

# THE ARAB WOMAN

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While the challenge Arab American women face balancing the American way of life with the Arab culture is an unacknowledged issue in our nation's society, these women have discovered their strength and stability to protect their family, honor their bodies, embrace womanhood, and prove their worth to not only those in their communities, but to themselves. Despite Arab American women having suffered emotional hardships, gender stereotypical roles, undesirable marriage expectations, misrepresentation in society, and mental health instability; they have been known to persevere, thrive, and uplift themselves in a world where they do not belong.

I am a twenty-one-year-old, second generation, Arab American woman living in New York City during the chaotic period of post 9/11 America. The United States is the one of the most known multi-cultural countries within human civilization, with the highest immigration rate in the world. "According to the United Nations, the United States has the highest number of immigrants, with 48 million in 2015, five times more than in Saudi Arabia (11 million), and six times more than in Canada (7.6 million)" (Pison). The highest proportion of immigrants originated from Middle Eastern countries and possess an Arab descent. "In 2015, the world's highest proportions of immigrants were found in this group: United Arab Emirates (87%), Kuwait (73%), Qatar (68%), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman, where the proportion ranges from 34% to 51%"(Pison). While the American culture is the most dominant in the U.S, a large percentage of the population are Arab American immigrants belonging to different ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds. "Arab Americans are Americans of Arab descent whose ancestry can



be traced to any one of the 22 Arab countries in the Arab world in Asia and Africa” (Mango, 84). Arab Americans continuously face the challenge of assimilating to the American culture, while still practicing and valuing their own traditions. Many cultural ways in the Arab world do not mix or coincide with American culture and for that, Arab Americans will continue to face the difficulty of balancing two different ways of life. For the longest time, myself, and many other Arab American women have struggled with finding the stability of being bicultural and living a double life. “It is important to be aware of the different ways that identification with the Arab culture can influence the woman’s understanding of her own situation and the difficulty reconciling Western and Arab values (Abu-Baker, 2006b)” (Mourad and Carolan, 182). Growing up as bicultural in a city that chooses to place Arab Americans in a prejudiced, dehumanizing category, has not only impacted me as a young adolescent, but as a woman. My identification as an Arab American woman has affected my role in a household, set undesirable expectations for marriage, toyed with my self-worth and character, and greatly influenced my mental health. While Arab women across the Middle East endure patriarchal complexities within their communities, particularly Arab American women of the diaspora, face challenges of gender stereotypes, misrepresentation in American society, customs of marriage, and the stigma of mental health altering self-identity and womanhood of the opposing cultures.

Gender plays a significant role in this issue, being that women endure a huge cultural imbalance between the ethical and cultural ways they were raised with, and the American exposure of peers, societal pressures, and new traditions living in the United States. Men fall victim to this challenge, but women become emotionally distraught and are impacted in a way where their self-identity, their worth, interpersonal relationships with others, and overall



confidence is questioned. In an article called “Experiences of gender among Arab American women: A qualitative study”, experts at the Journal of Counseling Psychology conducted a study where eleven Arab American women discussed the separation between their ethnicity and gender, with the role they play in American society. “Participants reported believing that they did not fit American society’s view of Arab American women. They also conveyed feelings of invisibility and invalidation due to racial ambiguity, and lack of census recognition. The findings affirm the need to increase psychological focus on Arab American women to facilitate the multiculturally competent practice of counseling psychologists working with this population” (Salam, Rifkin, Smith, Zaki, 255). The current U.S Census Bureau and the racial categories present have always played a role in feeling “invisible” and not acknowledged by the superior groups in society. Anytime I would fill out a job application, or take a state test, I would reach the race category and all of a sudden become so indecisive about who I am and what I’m supposed to identify myself with. The options I had to choose from were “White, Black or African American, Indian and Alaska Native, Asian American, or Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander”. Being that the United States’ highest percentage of immigration population are Arabs and people of Middle Eastern descent, it doesn’t make sense that our nation’s census does not include a race category fit for Arabs. An Arab woman is viewed as submissive or “half” compared to the male figures in her life. She is not seen as “whole” or “established”, regardless of what efforts she has made to accomplish her goals. The only way a woman in an Arab household is considered successful, whole, and solid, is if she gives herself and her aspirations up to a man through marriage. While Middle Eastern women all across the world endure similar struggles pertaining to womanhood and culture, Arab American women have been fighting an





internal battle between what they were taught through Arab tradition and values, and their desire for freedom. New York is a culture within itself, and the way people interact and communicate with each other on a day- to- day basis is a custom that I have already assimilated myself to.

While assimilating to the dominant, American culture is already a challenge for Arab Americans, they also have to claim a balance between the Arab culture itself and the Arab American ways of life in the United States. “There is both distinction and adequation when indicating that Arab Americans have their ‘own culture’; implicit distinction since the words imply that this culture is theirs and not their parents’; there is adequation by implying that their generation of Arab American women have enough similarities to have one common culture” (Mango, 653). It is one thing being bashed down, dehumanized, and constantly called out on for being who you are, but I think what’s more damaging is struggling with one’s own identity and not being able to express yourself or be vocal, without constantly being judged by those you thought you can trust. I believe it’s essential to remember that when a woman struggles with finding her niche, her comfort zone, and where she belongs in society, her self- worth, confidence, and certainty as an individual is toyed with. This problem is enhanced even more when a woman is exposed to two cultures that do not coincide with one another. There are a few cultural matters that are overlooked and not acknowledged by many non- Middle Eastern Americans. The first issue I will be tackling is gender and the male and female roles in a typical, Arab American household.

While women in American society try to prove themselves to be better than men, women in the Arab world try to prove themselves to be worthy. Worthy of a role in society, worthy of being important and acknowledged, and worthy of being free. In American society today, gender and the stereotypical roles between a man and a woman is a continuous problem that all people,



but specifically women, have to endure personally throughout their lives. Combining the stereotypes against women in both the American and Arab culture can not only create a cultural imbalance, but gives Arab American women a huge burden to carry. Let's put culture on the side for a second and just think about what it means to be a woman. All a woman aspires to do is express herself in any shape or form that represents who she is. Imagine being in a position where not only are you fearful of being yourself, but you struggle with finding your real identity in a world full of restrictions and limits. In American society, some women have to prove themselves to be capable of doing whatever a man can do, especially in the workforce or day-to-day life. In an Arab society, women have to do the same thing except proving it to her own family and loved ones as well. Your family and the people you grew up around are supposed to be the people you confide in, the ones you seek comfort in, and the ones you can be your true self around. It is upsetting to know that no matter how hard a woman tries to apply herself, reach her aspirations, make her family proud, and flourish with success, it'll never be enough because at the end of the day, she's just a woman. However, higher education obtained by Arab American women is strongly encouraged in a household. Education is a contributing factor to a woman's success and separates childhood from womanhood. In a study conducted by Jen'nan Ghazal and Sharon Oselin, Christian and Muslim Arab Americans were chosen as participants to discuss their view on education and how that ties into the gender roles Arab American women partake in. The results indicate that "As such, educational attainment is not seen as oppositional to traditional gender roles, but rather as a fundamental component of women's roles as wives, mothers, and daughters. Respondents repeatedly talked about the centrality of the family and pointed to women as the glue that binds a community together



through shared religion, values, and cultural practices” (Read and Oselin, 306). These findings were relatable to me because my parents have pushed education in my life for as long as I could remember. They talked about it as if it would make or break me. But it wasn’t because they wanted me to gain more knowledge or expand my mind, it was because I had to mentally prepare myself to take on the role of a caretaker, wife, and submissive woman in an Arab American household. “Arab Americans universally support female education as a resource, not for economic mobility, but to ensure the proper socialization of children, solidarity of the family, and ultimately the maintenance of ethnic and religious identity.” (Read and Oselin, 296)

In my life, I was the only girl in my household surrounded by male, dominant figures. Living with my dad, my two brothers, and spending a lot of time with my uncle and male cousins, I always felt like they played a superior role in my life, whereas I was belittled and not given the same treatment. “The collectivist quality of the Arab culture has special implications for female members. In the Arab culture, it is believed that females are to be protected by the males in the family (Sheridan & Ghorayeb, 2004). In this case, it is not uncommon for a woman’s individual needs or desires to have a lower priority to the needs of the overall family” (Mourad and Carolan, 179).

While continuing the discussion on gender stereotypes, it’s essential to note that everyone has a role in an Arab American household. Men, women, and children are all expected to play a part in their families. Men, of course, are the breadwinners; they hold the responsibility of handling the physical labor, the finance, and any masculine role that needs to be led. Women, however come second and take on the role of being a full time mother, caretaker, emotional support system, and the one who cleans and cooks. She has no involvement in money and how



that is structured. Children also take on a specific role in an Arab household. They are expected to be obedient and well-disciplined by their parents. Yes, that is very common in most households, but gender roles among children are not taken as serious. Boys usually stick to their video games, sports, and cars. Girls are raised to love the color pink, play with dolls, and wear dresses. “As previously noted, in a collectivist society, the actions of one family member are believed to reflect on the entire group, this concept is especially pertinent within the Arab culture. Thus, children grow up with the belief that their actions are reflections on their family” (Mourad and Carolan, 180). If a child steps out of their gender role, it reflects back on the parents and now the parental skills are questionable by people in our community. This aspect also pertains to Muslim women living in Arab American families. “Young Muslim women would choose allegiance to their community and compliance with their parents’ will, as both contribute to their identity as young Arab Muslim women. Defying their parents’ authority or confronting their community’s influence would isolate them from their own core values, without necessarily ensuring better integration in mainstream society” (Zimmerman, 154). Masculinity and femininity are strictly enhanced in an Arab American household. It is not considered stereotypical nor degrading upon men or women. It’s pretty much the norm and if one cannot adjust themselves to what they were taught, it will have an emotional impact on them in the near future. “Conflict between the roles that are set for Arab women and those embodied in the American culture can lead to problems that are brought to the therapeutic setting” (Mourad and Carolan, 179).

The second issue I want to shed light on is the idea of marriage following body image and virginity. As an Arab American woman, marriage and the idea of being with a man is pushed





on you starting from the age of twelve, until you are in a set situation to be with someone.

Throughout the years of visiting my family in Jordan, the first words that come out of my grandmother's mouth is "make sure you find a man that will take care of you". Growing up, I never really took offense to that because I heard it so often and understood it as her caring about my well-being. But I've realized that all my accomplishments, hard work, dedication, and overcoming challenges will never be acknowledged because I fulfilled them as an independent woman. In these last few years, my perspective completely shifted through education, my college experiences, and overall getting to know myself on an intimate level. In my mind, I know that I've made it this far, established myself, and prospered without a man by my side. That fact is what solely keeps me going and gives me the drive to continue to prove everyone else wrong.

Although the idea of marriage and gender stereotypes have played a significant role in my life, Arab American women all across the United States have endured their own trauma, with an even bigger impact on their lives. It's important to note that in most Arab families, marriage signifies the first step to success and an accomplishing life. Middle Eastern parents make it their duty to marry their son or daughter off to someone who shares the same values and morals as them.

Marriage is an essential part of a woman's life and is considered necessary to continue on a life journey. If an Arab woman is not married or decides to not be with a man her family chooses for her, she is frowned upon and seen as a disgrace to those around her. She is usually separated from her family, her community, and doesn't continue the same relationship she once had with her loved ones. I believe this is the biggest emotional burden to carry as a woman. Not only are you expected to put your life aspirations on pause for a man you don't see yourself with, but the



people you love and trust are willing to turn their backs on you because you refuse to be trapped in a box to please them.

In most American societies, a woman's virginity holds little to no significance or value to her reputation and image. In the Arab world, a woman's virginity is solely the one thing that separates a well-mannered, educated, and respectful woman, to a dishonorable, misguided, and shameful person. As there are many views of losing your virginity and how it is defined, it is universally known as the tearing of a woman's hymen, either through sexual intercourse, tampon use, or injury. "While many meanings are associated with virginity, in most of the Arab world virginity relates to the presence of a hymen and extends to encompass the honor of the Arab community, and virginity loss commonly relates to first vaginal intercourse" (Abboud, 715). Arab American women were taught from a very young age that their body is sacred, and should remain clean and untouched until marriage. If there is any indication that a woman is not a virgin before marital status, they no longer represent their family nor carry any dignity or honor. On top of Arab American women facing the hardships of gender stereotypes in their household, they carry a huge load of pressure to please everyone in their family and to not destroy their reputation. In the Arab world, the connection between a woman's body and their sacredness has been normalized overtime through many societies. Girls grow up with duties and responsibilities to hold the family together through her respectful actions. There hasn't been much change when it comes to a woman's role in the Arab world, but for the Arab Americans living in the United States, it is a bit more complex. "Females reared in Arab homes have additional stresses regarding protecting family honor; sexual activity prior to marriage is not acceptable within the culture, thus maintenance of a woman's virginity is considered extremely important. Concerns



circled around the overall Arab ethnic identity that was significantly characterized by family, the “good Arab girl” image (Naber 2006), gender division within the family, and the double standards of the sexual experience within the society” (Abboud, 724). Besides sharing the same ethnic background and tradition, these women endure the pressure of maintaining the “good girl” status, while facing uncertainty with their own identity. “The women shared similar stories of being pressured by parents to maintain the values and principles of Arab ethnicity through appropriate gender role performance. They were more pressured as Arab women to preserve the “good Arab girl” image by remaining virgins until marriage, by attaining high educational levels, and by behaving as respectful women through their dress code and daily gender performance” (Abboud, 732). A woman’s virginity would be thought of as the least relevant factor pertaining to her identity, her future, and overall role as a working individual in society.



But in the Arab world, a woman's virginity signifies respect, honor, worth, and ultimately shapes her character.

Gender roles in an Arab American household, and the expectations of marriage with the importance of virginity, all play a significant part in the uncertainty of a woman's identity, worth, and bicultural way of life. Although, one unacknowledged issue that many Arab American women face is mental health. Before diving into the role that mental health plays in a woman's life, it is essential to have a clear understanding of what it is. "Mental health refers to cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being. It is all about how people think, feel, and behave. People sometimes use the term "mental health" to mean the absence of a mental disorder" (Newman). Upon Arab American women struggling with balancing two opposite cultures, experiencing horrendous stereotypes, and taking on the role of caring and representing their family, mental health is another contributing obstacle these women have to face in their lives. It's important to note that mental health is overlooked in many Arab societies due to the lack of resources and the failure to acknowledge the severity of the issue. There is a strong stigma attached to mental illness in the Arab world and is usually either ignored or blamed on the woman. Problems with mental health affect first and second generation Arab American women differently. Since first generation women were the first to immigrate to the United States, they faced difficulty picking up on the English language, assimilating to the education systems, finding a well- paid job, and adapting to a new culture of music, food, and interaction. Second generation Arab American women are more exposed and assimilated to the American culture being that they were born in the United States; although, they still face hardship finding a neutrality between both lifestyles. September 11th, 2001 was the day all Arab Americans sacrificed their voices, their freedom, and





their significance as American citizens. “According to some researchers, an event that may have increased the need for mental health services for Arab American women was the attack of September 11, 2001. Since then, Arab American women have experienced increased negative stereotyping, open prejudice, hate crimes, civil rights violations, deportation, and incarceration” (Kakoti, 63). From the time of 9/11 until now, Arab American women have faced hatred, disgust, and disunity from non- Middle Eastern people, which led to difficulties in finding a job and maintaining a stabilized lifestyle in American society. Being that both my parents are first generation immigrants, they faced financial hardships in finding a place in the workforce and providing for three children. After 9/11, my dad was denied many jobs and opportunities not because he lacked the experience or skill, but because of who he was; a first generation Arab American man. My parents came to the United States to make sure my brothers and I lived a life that was better than theirs. My mother and father experienced stereotypical hardships, rejection from opportunities, persecution, and dehumanization. Despite these obstacles, my parents went from working at fast food restaurants sweeping tables, to establishing a stable household, raising three children, and building a successful career that will be passed on from generation to generation. Their story is inspiring because not only did they work their way from the bottom, but they persevered and didn't allow external issues to interfere with their mental health.

Growing up as a second generation, Arab American woman, I never realized the affect mental illness had on my life until now. Growing up in an all- White, middle school and high school, I always felt like the odd- one- out compared to my classmates and peers. I thought it may have been my academic performance, what I wore, or how I looked. Even my teachers would single me out during class for a reason I couldn't figure out at the time. I remember this



one instance where my seventh grade teacher had told me the Akroush family were a bunch of animals. Later on that day I told my mother what happened and her exact words were “it’s just something we all have to deal with.” During my youth, I would constantly hear people make terrorist jokes and side comments to my face, and laugh it off with their friends. Me being so young and naive, I never acknowledged the severity of the issue. I thought of it as harmless and not targeted towards me specifically. Growing older and wiser, I’ve come to the conclusion that my ethnic background and identity designates my place in society and how I am treated by the superior race. Overtime, issues with my mental health altered how I perceive myself and my overall confidence. Being that mental illness greatly affects immigrants living in the United States, resources for Arab American women are limited and lacking. “Improving mental health services for Arab American women begins with changing negative attitudes, shame, and stigma by engaging in culturally competent practice and acknowledging the oppressive factors that influence both the practitioner and the client” (Kakoti, 65). Little mental health assistance for Arab Americans is due to present stereotypical views and the need to understand their values. Married Arab American women are more at risk of facing difficulties with their mental health and finding the comfort to open up to anyone about their personal struggles. “The strong restrictions placed on unmarried women in the matter of premarital sexual relations can result in fear discussing thoughts with others. For some women, it may be a very difficult topic to broach with people outside of their trusted network; this may arise as a major challenge in the therapeutic setting” (Mourad and Carolan, 180). Being that a woman in an Arab American household has the responsibility of holding her family together and representing their honor, it is rather difficult for a woman to open up about her life in fear that she will somehow disappoint



her loved ones. Another underlying reason for why Arab American women should seek therapy or psychological assistance is the marital relationship she has with her husband and the abuse or trauma it may cause. Specific roles in a household can result in conflict and disagreements between spouses; especially when these roles support the idea of masculinity and femininity. “Arab women are encouraged to try and hold the family together by “managing” the problems that may arise within her marital relationship. The stability of the family is given precedence in the Arab culture over each member’s own desires” (Mourad and Carolan, 180). Despite abuse or traumatic involvement that a woman may face in her own home, she still has the responsibility of protecting the family’s name and keeping them together no matter what. Being that Arab women have sacrificed many things coming to the United States and establishing a life for themselves, I can’t even fathom what it feels like to sacrifice your freedom and voice just so you can fulfill your obligations. This burden women carry does not only make them uncertain about their identity and place in the world, but is a direct cause for issues pertaining to mental health. “Arab American women in the United States are at risk for a myriad of stressors, including stress of immigration and intimate partner violence, that contribute to an increased risk for depression. Cultural and social barriers exist for the women to seek and access appropriate care, and future research should explore holistic and longitudinal interventions to address the physical health and mental health needs of Arab American and immigrant women” (Abuelezam Fontenot, 398). This is the unfortunate truth for many Arab American women facing mental instability being bicultural, but this is not an issue that can’t be altered. Mental health is a universal constituent that affects people of all different ethnicities, races, backgrounds, ages, and genders. Improving nationwide systems to better assist Arab American women in therapy and mental treatment will



build a stronger bond between the specialist and client. If specialists and mental health experts familiarize themselves with the ongoing struggles Arab American women face in their household, worklife, and day- to- day experiences, then they will feel more confident in being transparent with their visits, and open to seeking additional help.

While the Arab culture is universal and has remained the same for a long period of time, that doesn't necessarily mean women have to continue to endure stereotypical treatment and misplacement in society. Education systems, the media, and therapy services should take accountability for not accurately portraying the identity of Arab Americans, and their majestic history in the development of the United States and nations worldwide. Since education is considered valuable in an Arab American woman's life, it can also influence change and build a different perspective for a young girl just learning to experience two varying cultures at a time. But unfortunately, the structure of classroom lectures does not adhere to women not belonging to the superior race. "Classrooms should not only include Arab Americans in textbooks and in the curriculum, but also should include their experiences and the challenges they face that are particular to their group. Teachers need to critically explore how Arabs are misrepresented and allow all students to take part in the discussion, especially Arab Americans, so they can draw a different narrative of who they are according to their own worlds without intimidation or accusation" (Mango, 100). Reflecting back on elementary school, I was never asked about my own experiences living in American society and strictly following Arab traditions. It would have added contrast to classroom lectures and discussions, but instead we were expected to memorize the world wars and ancient European history. If education systems ensured that teachers took the time to build an open, honest relationship with their students, young Arab girls would develop





that comfortability to discuss their own cultures and further build character. “Educators should foster in their schools understandings of cultures and develop students critical thinking toward the media’s representations of Arabs in order for students to be able to contest the validity of the dominant discourse so they are able to think for themselves, reinvent their identities, and not just take things at face value” (Mango, 99).

Analyzing the many hardships and difficulties Arab American women have to face growing up in a country that is opposed to your own culture because of certain prejudiced beliefs, opens a whole new perspective on bicultural individuals. Between carrying the burden of making your family proud, playing the appropriate gender role, accepting the expectations of marriage, and enduring personal obstacles pertaining to mental health, it is fair to say that we are powerful. Not just powerful women, but powerful people. To suffer and face all of these emotional burdens just to protect our reputation, our honor, and our families, indicate that we are capable of almost anything. What we’re not capable of is putting ourselves first. I believe I broke that tradition. I am a second- generation college student who has proved herself to be hard-working, passionate, self-taught, dedicated, and independent. I believe I paved the way to a fulfilling, prosperous, and rewarding way of life, given that I endured personal struggles of being bi-cultural, and facing the challenge of remaining true to my character. More importantly, I put myself first. Although I was raised to obey my family, value my traditions, and honor my culture, I still embraced womanhood and my value as a second generation, Arab American woman. I used my voice and willpower to prove that I am more than just a caretaker or housewife. I challenged the expectations of marriage by being independent and flourishing without a man by my side. I trained my mind to ensure a good, stabilized mental health by thinking positive



thoughts and reminding myself of my worth. Although it took twenty one years to become the woman I am today, it is not impossible. Arab women all around the world still have a chance to claim their worth and become who they really are; not an Arab American, not a first generation immigrant, but a woman.

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