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Western Perceptions of Arab Women & Their Lived Identities as Women

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Abstract

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The current circulation of knowledge that Western audiences are exposed to leaves much to the imagination and little to be understood of the everyday realities of individuals of the MENA region and specifically its women. Western media and news often present Arab women as a homogenous group of silent women. Others, such as Arab women activists and scholars present Arab women as active, involved, dynamic and heterogeneous. The simplification that exists in the media was the motivation behind prioritizing the voices of Arab women as they speak for themselves. Rather than solely observing behaviors and trends among the featured population, I chose to interview Arab women in depth to more faithfully capture their voices.

This research brings to light the diversity among Arab women's lived experiences as they navigate womanhood both in the Middle East and in the Western world. Specifically, I explore the range of experiences around Arab women's religious and female identity through their experiences as youth and as adults. Their distinct experiences demonstrate the diversity of the Arab world: if the variance in opinions and attitudes among the small sample of women I interviewed is any indication, then we can presume that the variance among their respective societies must be much greater. Rather than make sweeping claims of generalization about women's life in the Middle East, the research explores the diversity that exists in Arab women's ideas, attitudes, and opinions about religious and female identity, in the hope of deconstructing a common one-dimensional narrative that exists about Arab women in Western consciousness and rendering it more complex.

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INTRODUCTION

In the Arab and Muslim world, the oppressed image of Arab women has led to the continuation of a certain understanding of Arab women as a whole. Given this representation that exists, I wanted to explore the reality of such a perception. In this research, I investigate how some Arab women form their identities and what their experiences are as women as they interact with both Western and Arab societies. Some of the questions shaping the research include: How do Arab women feel their identities as women are defined, and does their identity as a woman affect their position in society or create obstacles for them in their life? And how do these narratives reflect or differ from how Western sources or nations perceive in the Arab, North African, and Muslim world?

The first chapter will provide a framing of the region that the population I am researching belong to in order to better situate the reader. In the second chapter, I will summarize certain studies that deal with representations of Arab women in the Western world to contextualize the reader to the setting of the research, and provide and understanding of the ethnographic information to follow. Given the effect representations have in discourse, media, and the framework through which populations are viewed and understood, I will unpack Western perceptions and explore the current understandings of women in the Arab world. The third chapter will discuss the anthropological data collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews compared to existing literature on similar topics.

CHAPTER ONE: SITUATING AND FRAMING

Defining the Middle East and Arab World

While the region of the Middle East and North African (MENA) is often termed "Arab" and is confined to countries in North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, sometimes with Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan, this construct is notably based on geographical location. Current news media has an inclination to unify the various countries through cultural or religious characteristics which Joseph argues stems from a desire to make abstractions more concrete and defined (1996:6). Yet, Joseph points out that "the region does not share a common culture, language, political boundary or vision; the region has many cultures that have continually changed. Even Islam, the predominant religion, which Orientalists and the heirs of their modernization theory have projected as the region's defining feature, is highly diversified and does not constitute a unifying culture or cohesive community" (1996:5-6). Though tempting to view nations or regions as containing a homogenous population, it certainly does not reflect the diversity within the Middle Eastern and North African region.

Naming and simplifying the complexities of a nation into a single name – Arab- or idea removes its multi-dimensional layers. Like its culture, it is tempting to classify the population into a certain racial or ethnic group. However, just as it is dangerous to define the culture in a single sweeping definition, it is also not necessary to artificially describe the population into discrete cultural, ethnic, or racial categories. As Willis notes, the "unavoidable truth of the historical experience and legacy…is highly mixed. No one experience or influence can be seen as eclipsing all others" (Willis 2012:10). Thus, no single description can encapsulate the Arab experience, or what it means to be Arab in the diversity of the population.

Despite the diversity within faiths, values, environments, and societies, for the purposes of this paper and research, MENA and its population are considered part of the Arab and Muslim world. However, this does not mean that the region and its culture is one-dimensionally understood or viewed through a single lens. Joseph notes that the Middle East is a "geographic construct developed by European powers and scholars for political purposes," often including different sets of nations depending on the constructor's goals (1996:5). She further argues that while "Orientalist scholars have tended to reify the region --assuming the existence of a stable set of cultural characteristics that unify the region transhistorically," the region contains much diversity and is not so static (1996:5). And, according to Joseph, "Even Islam, the predominant religion, which Orientalists and the heirs of their modernization theory have projected as the region's defining feature, is highly diversified and does not constitute a unifying culture or cohesive community" (1996:5).

Thus, in acknowledging the dynamism of the region, the complexities and layers of society will not be ignored or simplified for the purposes of this paper. Rather they will be understood within the context of a certain framework, region, and religion due to historical, cultural, and religious ties while keeping in mind the powers at play and the complexities that exist within Middle Eastern society. To avoid misrepresenting the Arab women included in this research, I will illustrate the variety of experiences and opinions that exist among these women. Each woman's religious identity and expression of that identity, education and professional life, and family responsibilities are distinct and will not be reduced to a single generalization of the 'Arab woman experience'.

Defining the Western World

Given the focus on complicating the language regarding the Arab world, it necessary to also define West and Western in my research. In attempting to deconstruct the one-dimensional narrative of Arab women that exists in certain media, the perpetrators of such a construction should also be clarified. However, given the limited scope of the research and constraints in resources and time, such a definition will not be comprehensive. The studies and news media examined in this research when discussing perceptions of Arab women include literature from Canada and the United States. Given these countries' cultural and political international influences especially on the English speaking world, the term West/Western in this research does include nations apart from these two. While historically, the "Western World" was also a geographic construct, presently and in this research the term includes Europe and the nations of colonial influence in the 20th century, especially those whose predominate language is English.

Western Perceptions of Arab Women

You've seen her image: dark round eyes, averted and peering from behind a dark veil; her body draped from head to toe, blending into the shadows to avoid the public eye. She is an Arab woman.

You've heard their stories: preteen girls given to men old enough to be their fathers or grandfathers, men who are already married and looking for more wives; innocent teenage virgins killed by family members because the teens were suspected of having sex before marriage; female college students strapped with bombs and AK47s destined for the next suicide mission. These, too, are Arab women.

In fact, these images all depict women of Arab nations, yet they do not rep resent the "Arab woman." They feed the common, often mistaken, view of what it is to be a woman in the Arab world, but they don't give us the whole story. The "Arab woman" is far more complicated than brief sound bites, photographs, or five-second clips on the evening news can portray.

Despite the images we see repeated in newspapers, magazines, and on television, there is no such thing as a typical "Arab woman." To say that someone is a typical "Arab" would be like saying she is a typical "American" or typical "African" or typical "Asian" or typical "European" The lives and personalities of Arab women differ vastly from each other, just as they do in other countries and cultures. To assume that all Arab women are the same or that they experience identical joys and challenges would be to unfairly stereotype them. [Women in the Modern Arab World 2005: 18, emphasis added]

According to Al-Malki et al., "the single most cited empirical study to date on Arab women in American news (Wilkins 1995) uses journalistic image bites as the coding unit of her study" (2012:6). The Wilkins study was a survey of *The New York Times* and photographs related to news related to the Middle East and was designed to test, through the analysis of one Western media source targeted to a Western audience, if Orientalist (Said) perceptions permeated Western media on Arab women. Specifically, Wilkins tested to see if men more were likely to be represented in active roles or as violent, and if women were more likely to be represented in lower status positions, be stigmatized, or holding passive roles. Wilkins' results found that Orientalist assumptions did pervade through Western media: 13% of the photographs were of women, yet 63% of those photographs of women were of veiled women (Al-Malki et al. 2012: 6). Captions under these photographs reported men in active roles such as politicians,

soldiers, protestors, and overall working professionals. Women were instead described more frequently as wives, mothers, and religious worshippers. The women were thus left to the "periphery of the story, in collective, generic, supportive and victim roles," mourning and suffering, proving six times more likely to be described as victims than men(Al-Malki et al. 2012:7). The data strongly suggest that women were not in the news because they were making news, but rather because they were, as a collective part of society, affected by the news. The study concluded that "women from the Middle East conveyed through image bites in Western news appear less frequently and in less central news-making roles than Middle Eastern men" (Al-Malki et al. 2012:7). This depiction in Western media reveals what exposure Western audiences have surrounding Arab women. While slightly dated, the study provides insight into the kinds of information offered to an audience in the West about the East. But, are these images representative of "Arab women"?

More recent studies echo similar sentiments regarding representation of Arab women in Western media as those that Wilkins found in 1995. For example, a 2000 study found that while not all media is the same, there are reoccurring narratives involving Muslim women (Bullock and Jafri 2000:36). Of such narratives, one that persists according to Bullock and Jafri, is the characterization of Muslim women as outsiders to the Canadian nation. Despite the millions of Muslims that live in Canada as citizens, in Canadian print media, "Islam and Muslims are usually covered in the foreign affairs section, meaning they are presented as outsiders, not as members of the Canadian nation" (Bullock and Jafri 2000:36). The same study further supported their argument by noting that most articles identified Muslim Canadians by their Middle Eastern or South Asian descent or status as immigrants. Such a focus, Bullock and Jafri note,

“emphasizing the "immigrant" status of Muslim women ties into the larger racialized discourse in Canada about who is/is not a "real" Canadian” (2000:36).

Another study conducted in 2007 reproduced similar results to both Wilkins and Bullock and Jafri’s studies. Smeeta Mishra analyzed 258 articles from 2001 to 2003 from *The New York Times* to explore how articles and commentary pieces represented Muslim men and women. She found that there was “an overwhelming portrayal of Muslim women living in different parts of the world as victims of political violence and Islamic practices, few articles portrayed them as agents of resistance and change within the Islamic framework” (Mishra 2007:5). This reoccurring portrayal of Arab and Muslim women ignores the diversity of experience what women of any region and certainly the MENA region must face. Such portrayals tend to ignore historical and cultural contexts that have perhaps led to marginalization. And, perhaps ignores certain agency many women hold in their lives despite their religious beliefs or cultural background.

In examining these portrayals of the Arab population and Arab women in Western sources, it is also valuable to explore possible explanations motivating these portrayals. Given the many political international conflicts that have occurred between the region and the West, --including 9/11, the war in Afghanistan, and dating much further back, the Iranian Revolution--conflict has often been a key motivator in Western news coverage of the region. Skalli of the American University in Washington D.C. writes in the *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* in 2013 that knowledge produced about the Middle East and North Africa “has been constrained by the twin processes of intense visibilization and securitization since 9/11” referencing the political contexts through which much media is produced surrounding the Arab world (2013:5). Similarly, Mishra argues that war has had a large role in the shaping of Western

media surrounding Middle Eastern nations and Muslim populations. She insists that with the common framing of Middle Eastern and Muslim populations, it becomes crucial to examine the possible motivations behind Western media's simplification. Mishra's 2007 study specifically focusses on representations of Muslims in the *New York Times* in a post 9/11 world. The national tragedy, and events that came after have significantly shaped Western discussion on not only the Middle East but certainly Muslims and Islam as well at the U.S.'s attempts to regain national security led to a war in the Middle East (Mishra 2007; Al-Malki et al. 2012). In March of 2003, the U.S. led an invasion of Iraq under the guise of a war on terror in response to the 9/11 attack in 201.

To understand certain perceptions that permeate Western representations of Middle Easterners and Muslims, the events that led to the war in Iraq should be explored. The war in Iraq provides one example of the understanding of the Middle East from a Western perspective and can illuminate some of the exposure to the Arab world the West (and particularly the U.S.) has come across.

The American invasion of Iraq was based off of the assumption that Saddam Hussain, the then leader of Iraq, had created weapons of mass destruction (Acharya and Katsumata 2011:65-66). Political scientists, Acharya and Katsumata claim, "The civil conflict produced human suffering, virulent ideologies, sectarian violence, internal displacement, refugee flows, and extremists and terrorists" on Iraq (2011:109). Not only has the American intervention has remained one of the most significant factors in the context of current events in Iraq, but the Second Gulf War and its outcomes, which ended in officially 2011, were some of the motivators behind coverage on the nation in Western media. More recently, in 2012, the sectarian power struggles in Iraq became one with those in Syria as the Syrian Civil War spread to Iraq. (Rayburn

2014: 242). The Islamic State extremist movement's coverage of Iraq prompted the U.S. to intervene once again in 2014. The weakened state of the domestic government in Iraq since the Second Gulf War, together with ISIS's presence in the country and surrounding regions and its growing global members, have caused much of the political instability in the country, and thus prompted much international attention. Such attention bred international and Western news coverage, often focusing on the conflict through a Western focused lens –as expected. This news coverage inevitably simplifies factors that led up to and surrounding the conflict to make it more palatable to an uninformed audience.

However, prior to invasion, in the early 1990s, the US and UK established Iraqi civil societies. Civil societies were initially formed as collectives of a variety of organizations including NGOs, faith based organizations, labor unions, or community groups. At their establishment, many of these civil societies often had goals transition former colonial states to democratic independent nations (Zangana 2014). Such civil societies aimed to represent and promote the will of the nation's citizens through organizations independent from national governmental institutions (Zangana 2014). Inevitably, civil societies and feminist organizations affected the fabric of Iraqi society and how Iraqis were viewed by Western audiences. Rather than an organic establishment of civil societies, it was instead linked to the American foreign policy agenda, and in turn, to its sources of funding (Zangana 2014). One of these organizations, established in 1991, was the Iraqi Foundation in Washington, with a mission to "promote democracy, human rights and civil society in Iraq" (Zangana 2014:218). This mission was echoed by other Iraqi civil societies and feminist groups both inside and outside of Iraq. With political tensions high, these organizations became tools for their 'war on terror' while aid agencies were forced to make known their ties to U.S. funding to further American political

goals; NGOs and contractors became not only limited in their possible initiatives, but also had to align their goals with those of Washington's (Zangana 2014:218-9).

Given their missions to promote freedom and equality for women in Iraq, these organizations eventually affected the way women of the nation were viewed by Western populations whose governments funded many of these organizations (Zangana 2014:219); Americans began to understand Iraqi women as "in need" of saving and Western support. In the time right before the invasion, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a nonpartisan policy institute or think tank based in Washington, D.C., (FDD) warned civil societies and their Western funders against leaving out first-hand accounts of the injustices facing the people of Iraq, collecting a number of stories from Iraqi women to help shed a light on local realities. According to Zangana, after this statement, the discourse of White House officials shifted to include statements such as 'the suffering of Iraqi women', with a focus on their 'liberation' and 'rights' as their planned invasion grew closer(2014:218); "This was due to the administration's failure to garner the public's support, as it had hoped it would, after its two initial excuses for going to war collapsed" (i.e. the presence of weapons of mass destruction and the relationship between Saddam Hussein's regime and al-Qaeda) (Zangana 2014: 218). And, while some of the repeated stories of women's suffering that were publicized by Western media and administrations held some truth, "no independent research has been undertaken to establish their veracity" (Zangana 2014:219). The FDD report and subsequent investigations into the circumstances on the ground in Iraq revealed that despite possible accuracy, the claims of women's suffering that became the U.S. battle cry had little actual empirical evidence from any field studies at the time. Despite the lack of substantiation, the liberation of Iraqi women

remained a unifying motivator for those that had doubts surrounding the morality of sending in Western troops (Zangana 2014:219).

Moreover, following 9/11 and the subsequent 'war on terror', U.S. policy changed significantly towards non- governmental organizations and women's groups. As Zangana reveals, "The scope of these organizations' ability to choose their activities to suit their country's and their society's needs, and to acquire funding, became much more limited, if it did not end altogether" (2014:219); rather than defend issues as the saw fit, these civil societies almost always only received funding if their mission included liberating women (2014:219). This shift further clarifies the link between the then newly formed feminist organizations and the occupier's foreign policy agenda. Thus, liberating the women of the region became a battle cry for American troops in Iraq just as they had been in earlier conflicts in Afghanistan (Zangana 2014:219). Such a mobilizing mantra certainly led to some understandings of Iraqi women as unjustly discriminated against by war and their men (Zangana 2014:220). Western audiences observing from the sidelines and through news headlines inadvertently began to understand these women as in need of Western support to liberate them. And, perhaps unknowingly, Western perceptions surrounding Iraqi women bled into Arab women as a whole as in need of saving.

Yet, though many years have passed since this conflict, other conflicts in the region persist and seem to bring with them historical (mis)understandings of the region. Time Magazine's 2011 article "Silent No More: The Women of the Arab Revolutions" reveals both in its title and first sentences, perceptions of women of the Arab world. Naming the women of the region as "Silent" in the article's title, speaks to an understanding held by the presumed Western audience to which the article is addressed. The author, Carla Power, then mentions in the first lines of her story that along with the removal of dictators of the region, "Gone too are the old

stereotypes of Arab women as passive, voiceless victims" further alluding to this understanding of Arab women (Power 2011). While she acknowledges that the understanding of Arab women as passive is in fact a stereotype, her title does allude to some shared understanding of such a notion. Or, at the very least, validates the existence of such a stereotype in her Western audience. Power then mentions Arabs' reactions to their many women-led protests, and stereotypes that exist surrounding them, writing that "Arabs were bemused that the Western media was shocked — shocked! — to find women protesting alongside men" (Power 2011). Despite the West's surprise, women were actually some of the instigators of the social and political movements of the region. Power emphasizes women's participation stating that, "Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz, 26, became known as the Leader of the Revolution after she posted an online video call to arms…In Libya, female lawyers were among the earliest anti-Gaddafi organizers in the revolutionary stronghold of Benghazi" (Power 2011). Power's writings, and others experiences noted in her writing, both reveals the diversity in Arab women's identity and also the homogenizing force of Western media. Despite the expectation of women to be removed from political activism in the Arab world, Power's article establishes that such a belief is not the reality. Thus, these works problematize certain notions regarding Arab women and their believed active or passive roles in society.

Interestingly, the women's participation that Power mentions, may actually have been one of the factors breeding some of the successes of the political uprisings of the 2011 Arab Spring. Award-winning documentary filmmaker, media strategist, and political activist Julia Bacha notes in her 2016 Ted Talk, "How women wage conflict without violence", that in a study of over 300 major political conflicts from 1900 to 2006, nonviolent movements proved almost 100% more effective and constructive than violent movements in successfully making change,

and that the likelihood that a movement would adopt nonviolent strategies depended on its perspective towards the role of women in public life(Bacha 2016). More specifically, in Bacha's words, "When a movement includes in its discourse language around gender equality, it increases dramatically the chances it will adopt nonviolence, and thus, the likelihood it will succeed" (2016). While much of Bacha's own research and political work took place along the Gaza Strip and in the Middle East, the successes of nonviolent movements were taken from global data. According to research into political movements and her own research in Budrus among Palestinians and Israelis, Bacha states that "movements that welcome women into leadership positions…were much more likely to achieve their goals" (Bacha 2016). Thus, a solution to political conflicts surrounds encouraging nonviolent movements in response to political problems that arise. And given much of the conflict that surrounds the Middle East, and Bacha's own work, one might see a solution to war and conflict "to educate Muslim and Arab societies to be more inclusive of their women" (Bacha 2016). Yet, despite these data and results, Bacha wanted to avoid certain misunderstandings surrounding the Middle East among her audience given the information she shared surrounding women in public life. While she noted that her experiences focused on the Middle East, she also asserted that,

> They do not need this kind of help. Women have been part of the most influential movements coming out of the Middle East, but they tend to be invisible to the international community. Our cameras are largely focused on the men who often end up involved in the more confrontational scenes that we find so irresistible in our news cycle. And we end up with a narrative that not only erases women from the struggles in the region but often misrepresents the struggles themselves. [Bacha 2016]

She then cites several movements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in which women were the main mobilizing forces. And, as previously mentioned, in the 2011 Arab Spring, women were also noted as having frontline positions in the success and organization of protests despite

sometimes being excluded from public and official recognition. The pattern observed in the Arab Spring matches broader historical patterns where women have been overlooked in political movements, despite their active participation in movements such as the American Civil Rights Movement (Bacha 2016). More important than the recognition that is omitted, is how women are viewed in society when they are left out of active roles in social change. Bacha summarizes the effects of this omission,

> The stories we tell matter deeply to how we see ourselves, and to how we believe movements are run and how movements are won…If we do not lift up the women who played critical roles in these struggles, we fail to offer up role models to future generations. Without role models, it becomes harder for women to take up their rightful space in public life. And as we saw earlier, one of the most critical variables in determining whether a movement will be successful or not is a movement's ideology regarding the role of women in public life.

Given that “The greatest predictor of a movement's decision to adopt nonviolence” —and thus its inevitable success—“is its ideology regarding the role of women in public life,” it becomes even more crucial to encourage women’s participation in political movements through past examples (Bacha 2016). Yet, given the saturation of present media with current understandings of the Arab world, Skalli reveals the difficulty in exploring the individuals within the Arab region. She wonders about the dimensions within the “identities and realities hide behind the figure of the ‘angry young man’, the ‘veiled young woman’ and the politically apathetic generation depicted in numerous accounts prior to the Arab Spring?” (2013:5).

Historical and ongoing political contexts in the Middle East have bred U.S. media representations of the Arab world and its cultural and religious realities, that focus on “oppressive Arab regimes, but also consistently highlight the ‘plight’ of the Middle Eastern woman” (Jarmakani 21996:1). While the issues that Arab women face, such as access to

education and political representation, are issues that women globally face, as Jarmakani notes, "the corresponding images typically depict women hidden 'behind the veil'"(1996:1).

Thus, Western media and news simplifies the mentioned complex political and cultural contexts of women in the MENA region into symbolic representations such as the veil, eventually permeating Western minds as well. And, in Jarmakani's words, "Such a narrow focus not only slights the complexity of the circumstances that determine women's lives in different regions of the Middle East, it also homogenizes their lived experiences behind the exoticized veneer of the veil."(1996: 1). Lila Ahmed echoes this pattern among Western perceptions of Arab women that seem to also conflate the term "Arab" with "Muslim,"

> Just as Americans "know" that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded. And they know this not because they know that women everywhere in the world are oppressed, but because they believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women. [Ahmed 1982: 522]

Like all portrayals to some extent, the images that exist in Western media surrounding Arab women have not represented the complicated social and historical circumstances that have determined Arab women's lives despite having impacted the dominant perception of Arab women's lives in the U.S. What becomes crucial to understand beyond the reality behind "the victimized veiled woman" that "may not reflect the lives of the women they are meant to represent" is their effect (Jarmakani 1996:27). Such representations affect "those women's sense of possibility about their own being in the world" (Jarmakani 1996:27). Thus, by working through the existing narratives compared to lived realities "to create new spaces of meaning in which Arab and Arab American women's full potential may be realized" (Jarmakani 1996:27).

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

Research Purposes and Questions

Western media and news presents Arab women as a homogenous group of silent women. Others, such as Arab women activists and scholars present Arab women as active, involved, dynamic and heterogeneous. I sought to talk with a small sample of Arab women to learn more about how they view themselves, their identities, and their relationship with their gender in their societies.

This topic is not just of academic and political interest, but also one of deep personal interest. Given my own identity as an Arab-American woman, I inevitably reflect on my expression of my womanhood as an Arab woman, an American woman, and a Muslim woman. Growing up in the United States, I came across certain representations in the media and news of Middle Eastern and Muslim women. But, I also came across another representation of Arab women I knew who lived in the United States, or those I interacted with during annual visits to Cairo, Egypt. Thus, I wondered which to believe, or which to look to for guidance in forming my own identity as a woman. Should I believe the news' depictions that Arab women succumbed to their patriarchy? Or, should I be inspired by the Arab women I knew as boisterous, opinionated, and assertive?

To answer these questions and to explore the potential diversity in Arab women's voices I chose to conduct in-depth interviews with Arab women living in the West or educated in the West. These women had grown up and been educated in the Arab world, but had relocated to the West temporarily or permanently and have thus experienced Western society. As such, the women experienced both East and West and provided a bridge of understanding between the life of a woman in the Arab Muslim world, the life of a woman in the Western world, and the life of

an Arab woman in the Western world. My overarching research question was how do Arab women see their own freedoms or rights in their respective societies and how do these narratives reflect or differ from how Western sources or nations perceive women in the Arab, North African, and Muslim world? I aimed to investigate how these women formed their identities, but left questions open to interpretation so as to collect broader experiences of womanhood. Because I knew all of the participants personally at varying levels of proximity, I structured the questions to address issues of upbringing, and formation of their identities – subjects I had less interaction with throughout my relationships with them.

I conducted four 1-hour long interviews with four different Arab women using a semi-structured interview. Each participant was asked the same sets of questions but were allow to respond in their own way. The question guide can be found in the Appendix but here I list a few a few key questions to give an idea of the overall questioning:

1. How do you see participation of women in your community or larger society? Do you feel misrepresented in your society?
2. Do you feel misrepresented by other societies and countries?
3. Do you feel like your religion has influenced the way you think about being a woman?
4. Do you feel like your religion has influenced the way others view you as a woman?

Given my personal background and interests, I conducted participant observation among the sub-cultures I my participants and I belong to. Such sub-cultures include those of Arab women, Muslim women, and more specifically Egyptian-American-Muslim women. From an early age, I have been exposed to interactions with and between Arab and Muslim women, both formally and informally. Spending five hours a week in an Arabic language and culture school, from ages 8 to 18, I observed behaviors and attitudes common among Arab women. I kept these observations along with my own Egyptian and Islamic upbringing in mind while conducting my interviews. I also spent four months studying in Rabat, Morocco from January to May 2018

during which I lived with a Moroccan family and was instructed by Moroccan professors. In this time, I also conducted participant observation. Drawing from my personal experiences in my own household, and aforementioned educational environments, I find these ethnographic observations reveal trends in behaviors and attitudes among several Arab women. However, like all research, especially research that is qualitative in nature, my collected observations do not speak to the entire population and are inherently not objective nor do they aim to be. Rather, my observations and interviews help to generate a record of Arab women's ideas and attitudes, which along with other work, helps to produce a more comprehensive understanding of Arab women that perhaps complicates the representation that many Westerners may hold.

Sampling and Participants

For the purposes of the research, it was important to include women who had experienced both Western and Middle Eastern cultures. Thus, I conducted purposive sampling, targeting women from four different Arab national origins, but who had high levels of education and lived in the West. Recruiting for the interviews was achieved through personal relationships I had with the women. Such a recruitment process was not only bred out of convenience but also these close relationships made collecting personal information more feasible. Below I offer a brief biography of each of the study participants, whose names were changed for privacy purposes, to help contextualize the study results:

Nancy is a 49-year-old Lebanese woman, with an undergraduate degree in agricultural economy from the American University in Beirut(AUB), and two master's degrees –animal science from AUB, and agricultural and resource economics from UC Davis. She is married with three children, and currently lives in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While currently

unemployed, she describes herself as an agricultural economist. Nancy is a neighbor and my former employer, thus my relationship with her is both personal and professional.

Sherine is a 46-year-old Egyptian woman, with an undergraduate degree in accounting from Cairo University, and a MBA from Sorbonne University in France. She is married and has one son, lives in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and works as the Vice President and software engineer manager at an American multinational investment bank and financial services company. Sherine is a close friend of my family and thus my relationship with her is personal.

Noura is a 57-year-old Sudanese woman with an undergraduate degree from Khartoum University, in Sudan. She is married with three children and is currently an Arabic and Islamic studies instructor and lives in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. My relationship with Noura began as a professional one, as I was one of her Arabic students previously.

May is a 62-year-old Saudi Arabian woman with a undergraduate degree from King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah Saudi Arabia, a Master's in Public Health from Tulane University and a PhD from Tulane University. She is divorced with three children. She currently lives in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and works as an accreditation consultant for the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation. May was my mother's classmate at Tulane University, and thus my relationship with her is personal.

The sample of women interviewed for this research is quite limited in that it only includes Sunni Muslim women, though each are of different levels of self-determined religiosity.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

Themes in Literature and Reality

Pervasive depictions of women in the Arab world bind them to singular understandings of cultural practices. Western discussions of Arab womanhood do not seem multi-dimensional but rather static unlike recent progress in discussions of Western women. Former Director of the Institute for Arab Women's Studies in Washington, D.C., Suha Sabbagh, states that "Through Western eyes, Arab women are perceived in popular culture as docile, male dominated, speechless, veiled, secluded, subdued, and unidentifiable beings" (2003: xi). But, what do Arab women have to say about themselves? If they could control their narrative, what would they say?

News media and some literature surrounding women in the Middle East or Arab world deal with the perceived notions that they are suppressed and dominated with by their male counterparts (Al-Malki et al. 2014; Sabbagh 1996). The cited scholars studying the region attempt to understand this perception and resolve the tensions between the perceived reality versus their actual experiences with women in the region. Based on Zangana's anaylsis of the war in Iraq along with Al-Malki et al., Bullock, and Mishra's investigation in Arab women in news and their analysis of Western assumptions about Middle Eastern women, the portrayals of women they found throughout media and discourse implied a sense of need from a democratic Western hand to solve their problems (2014; 2012; 2000; 2007). This mentioned portrayal that current discourse is competing against removes any dynamism among Arab women. Yet, these scholars found that often times the issues facing these women 'in need of saving' were far more complex, political, and historically rooted than they appear in the media.

In the next section I take four themes or foci that dominate Western media and that often depict Arab women as homogenous, silent, and passive actors. I briefly review how Western

media portrays Arab women in relation to each theme and then draw on my interviews to compare and contrast the extent to which these women mirror dominant representations. Four themes of identity formation reverberated throughout both the literature and interviews with Arab women I conducted: religion, education, belonging, and feminism and womanhood. Below, I present an overview of the theme and then each woman's experiences, thoughts, attitudes, and reflections on that theme.

Islam: dominating media coverage on MENA or Muslim women?

How Arab women's religion is depicted in the media and in the lives of Arab women

This section explores the ways that religion, particularly Islam, interacts with womanhood for Arab women. While the Arab world holds a population of diverse religions, the majority of the populations does identify as Muslim. Religion was not considered when determining who to interview, but the participants' Muslim identity inevitably played in a role in their answers and experiences as women. Overall, religion was a common factor for all participants' formation of identity as women, and thus was examined in literature as well.

When exploring the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region on any search engine, Islam –or religion generally, is a prevalent theme. Connected to religion, is the ever-present veil, a symbol of not only the women of the region but of their limitations. In 2010, countries in Europe such as Spain, France, Germany, and Belgium began proposing burqa and headscarf bans for its female Muslim residents. As Martha Nussbaum, law and philosophy professor at The University of Chicago, argues in her *New York Times* opinion piece, these laws were set into motion under the claim that the veil represents a physical manifestation of male domination over Muslim women (Nussbaum 2010). Yet, she quickly rebukes this claim stating that, "But the more glaring flaw in the argument is that society is suffused with symbols of male supremacy that treat women as objects. Sex magazines, nude photos, tight jeans — all of these products, arguably, treat women as objects, as do so many aspects of our media culture" (Nussbaum 2010). To further her arguments, Nussbaum then notes that dress is an individual choice for women, and physical coercion is already illegal in most, if not all, European nations (2010). Yet, several countries have still banned the burqa or full-face veil: there are partial bans on the full-face burqa in Spain, Turkey, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Chad, Niger,

Cameroon, and the Republic of the Congo as well as national bans in France, Belgium, and Austria (Sanghani 2017). While these bans remain in effect on Muslim women outside of the Arab world, they are still important to consider when discussing Arab women given the persistent ties that are made between Arab women and Islam, and the large role that religion and Islam particularly, plays in Arab women's identity. Additionally, a product of these laws regarding Islamic dress in the West is that religion has become an othering force. According to Gray, in the past decade, "there has been a shift in the European discourse" while previously immigrants to Europe "were identified by region of country of origin… today they are jointly referred to as Muslims, connoting a false sense of homogeneity and unified otherness." (2013: 22).

Interestingly, the country with the largest population of Muslims is not in the Arab world, but in Asia. In fact, the Asia-Pacific region holds the world's largest percentage of Muslims with about 62% of the world's Muslims compared to MENA's 20%. Indonesia has the largest number of Muslims with about 209 million people identifying as Muslim, and India follows with about 176 million Muslims nationally. Despite these majorities in Asia, the relationship between MENA and Islam cannot be ignored as it remains the most concentrated region of Muslims in the world with nearly 93% of the region's population identifying as Muslim (Desilver and Masci 2017).

Given this large portion of the population that identify as Muslim, and the pervasion of Islam with respect to discussions about the Arab world, it becomes crucial to examine the relationship between womanhood and religion for women of the MENA region. Sabbagh reveals that a common image of Middle Eastern women portrayed through popular novels and media has changed throughout the years (2003: xiii). While historically Arab women were viewed as

alluring or sensual objects and criticized for their promiscuity, contemporary images depict them as victimized or marginalized members of society. In discussing Middle Eastern women, Edward Said mentions Flaubert's historical text that conceptualizes women as submissive, "she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her… she was 'typically Oriental'" (Said 1978:6). Here, Said touches on a historical understanding of "Oriental" or Middle Eastern as passive or submissive to a male counterpart. This portrayal of Arab women is one that scholars cited throughout this paper seem to also oppose in their work. Current stereotypes of women in the Arab and Muslim world remain salient in Western media, citing them as victims of Islamic traditions and Sharia law (Sabbagh 2003; Gray 2013; Maestri and Profanter 2017). Bullock et and Jafri's 2000 study of Canadian print media garnered similar narratives, finding that "Newspaper photographs often show veiled women holding guns or supporting causes defined as fundamentalist" (2000:36). Sabbagh argues the current popular depiction "suffers from the naiveté of perceiving another culture through the prism of Western consciousness" (2003: xiii) For example, the veil is frequently cited as a symbol of Arab men stripping their women of their identity, freedom, and agency (Abu-Lughod 2013:10). These veiled Arab women are often seen as passive objects of male domination, symbolic of believed Islamic control.

The 1995 Wilkins study on *The New York Times* found that the existence of the veil "erased not only the woman's face but to an alarming degree, her identity" Al-Malki et al. 2012:6). Veiled women were substantially more likely to be identified by religious affiliation only, while unveiled women were substantially more likely to be identified by their names and positions. Additionally, the only mention of a female in an active role was politician Hanan Ashrawi, who is notably not Muslim and was described as "Christian in a largely Muslim world

(Wilkins 1995, 60)" (Al-Malki et al. 2012:6). In line with this othering language, Bullock and Jafri found that "Muslim women are presented as outsiders: as foreign, distant "others," and as members of a religion (Islam) that does not promote "Canadian" values" (2000:35). Additionally, Canadian media tended to focus on Muslim's in other nations, rather than Canadian Muslims implying that both populations –Muslims and Canadians– were incompatible. A larger failure in the sample, argued Bullock et al., was the 87% of the articles that focused "specifically about the issue of women wearing the *hijab* in Canada, as if that is the only relevant aspect of Muslim women's identity"(Bullock and Jafri 2000:36).

This view of the veil neglects the agency many women may have in deciding to wear the veil on their own and in their decision to express their religious identity, "The media focus on Muslim women as veiled, and the veil as a symbol of oppression/violence ignores the sociological complexity behind the decision to cover" (Bullock and Jafri: 2000:37). This tendency of Western media lacks the anthropological foundation of cultural relativity and proves partial in its representation of women of the region ignoring alternate cultural standards (Abu-Lughod 2002:784). As Sabbagh notes, "That women in different cultures might have a somewhat different agenda or methods of achieving their objectives is rarely considered" (2003: xiii). According to Sabbagh often in Western media, freedom is measured against Western standards, minimizing the validity of other cultural understandings and realities (2003:37). Moreover, for many Muslim women, the veil is a personal and independent choice,

> Many see wearing hijab as a fulfillment of their spirituality (Hoodfar; Cayer; Bullock; Zine). Others use it as an anti-racist statement (Cayer) or as empowerment against Western cultural pressures for women to be slim and beautiful (Mustafa; Yusufali). Issues of class are also involved, with some women in favour of covering, but feeling impeded by their upper-class heritage which emphasized the backward nature of covering (Cayer; Bullock), and so on. [Bullock and Jafri 2000:37]

Thus, Western media's fixation on the veil reduces Muslim women to this one part of their identity, a part not all even participate in. However, Bullock et al. do note that many Muslim Canadians wrote articles in response to ones written about Muslim women and the veil, stating that it was their choice to wear the veil. One journalist even wrote on individual experiences echoing the opinion pieces. And, while a progressive step, as Bullock et al point out, "giving them [Muslim Canadian women] space to discuss the veil is not much of a departure from the reductive notion that a Muslim woman's essence is her veil, or that all Muslim women are veiled" (Bullock and Jafri 2000:37). Such portrayals demonstrate that the veil has greatly impacted the way in which Muslim, and now by extension, Middle Eastern women are viewed. And, this reductionist approach limits Arab and Muslim women in the minds of those who see the veil as symbolic of passivity.

Despite perceptions according to media, and the limiting practice of viewing the veil as oppressive, forms of dress and the norms surrounding them do vary culture to culture (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Nussbaum 2010). And as Abu-Lughod (2002) emphasizes, all individuals' desire to dress according to shared norms of their social and religious communities according to anthropological frameworks. For many Muslim women, the veil provides an opportunity for an outward expression of her religious values and can be a way that women comply with cultural and community norms. Thus, the veil, burqa, modest dress should not be seen as a lack of agency but rather a voluntary form of religious and even social expression. While forced veiling should be denounced, so should forced unveiling. A key argument Abu-Lughod makes is in defending the diversity of experiences Muslim women encounter:

> First, we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom, even if we object to state imposition of this form, as in Iran or with the Taliban…Second, we must take care not to reduce the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing. Perhaps it is time to

> give up the Western obsession with the veil and focus on some serious issues with which feminists and others should indeed be concerned. [Abu-Lughod 2002:78]

Mahmood similarly urges readers to "learn to distinguish how particular reflections upon a religious practice are geared toward different kinds of ends" (2004:56). Within her research, among women who wore the veil, Mahmood noted that "their remarks are situated within very different visions of a virtuous society" (2004:56). Of the various reasons Mahmood's research uncovered for veiling, some included the veil as an "expression of one's cultural and nationalist heritage", others felt it was "part of an entire process through which a pious individual is produced", and for some it "encompasses an entire way of being and acting that is learned through the practice of veiling" (2004:56). This diversity among motivations and implications of the veil among a sample of women all from the same community exhibit the possibility of diversity among the millions of Muslim women globally. Moreover, these grounds for veiling also reveal the deliberation and reflection that occurs in a woman's decision to veil. While I did not inquire about each woman's decision to veil or not as my research was not intended to focus on religion, this revealed deliberation about the decision to veil perhaps sheds a light into the reality of some Muslim women's experience with the veil. Mahmood's research contradicts certain stereotypes that exist surrounding Muslim women's blind adherence to an6cient religious texts and perhaps even forcibly dressing in the veil. These perceptions concerning Muslim women's expression of their religious identity did not parallel the results from my own interviews. However, religion did emerge as a foundational aspect of the women's upbringing and thus the formation of their identity as Arab women.

Specifically, through my interviews, Nancy, a Muslim Lebanese woman recounted her experience wearing the headscarf in a predominantly non-Arab, non-Muslim neighborhood. She

notes she started wearing the permanently veil in the past ten years, having worn it for a short time temporarily before that. It was after her visit to Mecca, Saudi Arabia to carry out Hajj or the religious pilgrimage that all Muslims are expected to make at least once. It was after her pilgrimage that she began adorning the headscarf more permanently. According to Nancy, her decision to wear the veil was her own, one born out of her own religiosity and one that some but not all of her siblings have chosen. Notably, Nancy always wears her headscarf in a new fashion, matching her scarf to her outfit and accessories and expressing her style through her overall modest dress. Additionally, she notes after a visit to Lebanon, she often returns bearing variously designed scarves for her female friends in the states –women who she says are Arab, Muslim, or American. Such variation in form that the veil takes for Nancy –religious adherence, fashion statement, intercultural communication, or gift— affirms Abu-Lughod's assertion that the veil can be and is for many women a form of religious, cultural, and sometimes even stylistic expression.

Despite such a positive experience with the veil on a more personal level, in her years both with and without the veil, Nancy admits that she has noticed a difference in the ways people treat her, look at her, and speak to her since she began wearing it. She has observed people talking down to her because of it and has seen its influence on their level of respect towards her, revealing that sometimes the scarf is all people see. She even mentioned a few friends who recently removed their headscarf out of fear and unhappiness with how others saw them.

Bullock et al. also noted similar sentiments towards the one-dimensional view the veil gave Muslim women in Western societies. In addition to analyzing newspaper for images and articles on Muslim women in Canada, Bullock et al. conducted focus groups with 25 Muslim Canadian women. In them the women were asked how they felt about the coverage Canadian

news had on Islam and Muslim women, and if it affected their sense of self. Not surprisingly, Bullock et al. noted a general disappointment towards the sensationalized stories covered by print media. And, the women felt coverage was often simplified or inaccurate which allowed "a negative stereotype of Muslim women and/or Islam to develop in the (uniformed) viewer's mind" (Bullock and Jafri 2000:38). While consumers of Canadian news may not have been aware of the skewed portrayal they were being given surrounding Muslims, the women who participated in the focus groups seemed to be cognizant of it. Women who had been living in Canada for longer noticed improvements in coverage, yet overall the obsession with the veil or *hijab* still remained and permeated their daily lives. One woman even noted that her sister was denied a position at a company because of her veil (Bullock and Jafri 2000:38).

Yet, despite the fixation on the outer appearance of Muslim women, Nancy remains optimistic saying that while people do treat her differently because of her headscarf, she sees experiences like these as "growing opportunities for the person disrespecting me – in any case it influences how people see me but most of the time it's in your hand and how you represent yourself as a Muslim that will change their mind." Given that people do treat her differently because of her veil, if someone is speaking to her poorly or treating her with disrespect she believes she ought to be "smart" about her response because she is representing all Muslim women for that person. While she could also be in danger, she does not want to prove whoever is disrespecting her right in their opinion of women who wear the veil. Overall, her experiences in her neighborhood and among her non-Muslim peers and cohorts of parents in children's school district have been positive and she feels like she is treated equally.

Noura, a Muslim Sudanese living in the U.S. woman did not mention any discrimination she experienced regarding her veil, though she notably dresses more traditionally than Nancy –

often sporting a abaya or a full-length, long-sleeved garment worn by some Muslim women. Given May's residence in Saudia Arabia, a nation whose national religion is Islam and requires women wear an abaya or clothing that covers everything under the neck with the exception of their hands and feet in public settings, she also did not mention any discrimination she faced based on her religion or headscarf. However, when work brings her abroad and into the West, she notes that some people do view her in a particular way. May notes, that depending on who she is interacting with, and their understanding of Islam, they may underestimate her or interact with her in a particular way.

Sherine, a Muslim Egyptian woman living in the U.S., is the only woman interviewed that does not wear the veil, and thus her religion is not as conspicuous as it is for the three other women. However, with those in greater proximity to her, such as neighbors and coworkers, she says that she has not faced discrimination as a Muslim. She even noted that the Islamic tradition of hospitality is a practice she upholds and sees as a fundamental part of her personality that her friends tend to enjoy and benefit from. Thus, she believes her religion may have been a factor in her friendships with her coworkers and neighbors.

As Mahmood details, outward expressions of religion are not always indicative of religiosity or internal values and expressions. Mahmood cites that in her research among Islamist women's movements in mosques in Cairo, Egypt, that there exists a "citizen's ability to distinguish between essence and form –that is between an inner meaning conceptually independent from the outward performances that express it" with regards to religious practices. And, urges readers against the dangers of conflating "interiority and exteriority" (Mahmood 2004:133).

Apart from the veil, and the outsiders' view on Arab and Muslim women, Islam plays a role in how women form their identities as women. Most religious traditions have guidelines for expected behavior and conditions of adulthood. Thus, any individual who prescribes to a religion will inevitably be bound at some level to those guidelines or have their identity affected by them. Moreover, for many individuals, religion is an inherited practice, one that is passed through traditions between generations. In families with religious inclinations, Islamic or otherwise, desires to participate in shared cultural practices, belong to a larger community, or meet expectations set by families or larger communities shape children's lives. And, while in the United States, there exists a separation of church and state, this boundary is not so explicit in the Middle East (Gray 2013:17-22). Western constructions of citizenship also often surround the individual with autonomy from family and collectivity. But, nations in the Middle East "tend not to construct citizenship exclusively or primarily as individualized. Citizens in various ways, are formally recognized as members of family units, religious sects, ethnic, tribal or other subnational groups" (Joseph 1996:7). Thus, religious expression becomes closely intertwined with the establishment of social circles and communities.

Additionally, as Gray notes, in most of the Middle East and North Africa, "the demarcation between religion and state is either non-existent or much less obvious than in Western countries. Changes to laws and societal norms must be consistent with religious doctrine in most Muslim-majority nations" (2013:17). Thus, religion inevitably plays a larger role in society in the Middle East than it does in the West, especially in nations with a clear separation of church and state. For nations such as Morocco, where Islam is not only the state religion but the monarch is not only the head of state but also the "Commander of the Faithful", descendent of the prophet and the highest national religious authority (Gray 2013:17). Similarly, in Saudi

Arabia, since Islam is the state religion, law requires that all citizens be Muslims. It is no surprise then, that in many countries in the MENA region with Islamic majorities, that many cite Islam as a large determinant in formation of identity for both men and women (Gray 2013: 17). For many Muslim MENA residents, actions are dictated by Islamic tenants (Gray 2013:17). Modesty is performed in dress and behavior especially publically. As I observed, public displays of affection with the opposite sex are rare and restrained if present at all in public settings. Social relationships on a grand scale are not affected by religion especially among youth, although marital partners do seem to be dictated by religion.

In line with these observations of Islam in Middle Eastern societies, Nancy, notes that religion played a large role in her identity and personal values. She notes that her religious upbringing was one that was present but not dominant. She now identifies as "*very* religious, more than my parents and grandparents," despite her parents having cultivated her religious identity. While her paternal grandfather was a sheikh, or religious scholar, her mom prayed intermittently. Nancy did however, grow up in Islamic schools until high school and thus it inevitably affected the way she developed her identity as a woman. In describing her experience forming her identity as a Muslim woman she notes, "What's really confusing is that some people –I don't know how they came to this perception—think that Muslim women are suppressed but when I learned more and more about Islam but I felt empowered in all means." She then listed the ways she felt empowered by Islam, citing a Quranic verse in which men are told to support a woman if she has no means of support. For Nancy, this was empowering because she saw it as men owing something to women, as them having an obligation to women. While this circumstance could be seen as a victimization of women as it hinders them or binds them to men, Nancy argues it is "empowering" as it gives women value and worth rather than seeing it as

dependency saying it's how “men should spend on us and work hard to service women not top them.” She also notes that for her, Islam has had a positive effect on her identity as woman, as the religion encourages women to pursue education and to have independence when with regards to money in her belief. She says, “I take only the positive effects, I do not believe in the negative ones on women.”

For Noura, her religious identity is deeply connected to her moral identity. Self-identifying as more religious than her parents, Noura notes that while her parents mentioned the veil and daily prayers in her upbringing, her largest religious takeaways from her parents were to reminders to “respect others, and myself and to behave with good morals.” And, when making large decisions she weighs her options taking into consideration what the Prophet Muhammad would have done, and praying to god for advice. Regarding making large life decisions, Nancy also notes praying to god for advice.

However, both May and Sherine do not feel they are more religious than their parents unlike Nancy and Noura. May states, “No I feel I am much more like them following their footstep on the way they raised us religion wise. They are moderate not extremist; they taught us what should we do and how to behave as Muslims. But, after that I searched to learn more through other institutions that are available like how to understand the Quran and its meaning. It was the best class I ever attended.” Interestingly, she does not feel that Islam has directly influenced her identity as a woman, though when listing factors that enabled her to succeed in life she mentions, “God’s support and guidance” first. Sherine affirms that while she is Muslim, her expressions of her religion are distinct from her family in Egypt due to different environments –cultural and geographical, differences in education, awareness, and influences. And, in listing her own factors that enabled her to succeed, the last one Sherine mentioned was

her “faith in God”. Sherine also notes that while she is Muslim on paper and so is her family, each individual experiences Islam differently, and practices in distinct ways based on their own unique circumstances and beliefs.

Echoing Sherine’s sentiments, Mahmood documents the different expressions of Islam that can exist among women even in a specific and localized community. She argues that “differential understanding of performative behavior and ritual observance among contemporary Egyptian Muslims enfold contrasting conceptions of individual and collective freedom—conceptions that have radically different implications” within both public and personal realms (Mahmood 2004: 122). Bolstering these differences between expressions of Islamic identity, Mahmood cites several scholars of the Middle East that claim that religion has become more accessible to the masses given recent technological advances allowing “ordinary Muslims” several possible interpretations of texts. Thus, “practices that were observed somewhat unreflectively in the premodern period are now the focus of conscious deliberation and debate (Eikelman 1992; Eikelman and Piscatori 1996; Salvatore 1998)” (Mahmood 2004:53). Perhaps this accessibility explains the various interpretations of Islam each of the participants I interviewed expressed and the variances that exist among between them and their parents.

The results from the interviews revealed that religion and Islam more specifically, played a large role in each woman’s upbringing. In line with prevailing narratives, Islam does in face dictate certain values held by these Arab Muslim women and thus affected their behaviors. Yet, none of the women mentioned a stifling feeling dictated by Islam as the Western narrative portrays. Rather, the women I interviewed each expressed a connection to Islam in a range of ways. All of the participants shared that Islam was a fundamental pillar of their upbringing with regards to morals and each woman mentioned this connection within their own identity. At

times, some women even noted feeling empowered and liberated by Islamic doctrines and practices as Nancy and May revealed. The experiences that my participants mentioned are important in establishing some Arab women's reality with respect to Islam. And, while Islam did manifest itself as an important factor within the lives of these four women, it is only one facet of their complex and multi-layered identities as the rest of this research aims to prove.

Education's significant role in Arab women's lives

Among all of the participants a common theme was obvious and present at the forefront of the woman's life: education. In discussing their life goals and aspirations, education was presented as equally if not more significant. Among participants of my research, though circumstance bred difference among the levels of education each woman obtained, the women all expressed an emphasis on the significance of education in their lives. This section aims to reveal the role education plays in the lives of Arab women, and finds that their education, just as it does with Western women, often liberates them to resist patriarchal systems.

According to the World Bank, average levels of schooling among children in the Middle East and North Africa have increased four times since 1960, and illiteracy has decreased by half since 1980. And, unlike in the rest of the world, "there is a 'reverse' gender gap in the region with girls outperforming boys in grade 4 math results, a trend that generally continues into grade 8" in addition to improvements overall gender parity in primary education (World Bank 2014). It is important to note, while the MENA region still lacks total gender equality, differs in levels of access to, and attitudes towards education within each nation in the region, overall historical factors have consequently influenced education in the MENA region as a whole (World Bank 2014; Wiseman et al. 2014; Herrera 2007).

Historically, education in the Arab world originated in a religious context as some of the first schools (*madrasas*) in the region were founded with the goals of Islamic teachings but soon proliferated into "Arabic sciences" which played a role on a more global stage during the Abbasid and Umayyad dynasties (Herrera 2007). Then, between the 1920s to the 1970s, governments of the MENA region implemented educational systems that "sought to create a uniformity of provision in the form of a state-controlled school system" and "reflected a shift in

the power bases of education, with new sources of authority (political and social) and a revised series of definitions of what represented valid knowledge" and thus became "absorbed into the state apparatus and ideology (Mazawi and Sultana 2010:89)."

That is to say, beyond the religious connection, "institutions of higher learning have occupied a central place in Arab societies" as they also became involved in intellectual, political, social, and economic movements in addition to religious ones (Herrera 2007:409). Certainly, "the foundations of education in the Arab world are very different from those from the liberal Western Socratic pedagogic tradition" with a central aim in which "the learner grows, develops and comes to know the world through received wisdom and convention" (Mazawi and Sultana 2010: 85-6). As expected, different societies breed different cultural expectations, and in line with those social expectations, different educational systems emerge. For most of the Arab world, education's purpose is not focused on optimizing the development of human capital but rather serves to develop and culture the individual (Mazawi and Sultana 2010:86). These differences between Western and Middle Eastern education are important to note when discussing Arab women's experiences as their early education in the Middle East shapes their later life experiences and perspectives in the West.

Despite the geographical distances and historical factors that have led to differences among educational goals and systems, globalization's forces have created connections between Western systems and those in the MENA region. And, in the face of its evidence in contemporary society, globalization is less unifying than it is divisive within the region. As Wiseman et al. note, the responses to globalization tend to fall into three categories,

> First, those who reject it as the highest form of cultural imperialism which serves to undermine their local traditions and cultures; second, those, mainly secular individuals, who welcome globalisation as a force for modernisation, which brings the age of modern science, advanced telecommunication and freedom of choice to their conservative

> homelands and third, those who believe, pragmatically, that it is possible to find a form of globalisation which is compatible with local cultures and beliefs. [Wisemen et al. 2005:87]

Such responses are important to consider as I attempt to understand how these spatial tensions and sometimes seemingly contradictory dynamics of educational opportunities and practices shape and impact the lives of these four women. Through acknowledging the contextual background, I can begin to unravel “the multifaceted and multilayered ‘worlds’ of Arab education as a horizon of possibility and action” and its role in the lives of these women as they create their identities (Mazawi and Sultana: 2010:9).

Given the formative effect education has on individual’s lives, it was important to explore education as a factor of formed identity among the participants of my research. Through the interviews, the women revealed the emphasis they had on not only their education but the education of their children. Thus, the participants of my research confirmed the view of education as a fundamental stage of their lives. The United States Census Bureau states that only around 34% of U.S. citizens have a Bachelor’s degree or higher; notably, each woman I interviewed had at least a bachelor’s degree and all but one also had an advanced degree. All four women also mentioned their parents’ push for their education at both a secondary and tertiary level. Sherine notes, “My parents encouraged my education very much. There was no other option. You breathe, you eat, you drink, you go to school and college, and I continued this same concept with my own son.” Yet, her MBA was her own personal decision, stating that she pursued higher education to gain access to better paying jobs and better opportunities. Nancy echoed a similar sentiment sharing that while she was self-motivated in her education, her parents pushed her undergraduate education while she pursued her master’s without their external encouragements. Interestingly, while her parents encouraged her university degree,

Nancy notes that her father did not want her to leave home for her degree to attend The American University in Beirut (AUB) because "it was taboo, and my father said that was not a good environment for a young impressionable Muslim girl." Despite her father's discouragement, Nancy says she and her mother conspired against her father and her mother paid for her tuition behind his back. And, despite some turmoil, once she graduated with her degree, her father was happy with his daughter's rebellion and decision to attend AUB. Noura also commented on her parents' support of her college degree recalling that they forced her education prior to allowing her to marry. Along the same vein, May's experiences reflect a similar sentiment regarding the importance of education. When asked if her parents encouraged her education she responded,

> To a great extent and beyond; when I finished high school there was no university in Al Madina at that time so I went to Jeddah (another city in KSA) with the support of my parents; my uncles and the other family highly rejected the idea. All of us --my brothers and sisters and myself-- completed our education up to the bachelor degree and higher for some. I was the only sibling who got her doctoral degree and my parents were very proud. My parents were true and strong believers of education and its importance; in addition to my experience in life I strongly believe that education is the one thing parents should invest in to enable their kids to get the best education ever. If you are educated and able to learn whenever you need your life will be a joy and fulfilling.

May's educational experiences both in the Arab world and in the West contradict perceptions regarding Saudi Arabian women and education.

According to Hamdan, no sector of Saudi society has been subject to more debates and discussions than the women's sector and their role in the development process" (2005:42). And, she also argues that Saudi women were educated in a way that perpetuated their subordination to men and prevented them from challenging it (Hamdan 2005:45). What's more, Hamdan argues that until recently, "Saudi women were considered an extension of their male guardians" and that the "general public also indicated that a Saudi woman's place is in her home." (2005:45,47).

Additionally, Al-Rasheed argues that "For Saudi women, education became an ideological tool to instill the ethos of religious nationalism – mainly the preservation of the nation's boundaries, piety, and authenticity – rather than to prepare them for the labour market" (Al-Rasheed 2013:281). According to Hamdan a result of these circumstances in Saudi Arabia, is that "women continually encounter limitations and restrictions at both educational and professional levels…Additionally, only recently has women's segregation been discussed publicly" (2005:47).

Al-Rasheed's work also reflects similar arguments stating that while Saudi women do benefit from education both domestically and internationally, they still have limited access to employment because of the nature of their domestic education and workplace dynamics that dictate certain professions more suitable for women such as those in education or healthcare (2013). Al-Rasheed does note that educated Saudi women are able to "articulate their own grievances and aspirations: despite the traditional rationale behind education, Saudi women benefited from schooling and began to develop a feminist consciousness and awareness of their subordination" (2013:281).

Despite these alleged realities, May holds a high position among consultants with the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation working for the Saudi government, proving that barriers for women are at times penetrable. While equality in Saudi Arabia remains some of the most lacking in the MENA region, May's experiences shed a light into the possibility of women to overcome such disadvantages and discrimination and the diversity among experiences women of the nation (Al-Rasheed 2013:280-1; Hamdan 2005:42-5). While many challenges do exist for women most notably in Saudi Arabia, circumstances are not as dire or hopeless as they may seem in literature. Al-Rasheed also notes, that the second half of the 20th

century Saudi women “have been active agents in imagining solutions, often consisting of bargains with the patriarchy of their state and society” reflecting their “ability to engage with their own experience and expose contradictions in their society” (Al-Rasheed 2013:282).

For both Nancy and May, the significance of a good education was evident through their decision to move away from home alone to continue their education at universities far from their family home. Their decision to leave home, and pursue higher education at universities in larger cities demonstrates their commitment to and passion for education and their studies. Interestingly, they both describe their decision to move away from home for university as some of their biggest life decision, and both claim this decision was made on their own, however, with the backing of their parents.

Education as a large life decision existed among all three participants though it was expressed differently in each person. Interestingly, each woman seemed to be encouraged to get educated while the third and oldest participant had less pressure on her college degree than the younger women. However, each woman seemed internally and individually motivated on her own to pursue her education. Both May and Nancy seemed to make certain sacrifices -i.e. moving away from family- for the benefit of their studies and education. And, in discussing women in the Arab world, it is important to also mention the strides they have made towards equality. While the MENA region has mentioned problems in their educational systems, clearly there are also successes. These four women, all above the age of 40, have been successfully educated in the Arab world and have received higher education as well. All but one of the women has a graduate degree, and they all were employed in the Arab world at one point in their lives. If these women belonging to an older generation can overcome certain obstacles surely, many women today in the region have also made progressive strides.

It is important to mention that class may have an effect on educational status as well. While this research does not intend to investigate the barriers that prevent women from education in the Arab world, it is valuable to mention that class and socioeconomic status inevitably affect education in all regions of the world, including in the Arab world. While the four participants do not represent the possibilities or realities of all Arab women, they do present a contradiction to some understandings. Unlike certain narratives of Arab and Muslim women, cultural and religious influences do not always prevent the education of women and girls, even in the past 50 years. Often, it is the same barriers that prevent education in the West that also prevent education in the Arab world. Thus, these women's experiences provide evidence of the possibility of professional success for Arab and Muslim women despite the existing perception that their education is a rarity. Additionally, such a topic was crucial given education's role in combatting discriminatory difficulties in employment. Just as education aids employment options, and allows women to enter previously male-dominated sectors in the West, it often has the same effect in the Arab world.

Belonging in family and nation: how citizenship varies in meaning in collectivist cultures

This section aims to explore how belonging both in formal citizenship and in informal familial relationships differ or parallel in Arab communities compared to Western (American) ones. Such a topic is important because it contextualizes experiences that some Arab women have within their societies. Cultural notions of belonging affect values regarding individual identity and may in turn explain any discrepancies between Western media representations of Arab women and the women's lived realities.

In both the interviews and the participant observation I conducted, the phenomenon of collectivism in many Arab cultures was present. For example, Nancy's experience in Lebanon echoes the collectivist nature common among many Middle Eastern states. More specifically, according to Nancy, the Lebanese population was a mixing pot of ethnic and religious identities. Despite her affiliation with the religious majority, she never noticed much of a hierarchy or separation between different communities. She notes that her experience in university exposed her to more diversity, but nonetheless she felt the same supportive atmosphere was present; she felt protected by strangers and safe as a student in Beirut more so than she does now in the United States as an adult.

Similarly, in Morocco and Egypt such a collectivist was also observed. My ethnographic observations confirmed that unlike in many Western societies, family is prioritized over an individual's success or personal development. For example, in Morocco and Egypt, I observed that frequently extended families shared a home residence, and, that individuals in university lived at home even post-graduation. It is not until an individual is married that they eventually move out of their family home, and often times one spouse will move into his/her spouse's family home after marriage. I also observed that many families held onto family relationships

through constant contact if an individual did move out to live with their spouse. Additionally, I observed that connections were often made to family (last) names and that many young adults were known around their community by their older family members. These observations speak to the collectivist leaning that many Arab communities seem to possess. Such observations, in line with literature on the region, reveal that Arab culture often follows a group-oriented nature rather than an individualistic one. As such, individuals are often raised with a philosophy of dependency on family for support more than individuals raised in the United States (Shakibai 2005). Notably, generosity, caring for relatives, and honor to the family are cited as primary cultural values (Shakibai 2005). Thus, for those that abide by these values, commitment to the happiness and good of the family unit as a whole is placed above individual desires and self-satisfaction (Shakibai 2005). Such behavior contrasts those of individualistic cultures in which independence and autonomy is more highly valued (Shakibai 2005).

In Western nations, citizens are granted or denied rights as individuals, a construction that creates a somewhat unavoidable individualistic understanding of oneself for its people. While there are several constructions of identity and these vary cross-culturally, in several Middle Eastern nations, the self is much more buoyed to relationships with others (Joseph 1996:9). Joseph's claims surrounding correspond to these notions of collectivism as she notes, "In Lebanon, a widely supported construct of selfhood (not unique or exclusive to Lebanon) is relational; it is constructed and maintained in reference to specific connections with others" (Joseph 1996:9). That is to say, in forming identity in relation to others, the right of the individual weighs less in Middle Eastern countries like Lebanon; here, a "relational notion of rights" is created in place of an individualized notion of rights common in the West (Joseph 1996:9). Thus, relationships become not only social capital for members of Lebanese society, but

also civil capital as well. For societies that place higher importance on collectivism and connectedness, relationships with others create certain access to resources or privileges. Rather than existing permanently on the autonomy of the individual, citizenship in Lebanon and similar Arab nations relies on “knowing people upon whom they can make claims and who are situated to serve as providers or links to providers” (Joseph 1996:9).

This emphasis on social capital proves relevant in many of the participants’ responses. While not many gave direct examples of societal collectivity like Nancy, each participant mentioned at least once a reference to what “others” say or do –referring to social expectations. For these women, community norms and expectations played roles in their decisions and behaviors both indirectly and directly. Each woman mentioned that growing up, what others expected or others’ behaviors affected their behavior when it came to religion. For example, Sherine mentions that while growing up in Egypt she behaved more “authentically Muslim” than she does now living in the United States. According to Sherine, while her internal religiosity has increased since leaving Egypt and growing older, her external behaviors may come across less religious. Her reasons for her change in external expression claim to be less of a need to “please those around [her], and to practice in a way that is expected”. Though she mentions her change in outlook and behaviors probably have much to do with her age and life experience, in her current life she has felt more freedom to express her religious identity the way she pleases and feels less influenced by others’ decisions.

Additionally, Islamic culture places high importance on family, both nuclear and extended (Joseph 1996). Certain ideals surround having children, and keeping a tightly-knit family unit. Islamic society and the Arab world is far less individualistic than most Western societies, and emphasizes the success of an individual based on the success of his or her family’s

(Maestri and Profanter 2017). In my own research, May confirmed that family always played a large and formative role in her life. Growing up with 9 children and two parents, her house was always full of bodies. After each of her siblings got married, she remembers that during the life of her parents, her entire family returned to her childhood home to celebrate Ramadan for at least ten days, followed by Eid al Fitr before "going back to [their] lives again." Growing up, May recalls her mother in a leadership role for both her nuclear and extended family stating that she feels her life has improved upon her mother's life, "because while growing up I saw my mom playing all roles in the house and she was running everything with wisdom and expertise. My mom was a big influencer in the whole family; I mean even in my extended family she was highly respected for her opinions and decisions she took at the time of her life. She was a leader in every way."

Despite feeling like her life has improved upon her mother's, May asserts that there is only a slight difference in attitudes, behaviors, and expectations between her own generation and her parents'. Instead she believes that the huge difference is between her children's millennial generation and her parents' or even between her children's and her own generation's. When asked if she considers how her mother or grandmother would behave in certain circumstances, May says,

> It will depend on the circumstances or the issue I am dealing with. For an example if it is a social event or gathering when dealing with social protocol such as letting older people go first or using different style when speaking with them—then I would consider their behavior. I do it out of respect and love for my culture. But, when it comes to decisions that would affect my life and my kids I can't apply what they believe in or think it is the right way. Generations become very different as years pass and life changes.

While she definitely respects and admires the women in her life, and sees them as role models, she claims that as times change, so do views and expectations. She sees no overarching rule or set of expectations as fundamental over her own personal circumstances and religious beliefs.

These experiences of belonging to both family and society among four Arab women speaks to the cultural differences that inevitably shape values and identity. For these four women, collectivism seems more in line with their Arab communities than individualism. Yet, some of the women still did express notions of individual success that distinguished themselves beyond their society and their expected behaviors. These women demonstrate that they are also capable of making individual decisions that may go against their social norms for their own individual benefit. Thus, this small sample of women contradict certain expectations of individuals raised in collectivist nations. And, these women complicate a single understanding of Arab women based on a study of cultural practices and tendencies within the region. Rather than exhibit precise demonstrations of their societies, this small sample provides a glimpse into the layers within an individual’s identity and the possible diversity of thought among a population.

Womanhood as part of identity for Arab women

In exploring the identity of Arab women, feminism and feminist movements are a crucial undertaking. The movements and ideals shape social expectations and policies regarding women in their respective societies. This section aims to explore the differences among the different feminist movements, and the ways that certain movements have hindered women in the Arab world. Additionally, the section will consider how these movements have affected actual individuals through understanding how the participants defined feminism, and what their feminist identities were if they existed at all.

Academic activist, Shahrzad Mojab, mentions the concept of "colonial feminism," or the pushing of feminist ideals from colonial powers onto the countries they have colonized, neglecting the various possibilities for feminism relative to a nation (Makdisi et al. 2014: 379). While Western feminism and social movements do have problematic moments of forcing their own Western-focused ideology without relative, cultural information to shape the local movements, there can also be comradery between both "Western" and "Eastern" women's rights movements. Globally, women face drastically different living situations, but nonetheless have similar human social experiences and face the same patriarchal glass ceilings that exist in various corners of the globe.

Case Study of Progress in Women's Rights in the Arab World: Morocco

Elizabeth Warnock Fernea was a Middle Eastern Studies professor at the University of Texas at Austin and produced many films about the lives of Arab women, and wrote many books about the Middle East, Islamic world, and its women. Her book, *In Search of Islamic Feminism* chronicles her adventures in various Islamic majority nations, such as Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco, among many others, searching for women's roles and place

in Islam. She embarks on a journey to contradict the passive Muslim woman she argues many Americans assume exists in these communities and societies. She claims Americans like herself and Westerners more generally are "taught to think of Islam as a culture wherein social code and religious law alike force women to accept male authority and surrender to the veil" (Fernea 1998: xii). However, through her research in these various Islamic societies she finds "in every country she visits, women demonstrate they are anything but passive" (Fernea 1998: xv).

Fernea recounts her experience with faculty at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco, in the late nineties: specifically, she compares her experience in trying to start a women's studies program at her Texas institution. She and her colleagues were dismissed by their dean, and it took many changes in administration and almost twenty years for their efforts in creating a women's studies program to be realized and given a budget. In Morocco, in 1994, at Mohammed V University, a women's steering committee had been formed to promote research on women's issues and organize events, lectures, and courses. Unlike Fernea's experience with the dean of the college of liberal arts in the U.S., in forming this Moroccan committee, both the dean and minister of culture were almost immediately supportive of the women spearheading the group, one of which was Dr. Fauzia Rhissassi. The minister, both encouraged their "courageous" work and financially backed it. King Hassan II also supported the committee, and, as Dr. Rhissassi describes, urged the women to continue with their work as "Morocco is a small country; [and needs] all the people we have to work on the issues. Especially those who are educated" (Fernea, 1998:75) This difference in experience, contradicts many assumptions about Arab society and its role of women and respect towards them. As Fernea expresses, for her Moroccan peers, the "highest levels of Moroccan government were interested in women's studies, had funded a research center, were encouraging women to "have more courage," [while]

in the so-called progressive West, our dean had sent us back to our classrooms empty-handed!" (Fernea, 1998:74). While many obstacles exist for women around the globe, and notably in the Arab world and in Morocco, this account provides some contextual evidence of the progress Morocco has made towards women's rights. The political support of the women's studies group in Morocco also demonstrates that while certain societal differences account for hindrances in women's lives when compared to men's, these hindrances are not so tightly weaved into the structure and foundation of a nation as many Westerners believe; the societal expectations for women, can and do differ from the policies and educational structures put in place in Morocco.

According to Freedom House, an American non-profit non-governmental organization's 2010 book *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, the autonomy, security, and personal freedom of Moroccan women have expanded considerably in recent years. Additionally, legal equity and justice have also progressed substantially for Moroccan women. More and more, Moroccan women have greater freedom with regards to travel, employment, education, marriage rights, and at home within the family as well. Many women have organized their own businesses, pursuing greater levels of higher education, and are participating in both national and local political positions. (Sadiqi 2010). In fact, in 2002 and 2007 there were 35 women in Parliament, seven women ministers in 2007, and 1,004 women judges in 2015 (GEPA 2011:3). By 2009, women's representation in municipal councils increased from a previous 0.5% to a 12.3% exceeding the gender quota in place. And, in 2006, a program to train women as religious leaders to teach Islamic tenants in madrasas (Islamic schools) was enacted. While these statistics do show improvement, they do not negate the fact that there still remains a need for sustained effort in mitigating gender discrimination in Morocco. However, these figures do shed

light onto some of the realities of Moroccan society, a society that does in fact include women's participation in politics and high-ranking positions (Katulis 2004:1).

According to the United Nations Development Program's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Public Administration (GEPA) Morocco Case Study, "Women's equal participation has been recognized and promoted as part of the wider reforms for a more effective public administration and good governance" (2001:44). Additionally, the nation has been addressing women's legal rights and tackling equal representation in public administration for several decades now. While there are still many strides to be made with regards to certain quotas and implementation of policies in place, Morocco, like many other Arab nations has made some noteworthy headways towards the improvement of women's rights in society. As Aquertit and Sandbery reveal,

> By the end of 2010, Moroccan women were to be found in all realms of the country's political economy: as parliamentarians in the National Assembly, as mayors and councilors in local elected political bodies, as cabinet ministers and deputies, as executive directors in the non-profit world, as senior corporate directors in the private sector, and in all the positions below those of such high authority and rank. In short, a young Moroccan girl looking around her in 2010 could aspire to any profession if she wondered what she might do when she grew up. Although Moroccan women remained in the minority in most professions, they were present and they were visible in all realms of society. [2014:2]

This excerpt reveals the large improvements to include women's active and public participation in Moroccan society. Much of these positive changes in the status of women in Moroccan society have been attributed to activists, civil societies, and social movements' work along with some monarchal support aiding this progression along. However, while considering these improvements and public and political displays of active and public women's participation, it is crucial to remain aware of the Moroccan context. Rather than define and consider improvements

through a statistical and political lens, we must understand these landmarks through Moroccans' own aspirations and motivations.

With respect to women's rights in a society, it is vital to understand the perspectives of the individuals within society itself towards these ideals and realities. Without understanding the society from its own population, and understanding its perspectives and attitudes towards the women's rights issues, it is impossible to accurately and thoroughly conduct research about the phenomenon. In 2004, Freedom House collected data from focus groups organized as part of their Survey of Women's Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa a project, that in their own words aims to "facilitate and support national and international efforts to empower women in the Middle East and North Africa" (Katulis 2004:3). The research included twelve focus groups with each focus group including about ten Moroccan participants, both men and women. The participants were from various Moroccan cities and towns such as Rabat and Fes and some smaller rural towns surrounding Abadou and Ait Ourir near Marrakesh.

Some of the significant results of the focus groups and research included the feeling of a general improvement in women's lives in Morocco in a majority of respondents, with an overall understanding that rural residency is negatively correlated to women's freedoms. In the participants' view, some of the greatest factors that have aided this improvement and progression in women's lives has been an improvement in education quality and access for women as well as greater participation in the workforce. Additionally, many of the focus groups revealed a broad sense of support towards women's right to education and this education leading to better suited or apt mothers and more prepared centers of the family. Interestingly, the study found that many Moroccans attributed the larger presence of women in the workplace to a rise in the cost of living in Morocco and the need for two household incomes to compensate for this. However,

participants also noted that this participation in the working world in turn led to not only greater independence but also greater respect due to their contribution to the family's financial security.

An issue that was divisive among the participants of the focus groups were the reforms to the Moudawana –the personal status or family code of Morocco— that were set into motion prior to the focus groups. While some Moroccans felt these reforms were necessary and a progressive step in the right direction, others felt they contradicted Islamic traditions and were forced upon Morocco by Western powers such as the UN or World Bank. However, most did doubt the degree to which the reforms would actually be implemented. Along the same vein, Freedom House found that the majority of Moroccans who participated in these focus groups formed their opinions about women's rights and freedoms through their personal understanding of Islam and its principals. Both proponents of more freedoms and those who found no issue in the status of women's rights cited Islamic texts as evidence for their beliefs, "The values system of ordinary Moroccans remains strongly informed by the rich and deep traditions of the Muslim faith, and there is a diversity of views on how to apply the principles of Islam to today's realities" (Katulis 2004:4).

The Moroccan situation provides an example to counter the belief that Arab nations need a Western hand to create equality for women. Such a notion is pervasive in literature and media as Al-Malki et al. note (2012). While progress still needs to be made to create total equality among men and women in Morocco and the rest of the world, these mentioned achievements prove that Moroccans want change for themselves and thus progress is being made domestically. The differences among participants about women's rights in the focus groups also speak to some of the variety of opinions that exist in Morocco on matters of women's status in society. Within society, there also exists a diversity and difference of expression, particularly with regards to

women's rights. These examples from Morocco provide one example of the MENA region's interactions with feminism, and, can guide a more informed understanding of feminism in similar societies in the Arab world.

Thus, my interviews provide a glimpse of other Arab women's experiences regarding their identity as women. From the interviews I conducted, I received varying responses regarding feminism, and their experiences as women in their own societies. While Noura mentioned she felt more freedom to express herself now in the United States than in Sudan as a young woman, she did not clarify whether this was because of her age when she was in Sudan or because of constraints she felt there that she did not feel in the United States. She defines feminism as, "being part of the community, we are different but not less. Women have their roles as men do, I don't have a phobia of feminism because I never feel neglected." Despite never feeling "neglected," or marginalized as a woman, Noura did note that she felt more uncomfortable as a Muslim woman in the United States than she did in Sudan.

Nancy similarly shares a fear of going out alone at night in the U.S. that she claims not to have felt in Lebanon, where she felt that even strangers were looking out for her best interests if she was out alone at night. She recalls that recently, as an adult, while her husband was out of town, she went out with only female friends and felt afraid saying that "I was imagining if anything happened on the road I wouldn't trust anyone even if someone tried to help us." Despite this fear, Nancy's outlook on womanhood and feminism seem to take a different perspective. She believes that "if you as a female are confident you can achieve whatever you want" Though she also confesses that some women in Middle Eastern societies are less direct than she tends to be, "they like twists and turns and are not direct. I see a lot of hypocrisy and I feel I am more straightforward than many of my Middle Eastern peers." Nancy articulates that through her

adulthood she has noticed a “hidden agenda in every society but sometimes I feel like it is more obvious with Middle Eastern societies.” Despite this opinion, she feels that her Middle Eastern peers do have a lot of opinions and seem to be more boisterous than her American female friends who she describes as more “diplomatic.” Such an observation echoes Sabbagh’s argument that manipulating patriarchal conditions breeds assertive tendencies (2003:xvi).

Interestingly, Nancy initially claimed she did not know what being a feminist was, and believed it was biasness towards being a female. Yet, when asked to define feminism, her confusion was mitigated as she began to see feminists as supporters of feminism, which in her words is “being yourself without any pressure of gender and being proud of who you are and expressing yourself without using the fact that you are a female to do so.”

Unlike Nancy, Sherine notes she does not like to think of situations and circumstances based on people’s gender, but rather capacity. Given her work in the corporate world, she bases her experiences with people according to her experiences with their capabilities, stating that

> I don’t like to differentiate between men and women in participation in society. I would rather classify tasks and see who is best at doing what considering ability and time. Identifying anyone by anything other than their ability to do something or not is not fair. It doesn’t matter if it’s sex, gender, or race. This downgrades the person and gives excuses for discrimination based on things we cannot control.

In contrast to the other women, May is the only woman interviewed who still lives and works in the Middle East. Given her residence in a more conservative nation such as Saudi Arabia, a country often making headlines for its restrictions on women, one would expect May’s views on feminism to be the most conservative. However, May seems not only conscious of her constraints as a woman in Saudi society, but also defiant of them. In describing the challenges she has faced as a woman May lists them as,

> Making the decision and the steps to divorce my husband, raising my three kids by myself solely; insisting on living in my home with my kids rather than returning to my parents' house; travelling by myself or with my kids alone at any time I want; accepting any job I want; teaching my community and people I deal with as a woman I can do and live by my own rules; making decisions regarding my kids; and buying a house.

And, May points out, these life challenges were in fact related to her gender as a woman. She notes that many other women face similar constraints, "some issues are regulated by the government rules such as necessary accompaniment by male relatives or needing his permission to travel. Although in my case I always had that permission, it is an obstacle for so many women." Thus, while she has faced challenges and stood up to them, "some of them could not stand up and face the community and therefore lived unhappily due to the constraints they could not get through." She says that while she preserved through the barriers she has faced, Sometimes I feel tired, other times I feel strong like I have all the power in the world to go face my challenges and succeed…thanking always God and then my parents for the great support I always receive from them. I have worked on myself to empower myself."

In order to cope with and deal with the challenges she has faced throughout her adult life, May notes that beyond thanking and leaning on those that supporter her, she has attended "workshops, read books, and consulted with professionals to help [herself] to pass all these challenges and obstacles sometimes." Her largest decision and biggest challenge, was the decision to divorce her husband. And, she made the decision alone, without the support of her family. Because of her independence in this decision, May says she has not once regretted this decision. She notes that when making large decisions, she explores alternate solutions, discusses the issue with people she trusts and listens to their input before ultimately making the decision herself. And she claims she feels free to make her own decisions, "I consider myself lucky that I have supportive parents and siblings that don't interfere with my decisions in relation to every

aspect of my life: work, types of work, travelling, living alone and decisions regarding my children too; I took most of them if not all of them alone"

In comparing herself to her female peers and other women she interacts with, May argues that each situation is distinct and dependent on specific circumstances, stating that some women are more similar to her than others, but that "it really depends on their family and the values they were raised with and the believes each woman chooses to hold onto." While some women do judge her based on certain life choices she has made such as her living alone and her traveling alone for work, others May claims are content enough with their own lives that they do not feel the need to judge.

Despite her residence in the Middle East –specifically, in Saudi Arabia one of the most restrictive towards women—May was the only woman with the most thorough understanding of feminism. Perhaps this was due to her punitive surroundings that made it necessary to understand philosophies surrounding equality of the sexes. May defines feminism as,

> To be treated as a human being respected in every way since God has created me and my fellow men in the same way; we both have rights and responsibilities. Responsibilities are different between men and the women when it comes to how they are completed; but, our responsibilities don't compete with each other.

She was also one of the only women to identify as a feminist and confessing that she always finds herself "defending women and the way they being treated sometimes from some men and sometime from women too." Overall when asked how she would describe women's participation in Saudi society May asserts that,

> Women play a huge role in my community, their role has changed and they prosper now compared from the old days. Now you can find women taking role in every aspect of the community and its development; working jobs and at places they would never work at in the old days. Women are working in senior positions such as CEOs in banks or other companies.

Such an example can complicate and expand debates about women's rights in non-Western societies beyond the simplistic factors within submission to the patriarchy. Specifically, as Mahmood argues, such a focus on women's agency provides "a crucial corrective to scholarship on the Middle East that for decades had portrayed Arab and Muslim women as passive and submissive beings shackled by structures of male authority (Abu-Lughod 1990)" (Mahmood 2004: 6). Mahmood also spoke to the importance of feminist work written by women stating that,

> Feminist scholarship performed the worthy task of restoring the women as active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested(Abu-Lughod 1986; Altorki 1986; Atiya 1982;S. Davis 1983; Dwyer 1978; Early 1993; Fernea 1985; Wikan 1991)…The ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women's agency cannot be emphasized enough, especially when one remembers that Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression. [2004:6-7]

Media representations of gender roles in the Middle East include Arab women practicing domestic duties for a controlling husband. While the reality of the Arab world does include this narrative of women holding domestic responsibilities, so does the Western world. However, certain factors prevent women from financially supporting their families, separate from a dominating husband. More often than not, women in the Middle East face the same glass ceiling that those in the United States face. While they may earn an entry level position and if they are lucky, eventually get promoted (Sabbagh 2003:xvi), the same systematically sexist structures that exist in the West prevent Arab women from achieving high ranking leadership positions (Makdisi et al. 2014). This often deters most college educated women from choosing to work rather than stay at home, because often their salary is so insignificant, for them staying at home is the logical option (Makdisi et al. 2014). Moreover, as Sabbagh argues, "Just because there is a stringent patriarchal system in the Arab world does not mean that women are docile non-entitles.

In fact, strong patriarchies often breed the opposite: strong women who work very hard to insure the compliance of the system with their needs" (Sabbagh, 2003: xvi). While measured against Western individualistic ideals of professional success and wealth, Arab women may be seen as stifled and unsuccessful, if measured against their own yard stick, they may actually embody what for them is the quintessential successful woman.

Hopefully, the interviews illustrate some of the ways that women articulate their identities and challenge the power differentials that structure their everyday lives. In a region that undergoing serious transformations over the last few decades, women have been not only among the drivers of this change but also the first actors to experience the positive and negative ramifications of such change. Given the patriarchal nature of the regimes under which the change has taken place, and the forces of repression against dissent, women have often turned to micro spaces such as within the family to demonstrate personal expressions and alternatives to express their consciousness and imagine an alternate reality (Sabbagh, 2003). The dynamics of women take place within as well as outside of political structures and the geographical boundaries of their nations in the Middle East as well as in the West in the United States. These interviews provide a nuanced picture of what womanhood and identity means to some Arab women and in which venues they express their individual and collective consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

In this work, I set out to explore how Arab women are depicted in Western media and in turn in the Western consciousness and sought to examine the extent to which this portrayal was born out in discussions with a small sample of Arab women. My aim was to allow the small sample of women I interviewed to showcase the remarkable diversity that likely exists among all Arab women. In doing so, I hope to problematize the idea of "the" Arab woman, reflect on why Western media was dominated by a singular expression of Arab women, and explore whether their lived realities contradict or reflect such portrayals.

The importance of examining Western perceptions of Arab women comes from the inevitable Western lens that most English academia surrounding the region is written in. Given my own education and ties to the West, my perspective is arguably heavily colored by Western ideology. Yet, rather than view Arab women solely from a Western lens, as news media tends to, or solely through Arab ideologies, why not acknowledge the conversing and influenced meeting point of the two. Discourse, media, and literature surrounding a population or region can create context for the understanding of a situation, making it crucial to explore when studying a sample of women distant from the West. This too is the motivation behind examining the context and framework through which Arab women have been understood from a Western perspective. As Said wisely states, it is increasingly impossible to detach oneself "from the circumstances of life, from the face of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, set of beliefs, a social person, or from the mere activity of being a member of society" (1978: 10). Therefore, one's own position, and that of peers will almost always impact the decisions we make, and the understandings we have of regions more globally. To understand, therefore, Arab women's attitudes on their identity we must understand the social context in which they are embedded.

Conversations with four Arab women revealed that while Islam dominated many of the women's attitudes towards morality, values and overall behaviors, it did not dominate their identity or freedoms. Thus, popular depictions reducing Muslim women to their religious coverings limit the complexities that exist in not only their religious identities but also their overall sense of self. With regards to education, the Arab women who participated in this research emphasized the focus on education in their lives and the lives of their parents and children. Such a similar emphasis on education between different generations in the families of the participants suggests a larger tie to education in their communities. Thus, education can have similar affects in the Arab world as it does in the Western world; education can be a tool to combat limited professional options for women. And, further investigation in Arab societies brings insight into other understandings present surrounding Arab women. Unpacking the concept of collectivism reveals alternate methods of measuring success. Shifting the focus from individual to community leads to different goals in for individuals and their ideas surrounding success. Perhaps then, their feminist movements and identities should also be understood under such context.

In trying to understand Arab women in news and media, Al-Malki et al. dissected their lack of presence in mainstream media and the types of appearances they made. They noted that "Westerners have predominantly glimpsed Arab women in media where their words and actions are interpreted through third-person narrative accounts or image bites…Made known largely through image bites, Arab women in Western media have been the subalterns who did not speak but where spoken for" (Al-Malki et al. 2012:5). Given the language and geographic barrier, many encounters between Middle Eastern and Western communities exist through manufactured mediums such as media (Al- Malkti et al. 2012). In the face of the 'other' media often dictates

understanding of the unfamiliar, allowing depictions presented on the news, media outlets, and popular culture to shape our perceptions of a population (Al-Malki et al. 2012). Thus, sources such as news media are dangerous because they present as truth, but rarely are they so simple or objective. However, it is through these contrived means that many Westerners are exposed to knowledge about the Arab world and its women. This subjective and narrow focus of the knowledge produced surrounding Arab women like myself prompted my desire to showcase the reality of their lives. In place of these image bites, instead provide a more direct representation of Arab women speaking for themselves.

Unlike popular and common Western perceptions of women in the Arab world, not all of the women saw their lives as hindered or stalled because of their gender and their society's view surrounding the role women. In fact, the interviews brought out personal experience with struggle and strife quite separate from society's expectations of them but rather their own personal and familial goals. And, while these goals cannot be removed from societal expectations as society no doubt bore some effect on the development of these goals, their overall desire to please themselves or their family contrasts with what many would expect. Rather than a woman controlled by her male relative aiming to please him and his desires, unable to partake in her own life choices, what these interviews reveal are quite active Arab women. And within these women's lives, there exists much variety between experiences with similar parts of life. Obviously, there are many intricacies that affect the differences between each woman's experiences. While this research only deals with a small sample of women, each one from a different nation, there is no truly representative sample when trying to explore a culture. It is within the complexity and heterogeneity that Middle Eastern society and culture can begin to be understood and rather than attempt to define the Arab woman's experience in her society, this

research aims to respect the diversity among women and demonstrate the different ways each individual may experience her identity as a woman.

Without creating context of the possible Western understandings through the eyes of the possible readers of this research, a full analysis and exploration of Arab women cannot be thoroughly cognized. As Said insists, “Continued investment made Orientalism, a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness” which eventually made its way “out from Orientalism into the general culture” (1978: 6). Without practicing reflectivity, or acknowledging that actions are informed by prior knowledge of power structures and behavioral patterns, the full extent of any interaction between two cultures –here East and West—will be lacking. Hopefully, my work can help Western readers draw comparisons between their own lives and the participants' lives to create a bridge to understanding the “other” in revealing the similarities that exist universally. And, in turn render more complex the notion of “the” Arab woman.

Limitations and Reflections on Positionality

As previously mentioned, this study is limited in its sample. Not only is the sample interviewed for this study minimal, it is also not highly diverse. All of the women were of a similar age and generation, all were Sunni Muslim, and all had similar economical statuses or were part of a similar social class. Future research could include Arab women from different age ranges, social classes, religious backgrounds and other Arab nations. Additionally, after additional research was conducted, follow-up interviews could have been conducted to gather further insights into certain issues. Similarly, more media analysis could be conducted to gather more current perceptions and images that exist about the Arab world and its women. To do this,

survey data could also be collected from a Western sample to gather perceptions and before analyzing the sources that they receive their information from.

In discussing limitations, it is also important to mention positionality in the research. My position has definitely guided and shaped my research topics and possibly even the results I hoped to find. Both of my positions – as an Arab woman, and as a woman who was instilled with certain ideals growing up – have influenced and shaped my perspective through my research. Because of my connections to both larger communities involved in my research, I have conducted my research hoping for certain results. I did also have a familiarity to the cultural and religious upbringing my interviewees had, due to my own similar background as an Egyptian-American and Muslim woman. I was not in a position of greater power than any of my participants. However, I was hesitant to ask questions that may have been more personal or controversial at first, with all four respondents due to their positions as elders, as well as due to my friendship with them and desire to maintain this friendship after the research data was collected. The shared cultural and religious background to me and my participants helped in forming arguments and allowing me access to my participants. However, such similarity may have prevented me from noticing something that may seem ordinary to me but something that others would find more unusual; if I had been from a different cultural or religious background than the women that I interviewed, I may have noticed a behavior that I am not aware is not common across most people. My interviews allowed me to collect personal stories and insights about the achievements, challenges, and daily realities of real, live Arab women. I hoped to capture physical examples of the regularly stereotyped and “silent” participants in Western portrayals of Arab culture. This research emerged as I struggled to reconcile the simplified image of women victimized by Islam and authoritative Arab men with the complex women I knew. In

this research, I attempt to weaken that narrative through presenting examples of the lives of ordinary Arab women, and showing that these women cannot be represented by an all-encompassing term like oppressed or passive. Hopefully, these women and their experiences shed some light into the realities of life as an Arab woman and provide an association between women of the Arab world and women in the Western world.

APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Family:

1. What was your family life like?
    a. Tell me about your family, siblings, parents etc.
2. Do you feel like you were treated different than your siblings?
    a. How or why?
3. Do you feel like you were treated different by your mom than your dad, or vice versa?
4. Do you feel like there was a difference in expectations between your parents' generation and your own?
5. Do you feel like your life is improved upon your mother's life?
    a. If so, in what ways?
    b. If not, how?
6. Do you consider how your mother or grandmother would behave in certain circumstances?
7. Do you feel like you can relate to your mother or grandmother?
8. Do you feel like you adopt your mother or grandmother's values or modes of acting or thinking?
9. Do you feel that you think and act completely differently than your mother and grandmother did at your age?
10. Do you find your grandmother's values, traditions, behavior or beliefs useful for the present or simply a lesson of the past?
11. How do you remember your mother?
    a. Your grandmother?
    b. Do you feel like you have lost anything from your mother or grandmother and their traditions or what they passed on to you?

Coming of Age:

1. Where did you grow up?
2. Did you go out at night as a teenager?
    a. Did you feel safe doing so?
        i. Why or why not?
3. Can you remember the first large life decision you made?
    a. What was it?
    b. Did you make it alone?
    c. How did it feel?

1. How did you develop your outlook on certain parts of your life?
    i. Marriage
    ii. Education
    iii. Children
    iv. Employment
    v. Migration
2. What kind of challenges or constraints have you faced in your life as a woman?
    i. Do you think these challenges were related to your gender?
    ii. Did other women like you suffer from the same challenges?

iii. How did you feel during these challenges?
iv. How did you cope or what did you do to deal with these challenges?

Womanhood:

5. Are you religious?
    a. Do you feel more religious than your mother or grandmother?
    b. Do you think your parents influenced your religious identity?
6. Are you part of a political party?
    a. Why or why not?
    b. Which and why?
7. How do you see participation of women in your community or larger society?
    a. Which society do you identify more with?
8. How do you define feminism?
9. Do you identify as a feminist?
    a. If so, what is your definition?
    b. If not, why not?
10. Do you feel misrepresented in your society?
11. Do you feel misrepresented by other societies and countries?
12. Do you feel like your religion has influenced the way you think about being a woman?
13. Do you feel like your religion has influenced the way others view you as a woman?
14. Do you go out at night now?
    a. Do you feel safe doing so?
        i. Why or why not?
15. How do you feel in public spaces?
    a. Which types of public spaces do you enter?
16. Do you wish you could enter a certain public space that you do not feel like you have access to?
17. Is there something you wish to share with me that you would have wanted me to ask about?

Education/Professional Life:

1. Please state your age, and occupation
2. Did your parents encourage your education?
3. Did you always know you wanted to go to school and university?
    a. How did you decide your field of study?
    b. Do you want to pursue higher education? / Did you pursue higher education?
4. What kind of factors have enabled you to succeed in your life?
    a. What kind of factors have hurt your success or made you fail?
5. How do you feel like your life compares to your female peers?
    a. Do you feel like you are different or more similar to your female friends your age?
    b. How do your female peers about certain life decisions you have made?
6. How do you go about making large life decisions?
7. Do you feel free to make these decisions yourself?
8. Do you want to work? /Did you always want to work?

a. How did you choose your career?
v. Did anyone influence this decision?
vi. Did anything influence this decision?

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