US Open Studies & Development Journal
Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2023, pp. 1-10
Available online at www.arepub.com

Arab Women's struggle in the US

Syrine Jerbi

Doctoral School of Literary Studies (Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest), in the department of American Studies

E-mail: syrine.jerbi@aiesec.net

Abstract:

Despite making significant contributions to society, women often go unheard, unacknowledged, and undervalued in a world created by men for men. Since the 1960s, the US has taken some action to close the gender gap and abolish discrimination against women. Even though women achieved their financial independence, some of them still struggle because of their background such it is the example of Arab American women. Despite the societal restrictions and a lack of formal power, they have had a tremendous cultural impact as mothers, teachers, and community advocates. To pass on their history to their children, they created private philanthropic organizations that could pay for immigrant families' travel and lodging, promote community development, and support the arts. This article explores the distinctions between Middle Eastern and American feminisms to determine the identity of Arab-American women.

Keywords: Arab American identity, Arab American women, identity crises, immigration, women's struggle, Feminism.

When Arab immigrants first arrived in the United States, they discovered that their ability to adapt would be crucial to their survival. They would be Americans if they could appear and behave like Americans. As a result, several facets of the Arab identity were lost during the integration process. Indeed, social barriers prevented Arab American women from holding leadership positions inside these larger community centers because men would be the acknowledged leaders of culture and history professors. As a result, despite frequently being left out of the Arab American community's history, Arab American women have had a lasting impact on the formation of the American identity. Despite societal limitations and a lack of official power, Arab American women have been significant cultural influences as moms, teachers, and community supporters. Arab American women developed private philanthropic organizations with the potential to sponsor immigrant families' travel and accommodation, foster community development, and support the arts as a way of passing down their heritage to their offspring. They also taught their kids about it. Without a thorough comprehension of these concepts, discussions of Arab American women cannot be accurate. This article defines Arab-American-women's identity by going through the difference between *Middle East Feminism* and *American Feminism*. It also reaches the idea that women are struggling not only in these two regions, but worldwide.

Many Arab parents tried to grow their kids to be both Arab and American after moving to the United States. Many parents made an effort to instill the American identity in their kids while also trying to teach them about their inherited Middle Eastern culture. This is where Arab American women come into play and when they begin to search for their own identity. Recent research on protest movements has been dominated by identity politics. Although there are various identities, identifying their empirical link has advanced slowly. especially given that in recent decades, the study of identity has grown more complex for social scientists. Previously believed to be biological traits, psychologists today place more attention on how race and gender are socially constructed. There were many questions imposed such are: What is the place of Arab American women in the community, how do they search for their identity, and how is lifelike for Arab American women in the US?

To understand American women's identity, it is important for the reader to first understand *feminism* in the US and in the Middle East. The term *Feminism* in the United States refers to a group of movements and ideas that work to define, construct, and protect an environment where women have equal access to political, economic, cultural, and social rights. American politics have been significantly impacted by feminism. It's common to categorize American feminism into its first, second, third, and fourth waves chronologically. The Initial wave is *The Seneca Falls Convention* which represents the first women's rights convention. It took place at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York, on July 19 and 20, 1848, and it marked the start of the first wave of *Feminism* in the United States. The second wave began in the early 1960s. It followed the motto of *what is personal is political*. During this period, the Feminine Mystique, written by Betty Friedan in 1963 and influenced by The Second Sex, became a bestseller. It is commonly believed that this book launched second-wave feminism in the US. The third and last wave started in the early 1990s. During this period, the American lawyer Anita Hill charged Clarence Thomas, hair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, with sexual harassment in 1991. Although the charges were disputed by the assailant and he went home to continue his life as if nothing happened, it is still the first time to have a lawsuit that brings up the lights to women's voices. American feminist Rebecca Walker wrote an article titled "Becoming the Third Wave" in Ms. Magazine in 1992 in reaction to the Anita Hill sexual harassment case in which she said, "I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the third wave, which is where the phrase "third wave" originated. The fourth wave describes a resurgence in feminism interest that started about 2012 and is connected to social media use. Its main objectives, according to feminist researcher Prudence Chamberlain, are justice for women and opposition to sexual harassment and violence against women. She claims that "incredulity that certain attitudes can still exist" best describes its cor.

Unlike Feminism in the US, Feminism in the Middle East is still developing due to the harsh patriarchal cultures as well as the dominance of the West and its NGOs. Both elements almost vailed the feminist movement. It is almost non-existent. In the Middle East, Women are viewed as being oppressed and in need of Western assistance or aid. Nevertheless, the Feminist Movement in the Middle East started its traces since the 20th century. With the male dominance in the Middle East, it is important to understand the role of Arab women and impediments left in the way of closing the gender gap in this region. In some Arab nations, there is a terrible proverb that states that women only belong to their husbands and homes. They shouldn't have a degree, a job, or opinions, such it is the case of Saudi

Arabia where women were not allowed to go to school until 1956. This notion, regrettably, still dominates some places of the Arab world. But contemporary, educated, and strong-willed Arab women and men find this statement antiquated and unfitting.

Women are 49.7% of about 345.5 million people in the Middle East and North Africa region (IBRD-IDA 2020). To prevent the idea that the west created of Arab women needs their help, many modern Arab women try to dispel the idea that these women are locked up in a tent in the desert, perhaps being abused by their husbands. It is true that there are still many obstacles standing in the way of closing the gender gap in the Arab world, but there have also been significant improvements in the fields of politics, entrepreneurship, labor, and health as well as in education. Today's Arab women are leaders, entrepreneurs, activists, educators, Nobel laureates, and many more. For future generations, they are altering their society and creating a better path to gender equality and girl empowerment.

There are many examples of Arab women who are breaking down stereotypes and building their countries, such as Madeeha Al Bermani who had to go to a boy's high school because the scientific field she wanted to enter was only for boys. Now as an emigrée physician, she donated her savings to educate and empower generations of Iraqi girls to become what they want to be. Al Bermani didn't only donate the big bucks but was also involved in the selection of the teaching staff. With the money she donated, she equipped the school with the latest technologies, including touch-smart whiteboards and high-end laboratories, which could benefit the students in a revolutionary way She donated $2 million to build a high school for girls in her hometown of Hilla, Babil. Decades ago, when she was their age, Sara Toumi, moved from Paris to her father's hamlet Bir Al Salih. She established the NGO Dream in Tunisia there. She assists in teaching the local women how to make crafts and aids in the promotion and sale of their goods (women's forum magazine).

The young woman, who received her education at the Sorbonne, also established Acacias for All in Tunisia to combat desertification by using sustainable farming methods, such as acacia tree planting. In 2016, Toumi was chosen as one of the 30 Under 30 Social Entrepreneurs Changing Europe and the World. In order to train Jordanian women self-defense and fight domestic abuse in the nation, Lina Khalifeh, a martial artist and advocate for women's empowerment, established the NGO (SheFighter) in 2010. She was motivated to do so after witnessing her father and brother severely assault one of her friends. She wanted to educate her and other women how to be strong and how to defend themselves from similar acts after witnessing her being battered (al Arabiya English).

There is also Tawakkol Karman, who was one Arab woman bringing about change through peace as a supporter of the rights of women journalists. She was one of the well-known figures who helped bring about the regime change in Yemen during the so-called Arab Spring. Karman was the first Arab woman to ever win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. She was once detained on charges that she had planned "riots." Last but not least, the 6-year-old Mazoun Almellehan in her war-torn country of Syria made her a fighter for girls' education in the Azraq Refugee Camp in Jordan. Her 2011 arrest outraged the populace and sparked the uprising against Ali Abdallah Saleh's former Yemeni government. Mazoun has been running a one-girl campaign for two years to persuade parents to let their daughters finish school rather than pressuring them into marriage. For her efforts to keep children in school, Mazoun

has been dubbed the "Syrian Malala" in homage to the Pakistani education champion who was assassinated by the Taliban in 2012. Due to custom and religious conservatism, women in the area have fought for freedom and equality on many different levels.

However, the younger generation of females, who stand for their own unique brand of feminism, are undoubtedly making a difference. Many discussions about the place of religion in modern American life center on how religious influences on the family and the roles of men and women. (Bartkowski, 2001; Gallagher, 2003; Sherkat, 2000). The accepted wisdom is that the tenets of major religious traditions restrict women's achievements in the public sphere by prioritizing their obligations to home and family (for a review, see Lehrer, 1995). Recent studies on Judeo-Christian groups are beginning to challenge this view, finding that the relationships between family, religion, and women's economic activity are more complicated than previously believed (Gallagher; Heaton & Cornwall, 1989; Lehrer, 1995, 1999; Sherkat). To a lesser but growing extent, research is also contesting homogeneous images of Muslim women that depict them as universally oppressed by a patriarchal religious culture (Read, 2002; Read & Bartkowski, 2000). This article contributes to this line of inquiry by examining the effects of religious affiliation, religiosity, and family on women's employment, using Arab Americans as a case study. Because this population includes both Christians and Muslims, Arab Americans present a particularly interesting opportunity to study interreligious and interethnic differences in women's behaviors. The analysis uses survey data from a nationwide sample of 501 Arab American women to evaluate the extent to which religion restricts women's labor force participation and the degree to which family commitments moderate the linkages between religion and work.

Although gender differentiation is the norm in many parts of the Middle East, family and gender dynamics vary considerably among people of Arab descent in the United States (Esposito, 1998; Haddad & Smith, 1996). Some Arab Americans feel that female domesticity is fundamental for preserving their ethnicity and reproducing Arab culture in the new world (Cainkar, 1996). Others maintain pride in their Arab heritage but discard patriarchal customs perceived as inhibiting their integration and achievement in U.S. society (Haddad & Smith). These attitudes vary by social class and generational status, with stronger attachments to traditional values found among the lesser educated and foreign-born (Aswad; Read, 2002, 2003). The foreign-born segment of the Arab American population is predominantly Muslim, resulting in a conflation of religion and ethnic identity in studies of Arab communities in the United States. Muslims, however, make up only one-third of the estimated three million Arabs in America, with Christians comprising the rest of the population (Naff, 1994). Within these broad categories of Muslim and Christian affiliation, there is considerable diversity in Arab American women's employment patterns. As with other groups of U.S. women, Arab American women's participation in the public sphere varies by ethnic identity, religiosity, family structure, and social class (Cainkar, 1996). Women living in families with stronger ties to ethnic values and customs are less likely to be employed and have less power in major family decisions than women living in families with weaker attachments to cultural traditions (Aswad, 1994). In general, cultural bonds are strongest among the most recent Arab immigrant arrivals, many of whom live in ethnic enclaves because of network ties (Cainkar). Nonspouse adult family members can improve women's work opportunities by helping them with their domestic responsibilities; conversely, they can add to women's household obligations and reduce their ability to work. There is also the influence

of religiosity and education on Arab American women's employment working in the expected direction. Women with stronger connections to religion usually have lower employment and higher fertility rates than women with weaker religious ties (cf., Hartman & Hartman, 1996; Lehrer, 1995), and women with higher levels of education have higher work rates and earnings and are more likely to share in major family decisions (Haddad & Smith, 1996; Read, 2004). One can have one clear idea that Arab women since many years ago and until nowadays have been facing many obstacles.

Second, Arab American women are attempting to find their place in the US and their identity. As was already indicated, social scientists have recently found the study of identity to be more difficult. Previously believed to be biological traits, psychologists today place more attention on how race and gender are socially constructed. Once in America, a lot of Arab parents tried to raise their kids to be both American and Arab. While also trying to imbue their children with a sense of American identity, many parents try to instill their culture in them. The first wave of Arab American families kept a strong commitment to their culture and customs even though many of them had fled their home countries as a result of conflict.

This attachment was prompted by a need to keep the same family and gender roles as those found in many Arab countries. Since their male counterparts worked in the public sector as breadwinners and society builders, Arab American women were therefore expected to manage the home and uphold family honor.

Many Arab American families believed that controlling their daughters' behavior was a matter of honor, and as it is understood in the majority of Arabic countries, when young Arab women reach marriageable age, marriage would become a significant issue within the home. Arab American women reported that they were constantly being watched over by their male family members. Arab American women were expected to get married and there were very few incidents of women deviating from this tradition. Whether already living in the United States or yet in the Middle East, arranging weddings between daughters and cousins was a frequent practice among immigrant households. In the event that an Arab American lady did not marry the man of her parents' choosing, it was typically assumed that she would wed another Catholic Arab because non-Arabs and non-Catholics were viewed as unacceptable spouses. In the early 20th century, Arab immigrant women would frequently sell embroidered items, a tradition that was passed down to female children once they were old enough to work. The presenting of a dowry was another traditional practice that evolved as a result of the adaptation to American society, and just like Arab women in the middle east are standing up for themselves, it's the same case with Arab American women in the US. In contrast to their mothers, Arab American women started their own businesses, worked in modest textile stores, or pursued more conventional employment in an office or business environment when they were adults. It's important to note that the Arab American woman was progressively turning into a family's financial asset.

Lebanese silk companies did employ Arab women, but only if the husband or father was unable to support the family's needs entirely on his own. On the other hand, many American women acknowledged that they could have found employment without upsetting their families, even if they could have survived without their income. Women's economic options grew as a result, while the social effects of their employment diminished.

Prior to World War Two, relatively few women attended college, and only a small percentage of those women were Arab Americans, even though many adolescent girls were able to complete their high school education. The first 57 years of the development of their identities saw a minor change in the lives of second-generation Arab American women. Regardless of their birth year, women born between 1910 and 1967 were expected to work primarily at home and follow traditional marriage customs. After WWII, the third and fourth generations gradually acquired access to professional careers and higher education, but many of these women were still expected to get married early and have children. It is important to draw attention to the many freedoms that Arab American women did have, even if they shared many of the same limitations on their daily lives as women in their parents' native countries had at the time.

These women were typically expected to wed men who their parents approved of, but they had the legal freedom to set the terms of their union and to end abusive or unhappy marriages. Many women were allowed to work because the practice became increasingly acceptable as it started to focus less on family honor and more on the status of women as economic assets. Originally, they were expected to run the home and provide for their husbands and children with devotion. As a result, it is clear that Arab American ladies had to abide by their own particular set of limitations, some of which were derived from Arab culture and others from American legal and social norms.

Generally, Arab American women are proud of their role in the US community. They are also proof of their origin, heritage, and American identity. Yet, it is challenging to find ways to depict both informal settings by many reasons. First, women's movements in public areas were severely restricted, and second, women could not occupy official leadership positions in the community. Women were often the first instructors of their children, crucial Women's Freedom of movement in public spaces was severely constrained, and they were also not allowed to hold positions of formal leadership in their communities. Despite these restrictions, women were often the first teachers of their children, vital hubs of communication for new immigrants and marginalized neighbors, and lovers of the arts and literature. Arab American women were compelled to develop cultural ties to the Arab world because they were denied access to the political sphere. Women are seldom given the credit for starting Arab American community centers or groups, in contrast to Arab American men. The Arab American press did not originate with them. Even as the official head of the home, they were not acknowledged. The historical account has neglected the contribution of Arab American women as educators, community activists, and cultural boosters. Although more and more women in the Arab American community were able to find employment outside the home, their major responsibilities were as mothers and housewives. Early in the 20th century, Arab American women were in charge of running the household smoothly and providing the children with a foundational education in cultural standards. Women were expected to teach their kids the traits of a good citizen. Arab American women played a crucial role in deciding which components of culture should be preserved and which should be allowed to disappear because they were the first teachers Arab American children would encounter and the first to impart cultural values and expectations into children.

Many moms felt it was their duty to pass on their culture to their offspring. Arab songs and family recipes were passed down by mothers, but they were also the ones who pushed for a cohesive society based on Arab culture.

Arab American women met several difficulties navigating the social world. As a result, they created organizations that could manage and operate in according to their gender.

Arab American women founded philanthropic organizations to integrate newly arriving immigrants and promote the cultural exploration of Arab American artists by leveraging on the gendered idea that women were nurturers and teachers. And last, notable Arab American women. Abrar Omeish is the first Libyan American woman to be elected to any office statewide, the youngest woman elected official in Virginia history, and the first Muslim woman to gain a seat on the Fairfax County School Board, among other firsts. At the age of 24, she maintains a position on the Fairfax County School Board, works for a nonprofit organization she founded ten years ago, and attends Georgetown University full-time to pursue a Master's in public policy on a full scholarship. In her capacity as a member of the School Board, she has made it a priority to enhance student mental health, recruit more parent liaisons to foster relationships with the school's families, assist kids who are homeless, and provide for the needs of people with disabilities and their families. Omeish values representation. "I'm hoping that this is a statement, or maybe making it palatable to the general public that these are members of the community who are entitled to be in positions of leadership," the candidate said while discussing her win. Being the leader alters your perspective of what is possible and who belongs in this community honestly. Second, Pat Danner had a long and successful career in politics, starting in the 1970s and lasting until her departure from Congress in 2001. Her maternal grandparents immigrated from Lebanon. She held positions on a number of committees, including the Public Works and Transportation post, where she was assigned to the Small Business Committee as well as the Aviation and Ground Transportation Subcommittees. She left the Small Business Committee after her first term and was appointed to the International Relations Committee and the Subcommittee on International Economic Policy for her subsequent two terms. Danner was a fierce defender of the interests of the residents in her district and pushed to secure federal emergency relief assistance for agricultural and infrastructure endeavors, including flood management. Danner opted not to run for reelection after learning she had breast cancer in 1999. But she has never wavered in her commitment to assist others. The Breast and Cervical Cancer Prevention and Treatment Act of 2000, which was passed and increased insurance coverage for low-income women, was cosponsored by her. Third, Bazzi, who began working as an assistant prosecutor in 2006, is a prime illustration of the rewards of perseverance and hard effort. Mariam Bazzi, who currently serves on Wayne County's 3rd Circuit Court, credits her parents for instilling in her a strong work ethic. Bazzi says, “I had the support of my family and community. Arab American is an important part of who I am. I am very proud of it and where I came from; I am the child of immigrants.”

Her words are the outcome of her traditional Lebanese upbringing. She assumed she would get married and have kids but never predicted or anticipated having a career. While she says there is certainly nothing wrong with that path, she eventually stayed in school and loved what she was doing which grew into a flourishing career and judgeship. She asserts that part of her new role is “to serve in this community and to be active in the Arab American community because I wanted to be, to someone what others were for me a guide. Somebody that can help mentor someone that can help push them. Someone that they can see themselves in.”

Mona Haydar, also, is a poet, activist, and rapper who has used her intersectional identity as a Syrian American woman to create art that tackles important societal issues. She rose to fame in 2015 when she and her husband set up a stand called *Talk to a Muslim* where they would offer people coffee, donuts, and flowers to "replace trauma with love." In 2017, Haydar released the song "Hijabi (Wrap My Hijab)" which broke down stereotypes, dispelling myths, and clarified who she is and what she stands for. The song was one of the "Top Protest Songs of 2017" and one of the "Top 25 Feminist Anthems." Additionally, in 2016, Haydar took a stand with indigenous populations in the U.S. against the Key Stone Pipeline at the Standing Rock Indian reservation when she was 6 months pregnant with her second child. Fifth, the strength and initiatives of Lebanese American Candace Lightner make it no wonder she was dubbed "one of the most influential American citizens of the twentieth century." After her 13-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver, Lightner founded MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) in 1980. Not only has she spearheaded a movement that has completely altered society's acceptance of drunk driving and saved hundreds of thousands of lives, but she also became a victim's advocate and helped victims seek justice through the legal system. Her advocacy led to more than 700 bills at the state and national levels being passed, including legislation raising the drinking age to 21. To further life-saving efforts, she testified before Congress, statehouses, and committee hearings and has formed coalitions, like SOS (Save Our Students) as influential political instruments. In 2014, Lightner founded *We Save Lives*, an organization that deals with highway safety issues, focusing on the "3 D's" –drugged, drunk and distracted driving.

Lastly, the Arab American Maryland State Delegate Dalya Attar (Born to an Iranian father and a Moroccan mother); during her time as a Baltimore city prosecutor and member of the Baltimore City Juvenile Justice Center, she noticed an alarming lack of support given to the children in her city and decided to run for office to create legislation. Attar has sponsored bills to improve her district and its communities by ensuring public safety, removing barriers to remarriage after divorce, compiling a list of federal or State incentive programs for employers who hire or train formerly incarcerated individuals, and more. About running in 2018, Attar said "I was running for office at a time that many women wanted to step up and said, It's time for us now.' We are just as strong as anyone else."

To look at the political women's achievement overall, there is only 1 MENA woman serving in Congress, only 6 MENA women serving in state legislatures nationwide, and no MENA women serving as mayor. The women described above serve as a reminder that all women are capable of serving and making significant advances to the communities in which they live. These statistics are dangerously low. These are all powerful women who are challenging gender norms and the community's attempts to obstruct their path to independence and success.

In conclusion, Arab American women have traditionally played a significant though undervalued role in the Arab American experience. In early 20th-century Arab America, women were in charge of preserving culture and fostering the community's expansion. Arab American mothers used their status as mothers to their advantage against gender stereotypes and peer pressure.

These limitations were crucial in the growth of Arab American women's groups' roles as mothers and philanthropic donors, even though they limited their ability to lead in the social sphere. By depending on the social

expectations of their gender, these women were able to rise to positions of leadership in their communities as teachers. These women's commitment to the preservation of their culture and the advancement of the people of their fathers, despite history's long-standing disrespect for them, shows that women who operate within the confines of their assigned gender zone are just as capable of safeguarding their people's survival.

References

Marshall, S. E., & Read, J. G. (2003). Identity Politics Among Arab-American Women. *Social Science Quarterly*, *84*(4), 875–891. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42955909. Accessed 20 Ap. 2023

Badran, M. (2005). Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *1*(1), 6–28. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40326847. Accessed 12 May 2023

Freedman, E. B. (1974). The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s. *The Journal of American History*, *61*(2), 372–393. https://doi.org/10.2307/1903954. Accessed 22 Ap. 2023

Mango, O. (2010). Enacting solidarity and ambivalence: Positional identities of Arab American women. *Discourse Studies*, *12*(5), 649–664. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24049861. 15 Ap. 2023

Baker, P. (1984). The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920. *The American Historical Review*, *89*(3), 620–647. https://doi.org/10.2307/1856119. 16 Ap. 2023

Kuhlman, E. (1997). "Women's Ways in War": The Feminist Pacifism of the New York City Woman's Peace Party. *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, *18*(1), 80–100. https://doi.org/10.2307/3347203. 16 Ap. 2023

Bio:

I am an international student from Tunisia pursuing an English Ph.D. at the department of Literary and Cultural Studies at Eotvos Loránd University, ELTE. I was granted Stipendium Scholarship for both MA and Ph.D. programs.

My master's thesis examined the transition of American society, from civic to ethnic, at Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem, Budapest. My Ph.D. studies remain focused on American politics and culture. It examines the identity crises of Arab immigrants to the United States as well as Arab American identity before and after 9/11. I am currently working within the theory of Americanization, in relation to mainly the Arab American identity crises.

I had different experiences in teaching. I gave English classes for beginners in Tunisia as well as I gave lectures at the University of Sousse, Tunisia. I also voluntarily taught English to Syrian refugees in Egypt with the Syrian organization khatwa. Currently, I am teaching English to middle school students at the school of the Libyan embassy, in Budapest as well as I give classes of American history at ELTE university.