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Muslim American Youth in the Post 9/11 Public Education System

The terrorist attacks which occurred on September 11th, 2001 have had a profound effect on American culture and society. For many citizens, the attacks brought a sense of unity among them against a common enemy: Islamic extremism. This new bond excluded Muslim Americans who, despite no religious or ideological connections to the 9/11 terrorists, were now treated as all the same. As a result, Islamophobia drastically increased as Muslims, Arab Americans and other citizens of Middle Eastern descent took the blame for a catastrophic event in which they played no role in. In fact, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reports that between 2000 and 2007 the rate at which the Muslim population experienced violent acts of discrimination increased by 1,600% (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007, p. 208). Ostracized, the group is targeted not only by their peers, but by political and popular media as well; “othered” for their beliefs, culture and way of life. Acts of prejudice are present in all aspects of American society, including the public education system. Middle Eastern youth experience varying levels of discrimination on a daily basis, whether it be in the form of social interactions with their peers and educators, or via government policies and popular media. As a result, Middle Eastern youth experience a hyphenated self; unable to completely identify with either their current American homeland, or the Middle Eastern home their families left behind.

After the September 11th attacks, President George W. Bush proclaimed that America was under attack and declared a national war on terror. Suddenly, the Islamic ideology and Middle Eastern populations were synonymous with “terrorism” and considered an imminent threat to Western civilization: “Ideologically represented as a threat, since 9/11 ‘they’—Muslim Ameri-

cans—have been watched, detained, deported, and invaded in order to protect and save ‘us’” (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 151). It is very common in times of war, for “us” versus “them” rhetoric to become a standard practice for politicians and media outlets. The purpose of this is to dehumanize the enemy and highlight differences between one’s self and one’s opponent. For this reason, the attacks, combined with Bush’s resulting proclamation and military actions, have led to a significant increase in the negative portrayal of Muslims and Middle Easterners in both popular and political media. These negative media portrayals act as propaganda so as to reassure the general population that the government is making the right decisions and to validate military action. However in doing so, it is not merely the individuals responsible for the attacks who have become targeted, but the Islamic faith as a whole. The media paints with a broad brush, illustrating all people who appear to be of Middle Eastern descent as a threat.

Islamophobia has become a significant problem in the United States. Islamophobia can be defined as “a fear of Islam and Muslims which manifests itself in oppression and discrimination, occurring on both individual and structural levels” (Bonet, 2011, p. 48). In the case of the United States, the national fear of Islam and Muslims has resulted in a significant increase in hate crimes and discrimination towards the group, whether it be present in general social interactions, political policy or the media. On September 9th of 2015, more than ten years after the attacks, the 114th Congress put forth Resolution 413, officially acknowledging the drastic increase in hate crimes towards Muslims and Middle Easterners. The document signifies that the government officially recognizes that not only have Muslim Americans become the target of increased violence and hatred since 9/11, but also that those who are “perceived” as Muslims have also experienced an increase in violent behavior. This brings to light some of the issues regarding stereotyping and the dehumanizing of Middle Eastern folks. This resolution lists nine specific inci-

dences that all occurred in post-9/11 U.S.A however, it is noted that according to the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, more than seven hundred cases of hate crimes occurred in the first nine weeks following the 9/11 attacks. This resolution recognizes that these acts of violence have become increasingly common since the 9/11 attacks: “Whereas the war on terror in response to the September 11, 2001, attacks has increased instances of Islamophobia and hate crimes committed against Muslims, or those thought to be Muslim” (H. Res. 413). The document clearly states that these actions are not condoned in the United States and are considered to be hate crimes, a term defined as a “traditional offense like murder, arson, or vandalism with an added element of bias” (H. Res. 413). The resolution maintains that the cultural groups being targeted in this manner provide positive contributions and services to American society. It seems that many American citizens do not agree with this assessment considering that almost fifteen years after the attacks, acts of violence and discrimination against the group remain prevalent. In 2011, a decade after the events of 9/11, the Pew Research Center released a study that found that 40% of Americans believe that there is a great deal or at least fair amount of support for extremist Muslim groups among Muslim Americans (Pew Research Center, 2011). This type of suspicion and “othering” of Muslim Americans by their peers leads to acts of hate and discrimination.

It is not merely adults who feel the burn of islamophobia, but Muslim American youth, as well. In their article “Hyphenated Selves: Muslim American Youth Negotiating Identities on the Fault Lines of Global Conflict,” Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine (2007) assert that there should be more consideration for the experiences of young, Muslim Americans as they “witness and critically [speak] back to global, national, cultural, and economic contradictions, and believe they bring passion, loss, desire and critical action to ongoing shifting cultural formations” (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 152). The burden of discrimination sits heavy on the shoulders of this marginal-

ized group as they navigate their adolescent years. Immediately following the events of September 11th, tension increased on the school grounds. In an interview with Sirin and Fine, Aisha, a 16 year old girl Muslim girl describes the moment she knew that her life would be harder as a result of the 9/11 attacks:

I remember that day (9/11/01) my father drove home a number of children from school, a religious school. As he dropped them at the elementary school, where they would meet their parents, the police were there, taking names, phone numbers, and licenses. That was frightening enough, but as we drove off we found ourselves in a big traffic jam and some woman screamed out of her car, ‘Why don’t you just go home?’ I knew then that everything was going to be different (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 155)

Another common discourse used by politicians and the popular media frames Americans and Middle Easterners as polar opposites. This is done for the purpose of dehumanizing the enemy, asserting that they are in no way like us: “The dominant public discourse around Islam and gender frames it as a product of outmoded, backwards, and historic cultural traditions” (Bonet, 2011, p. 50). These discourses frame Muslim women as silent, passive, invisible and victimized, contrasting them to Western women who are “free subjects, mistresses of their own agency and destiny” (Bonet, 2011, p. 50). The image of Muslim women being oppressed in this way plays off the common portrayal of Islam as a violent religion, further polarizing them from the Christian values many Americans attribute to their own society. Similarly, this thought process frames the idea that a person cannot be both a Muslim and an American.

Because a large portion of an American's early years are spent on the campus of a public school, a child's experience in the education system plays an important role in determining how he or she develops their sense of self and identity. For Muslim American youth and other minorities, this self identity is often referred to by scholars as a "hyphenated identity" or "a cultural hybrid". In their book *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode (1992) define hybridity as "the fusion of various cultures to form new, distinct, and ever-changing identities," explaining that the term "refers to how people identify, regardless of which ethnic or racial group they may belong to. It recognizes that there are many other identities besides race and ethnicity; these include gender, sexual orientation, geographic location, and professional affiliation, among many others" (Nieto & Bode, 1992, p. 173-174).

Likewise, the term "hyphenated identity" describes a similar phenomenon, with "hyphen" referring specifically "to the identities that are at once joined, and separated, by history, the present socio-political climate, geography, biography, longings and loss" (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 152). In her article "Negotiating Muslim Youth Identity in a Post 9/11 World," Cynthia White Tindongan (2011) asserts that: "Exploring how multiple identities are managed by Muslim youth and perceived by others is crucial, because as young first-generation immigrants their identities as Muslims and as American students are sometimes in conflict" (Tindongan, 2011, p. 75). Although religion is not generally taken into account when discussing hyphenated identities, she asserts that it is necessary when considering Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States. Hyphenated identities take into account more than just culture, they also examine the historical and political contexts faced by the population. For Muslim Americans, this context includes events like the September 11th terrorist attacks, President Bush's war on terror, as well as the

subsequent USA Patriot act. These occurrences have been used to target Muslims specifically and play a significant role in creating the feelings of ostracism associated with the hyphenated Muslim American identity (Tindongan, 2011, p. 79).

One example of an issue Muslim American youth must navigate is the contradicting information they receive regarding the Islamic faith. Public schools have a tendency to present Islam as an oppressive religion that minimizes the importance of educational and occupational success, while the narrative in Islamic homes reflect the ideology that loyalty to the faith is of the utmost importance as it provides followers with a source of guidance and morality. As a result, many teachers view assimilation as a paramount factor in guiding students to a favorable outcome. This is of course in complete opposition to the Muslim view that maintains one's faith takes priority, even if it means abstaining from certain aspects of American culture (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2015, p. 203). Marina, a 17 year old Muslim American girl describes the internal struggle she experiences when she must stretch her identity between Muslim and American:

I didn't understand what side you're supposed to be on or anything. Like, you know, on one hand, you're Muslim, and they're saying, 'You're Muslim, go this way'; on the other hand, you're American, and you have to be like this. Like, if you go to the American side, they're never going to think of you as American, but if you go to the Muslim side, you're not Muslim enough.

(Ghaffar-Kucher, 2015, p. 202)

The conflict between one's Muslim and American identities play out frequently in the lives of Muslim American teens. In their article "Challenges and Opportunities Facing American Muslim Youth," Samara Ahmed and Maha Ezzeddine (2009) explain that like their non-Muslim peers, Muslim Americans are often subjected to peer pressure regarding substance use and premarital

sex, both of which are commonly frowned on by American society, in general. Islam also prohibits these activities in addition to other forms of recreation, such as participation in school dances and dating; both of which are common activities for American teenagers (Ahmed & Ezzeddine, 2009, p. 160).

Like all other aspects of American life, the school environment is not free from the bias and stereotyping that affects many Middle Eastern and Muslim students. While bullying is a fairly common problem within the education system, Muslim American students find themselves the victim of torment more often than their non-Muslim peers. Worse than your average name calling, Muslim students are subjected to labels like “terrorist” and “Bin Laden”. For example, James Karam, a sixteen year old Lebanese boy recalls some of his experiences with bullies in school saying that some “people say, ‘Look out for the terrorist! Don’t mess with him or he’ll blow up your house!’ or some stuff like that” (Nieto & Bode, 1992, p. 203). While Karam maintains that this sort of behavior does not bother him, other students find themselves humiliated and hurt when these types of incidences occur. In her article “Muslim Students in Post 9/11 Classroom,” author Ameena K. Jandali (2013) recalls comforting her school-age children after they were called “camel-jockey” and “towel head” (Jandali, 2013, p. 21). She recounts the story of a student who wore the hijab to school: “She was approached by one of her peers who called out “Her father is bin Laden! She’s going to blow up the school! Everybody run, this jihad girl is going to kill us!” humiliating her in front of her classmates (Jandali, 2013, p. 21-22).

To make matters worse, many teachers harbor their own biases and often, their misperceptions of Islam prevents them from handling situations appropriately. In the case of this student, her teacher asserted that the classmate was merely exercising his right to free speech (Jandali, 2013, p. 22). Sadly cases of discrimination like this one are common place in the school

system and can be severely damaging to student's morale and self-confidence (Reza, 2016, p. 37). In March of 2010 the group "Muslim Mothers Against Violence" surveyed 79 Muslim students between the ages of 12 and 17 within the Northern Virginia region and found that 50% of participants had experienced name calling in the presence of school teachers, staff and administrators. To makes matters worse, the survey also found that about 80% of participants had been the target of discrimination with 75% attesting that it had occurred more than once (Jandali, 2013, p. 22).

Within the education system, many Muslim and Middle Eastern students experience discrimination by their teachers, administrators, advisers and other school staff. In some cases these acts might be played out through ignorant questions and comments regarding a Muslim girl's decision to wear her "hijab" to school.

Many girls within the education system have found that their hijab makes them a target for bullying by peers and teachers alike. For instance, in 2003, Nashala Hearn, was attending the sixth grade in a public school in Muskogee, Oklahoma when she was sent to the principal's office for wearing her hijab to class. She was told that her head covering violated the school dress code and she was not to wear it on campus again. Hearn refused and, as a result was eventually suspended. Hearn and her family filed a lawsuit against the school, which granted Hearn the right to wear her hijab to school and paid her for emotional damages. After the settlement was reached, assistant general attorney R. Alexander Acosta issued this statement: "this settlement reaffirms the principle that public schools cannot require [students] to check their faith at the school house door" (Reza, 2016, p. 37). Unfortunately, many students who experience discrimination within the education system never find justice or compensation for the way that they are

treated. Many Muslim Americans are unaware of their rights and continue to experience harassment both within the school environment as well as other institutions (Reza, 2016, p. 37).

Discrimination within the public school system is often based on assumptions regarding the Islamic faith's view of education and its assumed value. Contrary to common belief, the majority of Muslims put a high value on education, as reflected within the Quran and the haddith (the documentation of teachings and practices of Muhammed the prophet). In fact, there are recorded accounts of Muhammed allowing literate, prisoners of war to buy their freedom by teaching ten Muslim children to read and write (Reza, 2016, p. 5).

Despite the high value Islam places on education, teachers and school staff are often under the false impression that Muslim students value education less than their peers. This misunderstanding is often met with extreme frustration by Muslim students who report being encouraged to enroll in general-level classes with non-collegiate outcomes despite their academic achievement (Bonet, 2011, p. 50). This is especially an issue for young Muslim women, many of whom have reported that they feel as though their teachers do not challenge them as they do other students. They also assert that their advisers do not provide them with the necessary information regarding post-secondary education, because they assume Islam discourages career and education for women. One student Bonet interviewed expressed her frustration that, despite a superb academic standing, she was unable to graduate from high school in three years instead of four, because her counselor was unhelpful and despite her efforts, he discouraged her from taking math and science courses. Instead, he steered her towards general, non-academic tracks (Bonet, 2011, p. 50).

Despite their knowledge and mastery of English, many Muslim students have reported ESL placement. This is an issue not only as a form of discrimination, but also because time spent

in an ESL classroom often takes away from other courses such as math and science, ultimately affecting their success in the future. In one case a Pakistani boy was placed in the ESL course despite being born in North America. When the boy's mother confronted his teacher, she was told that the decision was based on her son's inability to stay on track in class (Bonet, 2011, p. 50). Although attention and awareness are important in classroom settings, an ESL class is by no means a viable solution.

9/11 has not only changed the way in which Muslim students interact with their peers, but school involvement among Muslim American parents has also been affected by the attacks. In her book "The Effects of the September 11 Terrorist Attacks on Pakistani-American Parental Involvement in U.S Schools," Fawzia Reza (2016) considers this change. Here she asserts that the primary problem lies in the relationship between parent and teacher, as both parties harbor feelings of distrust and hostility (Reza, 2016, p. 2). Pakistani parents often feel stereotyped by their children's educators based on their cultural and religious backgrounds. As a result, many find themselves choosing silence so as to divert unnecessary embarrassment from themselves and their families (Reza, 2016, p. 39). Parents from minority backgrounds may be less involved in their children's academic lives than other parents because they fear that their opinions will not be valued or taken seriously. Language also remains a prominent barrier between some parents and educators (Reza, 2016, p. 38).

Educational curriculum has also been effected by Islamophobia with Muslim parents expressing frustration that teachers minimize the accomplishments of Muslims in the classroom. For example, many Pakistani parents complain that because Osama bin Laden was a Pakistani, educators discriminate against the nationality, painting the entire population with the same brush. Reza (2016) asserts that in doing this, educators subconsciously send a message to students re-

garding what accomplishments are most valued and who's accomplishments can be ignored (Reza, 2016, p. 39).

It is not merely from peers, educators and school staff that Arab American youth are subjected to discrimination but through government agencies as well. The USA Patriot Act (“Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism”) was put into action shortly after the September 11th attacks for the purpose of improving national security by increasing the “powers of federal agencies to conduct searches, use electronic surveillance to intercept communication both nationally and internationally, and detain suspected terrorists” (Bonet, 2011, p. 47). Many have found this political policy to encroach on civil liberties; however at the time, many citizens felt that the act was a compromise for the purpose of a safer nation. The Pew Research Center found that initially 49% of Americans agreed that it was “acceptable and wise to sacrifice individual freedoms to ensure national security,” but by 2004 the act’s approval rating had dropped by 11% (Bonet, 2011, p. 47). In her article, “Educating Muslim American Youth in a Post 9/11 Era: A Critical Review of Policy and Practice,” Sally Wesley Bonet considers the way that the USA Patriot Act has affected Middle Eastern Americans, both young and old. It became apparent that the act disproportionately targeted these groups, especially when, under the protection of the act, thousands of Middle Eastern Americans and Muslims were held for months, in solitary confinement, against their will. The act has been used to invade the privacy of these minorities, addressing this type of breach of freedom as a “measure of security” (Bonet, 2011, p. 48). This type of privacy violation affects not only adults, but youth as well. Bonet asserts that Arab, Arab American and Muslim students are also the target of excessive investigation, under the act, as their private records are obtained by the federal government as a means to allegedly maintain national security.

When one takes into account the educational, mental, personal and political factors that affect Muslim American youth, it should come as no surprise that they experience a plethora of challenges in their daily life, in addition to those commonly associated with adolescence. In response to the common rhetoric often biased against them, Muslim American youth form notions of dissent. Sunaina Maira's study "Citizenship and dissent: South Asian Muslim youth in the US after 9/11," examines some of the ways in which a community of South Asian Muslim youth in Wellford, South Carolina push back on the dominant society's notions of Islam and terrorism. She asserts that young people's notions of dissent take form very differently from adults because their perception of state, resistance and politics are rooted in different developmental and societal contexts. Due to their minor status, Muslim American youth are often more vulnerable to government disciplinary action than their adult counterparts. As a result, they have a tendency to push back on society in subtleties. Maira includes examples of this type of defiance, citing incidences such as a Muslim girl who chose to write "INDIA+MUSLIM" on her backpack in sharpie (Maira, 2010, p. 35) and another student who used school computers to view and share images depicting Bush as a terrorist and an ape (Maira, 2010, p. 37-38). Maira argues that these acts "test the limits of what is permissible by a subtle manipulation of political meaning that exists on a continuum of challenges to dominant interpretations of 'terrorism' or 'fundamentalism' by targeted or dissenting groups" (Maira, 2010, p. 37-38).

Some Muslim youth struggle to cope with the American islamophobia, resulting in mental health issues. In the article, "State of Muslim American youth: Research and Recommendations," authors Sameera Ahmed, Ph.D., Sadiq Patel, M.S.W. and Hanan Hashem, B.A. (2015) consider the experience of Muslim youth in the United States extensively. They dedicate a section of their piece to mental health concerns. While they acknowledge that minimal study has

been done on this topic, they do state that research points to a correlation between assimilation strategies and mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety: "Muslim youth who replace their cultural collectivist, or family-oriented, values with individualism may experience higher depressive symptoms than those who do not" (Ahmed, Patel & Hashem, 2015, p. 15). Higher rates of these symptoms have also been linked to feelings of alienation, hopelessness and loss of social support, especially among Muslim American immigrants. This population also experiences higher rates of post traumatic stress disorder than their non-Muslim neighbors. Ahmed and Reddy assert that this is likely connected to feelings of uncertainty resulting from unjust government action. Since the passage of the U.S Patriot act, higher rates of Muslim Americans, especially immigrants, have reported feeling targeted by government officials based on their religion (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007, p. 209).

Some studies have found that the discrimination that Muslim American youth experience in the United States affects young men and women differently. One such study performed by Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine, came to this exact conclusion. The report entitled "Hyphenated Selves: Muslim American Youth Negotiating Identities on the Fault Lines of Global Conflict," used a mixed methods approach, combining the use of surveys, focus group interviews and identity maps to form a thorough explanation of the issue at hand. Researchers found that across the board, all participants had formed complex, hyphenated identities as a result of their experiences in the U.S. However, Sirin and Fine also assert that young men and women react to these experiences differently, with certain factors presenting themselves more frequently for one gender than the other. For example, the majority of the young, Muslim women who participated in the study had a decidedly confident and secure reaction to their situation here. Researchers describe the young women as a group who "filled the air with a powerful sense of authority, protec-

tion, a mission to educate others, and a confident sense of their global ‘expertise.’” (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 156). The girls cited many instances in which their classmates would call on them to educate non-Muslim peers on topics like the Iraqi war, the hijab and Islam. The majority of participants were un-phased by this type of attention, often expressing relief that their peers chose to ask them questions instead of remaining ignorant. Similarly, when asked to create identity maps, 90% of the girls drew images that represented fluidity between American and Muslim aspects of themselves (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 156).

In contrast, Sirin & Fine found that Muslim American boys had a far more ominous view of their situation in America. Compared to female participants, 70% of male participants designed identity maps that reflected “fractured” identities, often including a tumultuous life of “conflict, tension, institutional and personal struggles with racism, white supremacy, aggression and war” (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 156). Here, the researchers note that the Muslim American boys were more likely to share feelings of doubt, defeat and distress regarding their time in the U.S, expressing a strong desire to return to an idealized homeland. For many participants, this homeland is one that they have only heard stories about, but have never had the opportunity to visit. They perceive this place to be one of happiness and peace. When asked to draw a picture of his identity map, a twelve year old boy drew a picture of a face split into two halves. One side is labeled, “American” and is clearly frowning with tears rolling down his cheek, while the other side of the face is labeled “Muslim.” This side of the face’s mouth is turned up in a distinct smile (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 156).

With this information in mind, some scholars have come to the conclusion that discrimination against Muslim Americans can lead to extremist, anti-American views and ultimately participation within terrorist organizations. Although it is a very controversial concept, there is like-

ly at least a strand of truth to this argument. Little research has been done regarding a potential correlation between Islamophobia and conversion to extremist groups, however a small body of scholars have used past polls to examine the potential for a connection. These academics include researchers: Jeff Victoroff, Janic R. Edelman and Miriam Matthews, who published the study “Psychological Factors Associated with Support for Suicide Bombing in the Muslim Diaspora,” in 2012. They found that young Muslims Americans who reported experiences of discrimination and perceived hardship due to their religious beliefs, were significantly more likely to justify suicide bombings, than the older Muslims who participated in the poll. This being said, researchers conclude that the correlation is not strong enough to warrant making any definite extrapolations (Victoroff, Edelman & Matthews, 2012, p. 799).

The 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City and the subsequent increase in hate crimes, violent acts, stereotyping and general feelings of Islamophobia have had a profound effect on the lives of Muslim American youth: “When one’s social identity is fiercely contested by the dominant discourse either through formal institutions, social relationships and/or the media, one of the first places we can witness psychological, social and political fallout is in the lives of young people” (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 151). While the issue of Islamophobia is complex and multi-faceted, the classroom is a viable space for the conception of effective social change. Before this can happen, schools and universities must incorporate religious and cultural education courses into their teacher training programs. These courses would be designed to increase awareness and appreciation for Muslims, so as to address some of the misconceptions perpetrated by popular media, news outlets and politicians. Muslims who have had a positive influence on American society should also be integrated into curriculum. Ultimately, a culturally aware classroom would en-

courage a shift in classroom discussion from one of group differences to one that values an increased understanding (Ahmed & Ezzeddine, 2009, p. 167).