the United States through a collection of interviews with women from various immigrant and United States born generations (Shakir 1997). Two key issues have emerged within the literature on Arab American women: family life (Faragallah, Schumm, and Webb 1997) and the negotiations over gendered identities between the demands of cultural authenticity and Americanization (Naber 2001). More theoretical research is needed in this area.

Due to the historical circumstances of African Americans, issues of race and racialization have been centralized within the literature on African American Muslim women. While limited research on African American Muslim women exists (McCloud 1991, 1996), some studies have focused on the processes by which they find alternatives to the pressures of racism within the dominant United States society (Bying 1999). Few studies have explored the patriarchal construction of womanhood within African American Muslim communities from a feminist perspective (Pierce and Williams 1996). An alternative approach has been to highlight African American Muslim female activism (S'thembile 1996).

More and more scholars are taking interest in the field of literature classified as "Muslim American Women," "Muslim Women in North America," or "Muslim American families" (Aswad 1994, 1996, Haddad and Smith 1994). Within this field, several studies have addressed the *hijāb* (veil) controversy (Moore 1998). Other scholars have explored issues of family, marriage, and patriarchal authority among Muslim American communities (Aswad 1994, Aswad and Bilgé 1996). Most social scientists argue that interpretations of Islam are shaped by the social, historical, and political context. Some researchers have thus traced the relevance of idealized Islamic family ideals to Muslim American families. Several scholars have explored the ways in which constructions of gendered identity, sexuality, marriage, and motherhood are shaped and reshaped by American Muslims.

Some studies have addressed the ways that generational shifts are gendered (Aswad and Bilgé 1996) while others have focused on issues of domestic violence (Hassouneh-Phillips and Saadat 2001). Others have either explored immigrant Muslim women's adaptation to American society (Ross-Sheriff 2001) or have compared and contrasted immigrant Muslim, African American, Asian Pacific Islander, and American Indian families and populations (McAdoo 1999).

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