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ISOLATION VERSUS INSULATION

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Foreword

Whereas once a citizen of this country could be blacklisted from the labor force because of political leanings, in the new century the same applies for religious affiliation. To many American women converts to Islam, well-educated and with significant work experience, this has become an all too familiar tale--the difficulty in finding or retaining meaningful employment. But before we begin there, let me step back...

As a researcher I wanted to be distant from the topic I was studying. Yet three incidents intertwined me with the experiences of my subjects. The week of July 4th I applied for a position within a different department at Harvard University where I work, and with significantly more responsibility than I presently held. I was a sure-fit with my newly-obtained Ivy-league degree and years of institutional history under my belt; not to mention the specialized skills and languages they were seeking. Yet upon my face to face meeting I was asked not about what I could offer, but how I became Muslim (obvious because of my *hijab*, or headscarf), and how many children I had, in direct violation of ethical standards. Needless to say, I wrote a complaint and never heard back from the department in question regarding the opening.

On September 18th, two weeks into the school year, my family was called upon to defend itself due to a cultural misunderstanding which resulted in the suspension of my 4 and a half year old son from public school. What was treated as a deviant psychopathic behavior warranting a meeting of many specialists, was in reality no more than a cultural imitation taken out of context. In this case it was a classroom reenactment of the sacrificial rite of Eid al-Adha. Surprisingly, the combined experts present had never heard of this holiday, one of two largest in the Islamic religion, and purportedly observed by as many as 2 million children in our public schools. Needless to say, our child was readmitted to class after educating the educators.

The very next day, September 19th, my doorbell rang, and much to my surprise two civilian-clothed policemen wielding badges towered in my doorway. They asked me to confirm that this was the residence of my husband and that he worked for Harvard University. Wanting to enter the premises, they obligingly and respectfully stayed in the doorway when I explained that it was not religiously appropriate; they left behind a calling card. That same day we learned that two women had seen my husband at his place of work and said he matched someone on a FBI most-wanted list. After the inquiry, the officers apologized.

This is the new post 9/11 reality for American-Muslims in the public sphere and workplace-- highly visible, and more often than not, suspect. For some, this has become an untenable situation, forcing them to shift into the Islamic sector as I shall call it, i.e. choosing to work for Islamic schools or businesses or begin family industries. Additionally, they may also instruct their children in religious schools with others just like them. It is my hope, through this work, to

begin to understand this new trend which I have labeled “Isolation versus Insulation”, with a special regard to the workplace.

I have identified isolation as coming in two forms. The first is a condition that is born internally, as in the case of an employee who chooses to be underground about the faith he/she professes.

In the case of my sample they are the women who chose not to wear hijab. Says one tellingly:

I cannot be open about my personal convictions or my Muslim relatives-by-marriage at work, as they will lead to the loss of my job. Work is not the appropriate environment for expressing personal convictions or elaborating on one’s family, but it is hard to become friendly with colleagues if one cannot be open about one’s life outside of work.

Isolation could also stem from more outward displays, such as wearing the hijab, and then subsequent subtle ostracization (whether self-imposed or not) for the person of faith. Such isolation may stem from the need to be excused to find a quiet spot to pray, to avoid functions with alcohol, or being unable to eat the same foods as the rest of the colleagues in the lunch room. In some cases it is more blatant--resulting in termination altogether. This is because “religious difference often signals what we most deeply fear” (Eck, 2001, p. 30).

Methodology

My primary research question was to ascertain if this conscious/unconscious apprehension by co-workers, employers, or in some cases customers and clients, appeared to be hindering promotion and stifling growth opportunities for Muslim women in America? Also, is this significantly more of an issue for women who became Muslim later in life, by choice, and for whom the glass ceiling was perceived as merely a gender issue rather than engendered with additional multiple layers of complexity? Are these women ready to take their complaints to the courts, if not for

their own personal satisfaction, then to pave the way for the next generation? Finally, beyond individual legal fights, in what other ways can speaking out and joining grass-roots movements be an instrumental tool for change?

A pioneering study in the 1980s (Haddad & Lummis, 1987) looked at Muslim immigrants, their children, and their grandchildren, and found that 73% of those sampled agreed “a wife should work outside the home if she wishes” (pp. 108-109). Professionals, both men and women, also appeared to be more open to women working outside the home for other than financial need. This conclusion was reached nearly two decades ago and, moreover, does not include the many recent converts to Islam, many of whose mothers were involved in the women’s movements. Indeed, according to one prominent researcher documenting the shifting demographics of our society, “of the some six million American Muslims today, about 25 to 40 percent are African Americans, and the rest are immigrants, both old and new. There is also a small but growing number of Euro-American converts to Islam” (Eck, 2001, p. 264).

It is especially this latter group, little researched as of yet, that I wished to reach most. To target them, my methodology consisted of a survey sent out during the summer of 2003 on several national listserves reaching this population. The main source eliciting the highest number of respondents was that of the American Council on American Relations (henceforth CAIR). From individual email accounts, women forwarded to their own like-minded networks. A comparison group of born Muslims (many who only began to practice their faith fully as adults) was also garnered using the same survey. Beyond capturing basic statistical information on 96 women on such variables as race, age, education level, number of children, choice to wear head covering or

not, etc. (some of which I disaggregate in more detail); additional room was provided for reporting discriminatory incidents in all public sectors, including employment, and finally conversion stories. Identification was optional and many, afraid to be traced because of potential job repercussions, withheld their names. Also non-compulsory were the personal narratives, and although not central to my initial research questions, provided me with some compelling stories of both the hardships (including several losing custody of children by prejudiced courts) and the joys of the choice to be Muslim.

In my sample, these conversions came about in many ways: from friendships with other women, to romances with Muslim men (some who supported their burgeoning interest in Islam, others who did not), to readings of the Quran, to myriad interests in the culture. For instance, one husband and wife team raised Arabian horses and because of their quest for knowledge in this arena and subsequent travels to the region, eventually converted together.

According to one source (L'Express, 2003) 50,000-80,000 Americans embrace Islam annually and it is noticeable that the overwhelming majority are women. These numbers are not surprising however, as Islam, contrary to its portrayal in the mass media, bestows full equality on men and women. Also worth noting, are a woman's right to education, her right to be provided for (i.e. due to her biological role as a mother she can choose the profession of motherhood with a husband required to support all her and her children's expenses), and finally the right to work should she so desire and the retention of all earnings gained. That said, there is general concurrence with the opinion of the piece by 'Abdur Rahman I. Doi (Women in Shariah Law, 1990) that:

a home business is probably the best type of employment for Muslim women. . . If a woman has professional education, her work would be of benefit to the Muslim women community. Examples of these professions are teacher, doctor, nurse, welfare worker or even an accountant. Muslim women professionals in these areas will reduce the need of other Muslim women having to seek the service of a male or non-Muslim professional.

For those seeking to move into these or other fields however, what are their likely chances of gaining meaningful employment in the post 9/11 environment?

Rhetoric and Reality

The women in my sample became Muslim both preceding and following the tragic events of 9/11. Some reported beginning to wear the hijab for solidarity with others of their faith when their religion suddenly came under virulent attack. Others, however, who had previously worn the hijab, took it off after this time due to heightened job discrimination and physical attacks. None, however, removed it because of stereotypes perpetuated in American society, mainly by the mainstream media. Indeed, many women reiterated that their way of dressing was in fact liberating and not at all repressive. Says Sharifa Alkhateeb, President of the Washington-based North American Council for Muslim Women in an interview with the LA Times:

The main reason we wear a head covering is to set ourselves apart from males and insist they observe us as human beings, with ideas and concepts. Rather than be distracted by hair and perfume and makeup. . . [However] there is such a horrible negative image associated with the scarf: of ignorance, dirty hair or terrorism (Watanabe, 1999).

Ideally, women of all races and creeds going into a job interview hope that they will be assessed on their intellect and other skills pertinent for the job, rather than on physical appearance. Yet for some human resource persons, it appears they cannot get beyond the latter. These three scenarios garnered from my questionnaire highlight the real difficulties faced and also the inevitably varied coping mechanisms available.

- “I have been to job interviews where the interviewer stared at me, and said that they did not have any openings for me.” *Continued wearing hijab and perseveres in applying elsewhere.*
- “When I wore hijab, I found it almost impossible to get hired for a professional job. I’ve learned not to mention being Muslim in job interviews, even though it contributes to my cross-cultural experience.” *Discontinued wearing the hijab.*
- My current job in an Islamic school “resulted in discomforts in public after 9/11; and despite having a BA and MA, difficulty in finding a job. . . . During some interviews there is tension with the interviewer. Many times they never look at my resume and seem fixed [sic] on my scarf. Not sure how much discrimination is involved; but soon decided to work at an Islamic school.” *Chose to move into the Islamic sector.*

These cases, and many others like them, illustrate why a new group consciousness (coined historically in reference to black churches) is forming amongst these women, in turn effectively “collectivizing the interests of the sub-group in an effort to counter prejudice and discrimination in the host society” (Jamal, 2003, p. 3). While I did not explicitly ask about women’s mosque participation on my survey, another recent survey did. Similar to mine in some respects, the MAPS 2001 poll (Part of Project MAPS : Muslims in American Public Square)¹ contained questions addressing perceived discrimination and real discrimination. One prominent social scientist in the field used the data collected to hypothesize that “if group consciousness is in fact a mediating role in mosque participation, then levels of perceived discrimination should correspond to levels of mosque involvement” (Jamal, 2003, p. 16). She further supposed that group consciousness “involves the acceptance of the belief that fundamental differences exist

¹ Carried out by the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Washington, D.C.

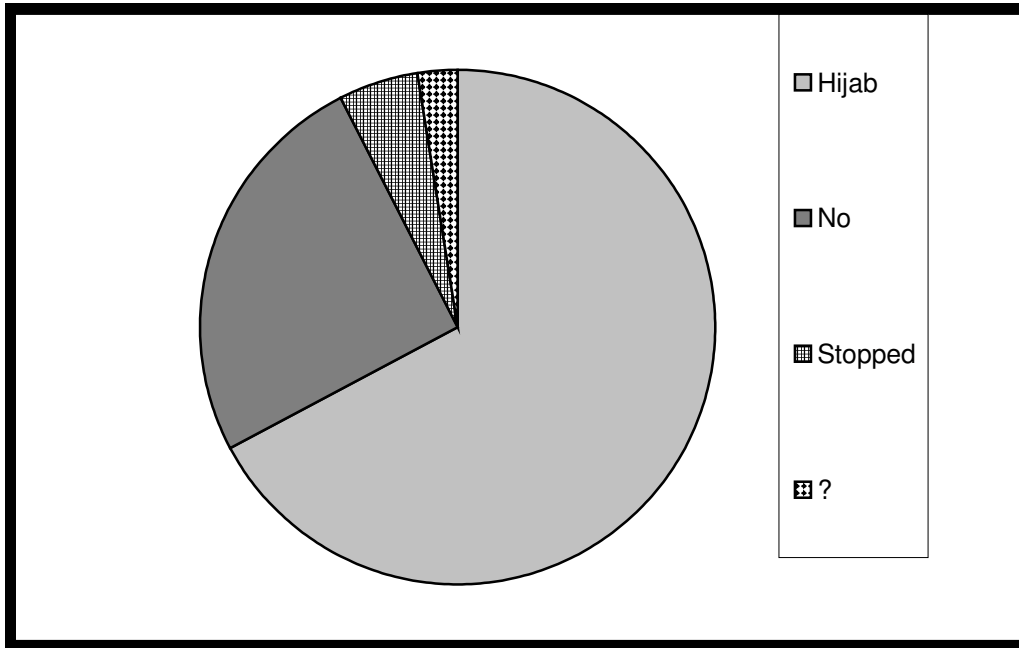
between the interests of one's own group and those of the dominant group" (Ibid). Indeed, while controlling for socio-economic factors, she found that mosque participation does increase levels of perceived discrimination and real discrimination, and augments the likelihood of knowing about real cases of discrimination by 33.3%. She then goes on to note, "these findings are not unexpected, as mosques and their immediate vicinities have emerged as key sites of vandalism and anti-Muslim activity" (p. 19). Interestingly:

income and education, once significant factors when explaining levels of perceived discrimination, become insignificant in explaining real acts of discrimination. People of varying socio-economic backgrounds experience or encounter discrimination, and mosque participants are more likely either to have encountered or to know about actual cases (Ibid).

Compare this to two decades ago, to that pioneering work of Haddad mentioned earlier--of the 365 Muslims surveyed, each one, without exception, said they believed America discriminated against Muslims, but admitted they personally had not encountered any discrimination (from Islam in America speech as cited by Jamal, 2003, p. 20)². More than ever before, these emerging 'common fate' attitudes and attachments are uniting Muslim-Americans in mosque communities, all the while increasing their group consciousness to such a point that an "injustice that occurs to one Muslim becomes an injustice that has befallen the entire Muslim community" (Jamal, 2003, p. 23). As Muslims increasingly watch their opportunities diminish, they have begun to take action.

Of my sample group, one fourth reported having experienced some form of discrimination in job hiring or at the workplace itself. This was consistent with this year's annual release of the CAIR Civil Rights report whereby the workplace remains the source of the largest number of discrimination incidents, also reaching one fourth. Interestingly, of my respondents, the women

were predominately Caucasian (with smaller numbers of African-Americans, Latina, and other Asian groups electing to respond) and well-educated, holding at least an Associate degree but more often a Bachelors or Masters. A great number wore the hijab, (see accompanying graph)



and worked outside of the home in a position necessitating substantial public contact. Although other respondents did not necessarily report discrimination, it is also notable that across the board they were also very well-educated, which may have explained their propensity to find meaningful employment. It appears they were able to move beyond the veiling factor into these higher career trajectories with specific areas of expertise, for example information technology, finance, or health care fields. Indeed, one Filipino convert noted that she had experienced more discrimination as a minority and as a woman in her male-dominant field (electrical engineering) than perceivably due to her religion.

² Islam in America—A Tentative Ascent: A conversation with Yvonne Haddad.

Evidence shows however that higher qualifications have not always been shown to correlate with more tolerant workplace situations. Indeed, one recent study by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2003) sent out nearly identical resumes to the same job opening, one with a typical white name and one with a typical African American name (and in many cases potentially Muslim--they used Aisha, Rasheed, Kareem, Jamal, Hakeem). By tracking the number of return calls generated, they found that “the level of discrimination (against African Americans in this case) is remarkably uniform across a variety of occupations and job requirements. This occurs despite the fact that some of the jobs we study are higher earning, such as managerial positions or high end sales jobs” (p. 16). Notably in their study, as well, was confirmation of the suspicion that even federal contractors and employers who list “Equal Opportunity Employer” in their ads discriminate as much as other employers in job recruitment. The study was carried out between July 2001 and January 2002 in Boston and July 2001 and May 2002 in Chicago, and the amount of discrimination both before and after September 11 was the same. Moreover, employer size had no effect, although there were indications that “traded firms seem to discriminate more, while not-for-profit organizations seem to discriminate less” (p. 17). In trying to determine why this might be so, the researchers carried out taste-based models on the prejudiced “tastes” of customers, co-workers, and employers (p. 22). While they did not find more discrimination by jobs that explicitly required communication skills or for jobs where customer or co-worker contact is high, the testimonials from my sample suggest discrimination not found in hiring (and in my case I neglected to consider whether women had used their given birth names or the newly adopted Muslim names) permeates down to the next level--coming from colleagues:

Once I decided to wear hijab, people began to show their true colors. I went from being a strong, independent, Ivy-league graduate whom everyone had always sought out for advice and help to being a helpless women dominated by her husband and “forced” to dress like a “foreigner”. Some friends decided to cut ties with me, most of the rest who

stayed openly criticized my choice. One of my co-workers refused to look at me the first day I went in to work with the scarf. As I don't work on the same shift as management, I can't say that it had any great impact there. Though getting into the building (I work in a landmark building in New York City) was increasingly tough after September 11. My belongings were always searched even when other people were simply waived passed the checkpoint. My I.D. was subject to greater scrutiny and I had to endure remarks made by patrons of a restaurant in the building to security as to it being inadvisable to allow people like me in the building. No one seemed to understand that I was just as much a target as anyone else in the building, not immune to terrorism.

Muslim women are finding that they are being singled out in direct disregard of the doctrine of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which clearly states³ that (a) It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer -

(1) to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin; or

(2) to limit, segregate, or classify his employees or applicants for employment in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

However, increasingly hostile work environments seem to be abundant as the next two examples illustrate:

At my last job, where I was in middle and then upper management positions, I was placed in a location of the office that was dark, dingy, and a health hazard – away from everyone. Despite extremely commendable work and work ethics, I could not get a raise in salary – even to the level that I know my colleagues were making.

³ Taken from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Website, <http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/vii.html>

I think I was passed over for a promotion in the U.S. Senate because I was Muslim . . . This was several months after 9/11 . . . A co-worker said I was unpatriotic for being Muslim/unloyal to my country.

Employers it appears, too, are increasingly condoning these situations, and not acting as intervening agents as their role should be. This disconnect between rhetoric and reality risks to create a schism in the American workforce. Just the week of writing this paper, CAIR circulated to all subscribers a call to action, through the means of a letter writing campaign, to the Bank of America. According to the circumstances presented, an extremely insulting message had been circulated on their internal email system. However,

Instead of taking immediate action when informed of the offensive e-mail, Bank of America reportedly told the Muslim employee to ignore the message and then lodged a complaint against her, alleging she was trying to get the co-worker who sent the e-mail terminated.

Following that incident, the Bank of America workplace allegedly became increasingly hostile for the Muslim employee, to the extent that she had to receive medical attention. She claims co-workers continued to make offensive remarks about her religious and ethnic background. One female manager, after learning that the Muslim employee attended an anti-war rally, said she would have loved to throw a “hand grenade at the protesters if [she] had one in [her] hand.”

The Muslim employee also says she has been denied requests for religious accommodation, such as taking time for religious holidays--a request enjoyed by other Bank of America employees--and has been denied sick leave. (CAIR circular, 10/8)

By keeping the public informed of such incidents, and from follow-up after campaigns, CAIR readily claims that half of all Muslim Americans have increased their social, political, interfaith, and public relations activities since 9/11. However, what is needed along with these grass-roots mobilizations, is an urgent awareness of the crisis by our public policy leaders and a concerted effort by public administrators and managers to implement genuine and thoughtful sensitivity training.

In the current void of leadership, some women are already taking on this role, of finding a voice to speak out about inequities in the hope of educating their respective institutions. Recalls one:

To the best of my knowledge I am the only female faculty member in a tenure track position who wears hijab at my institution. As a result, I was flooded with requests in the post September 11 world to ‘give talks on Islam’. On one occasion in particular another colleague in my department. . . came to my office rather irate and complained about the fact that I had given an interview to a campus newspaper in which I was quoted about my fears of not being promoted or not being hired because I wear hijab. . . . I also state in the article that I felt a certain amount of exclusion from important decision making arenas. I cited the fact that many important faculty gatherings involve serving alcohol. I explained that Muslims are not even supposed to be in a place where alcohol is served let alone touch it. I stated that for this reason I didn’t attend some of these functions. The colleague who came to my office with a copy of the article in his hand was upset because . . . I had stated that Muslim women might experience discrimination in job promotions based on religious attire.

Conclusion and Implications

On a positive note, the most common responses in my sample by far were not those of discrimination, but more of acceptance and tolerance and sometimes ardent interest in learning more about Islam by colleagues.⁴ Illustrative of this was one story:

[Post 9/11] I wore the hijab to work and still do. It surprised everyone at work and it took some time for them to accept it but I didn’t face any discrimination. I brought some brochures to work about Muslims and Islam and I think this helped to educate them about what it really is about (not about terrorizing innocent people). I have not faced much discrimination aside from the stares or people avoiding me *but I do wonder if I would have gotten this job if I was wearing the head scarf in the job interview ?* [author’s emphasis].

Despite cordial working relations, such are the lingering doubts expressed across the board by this myriad group of highly educated and competent women, many of whom converted later in

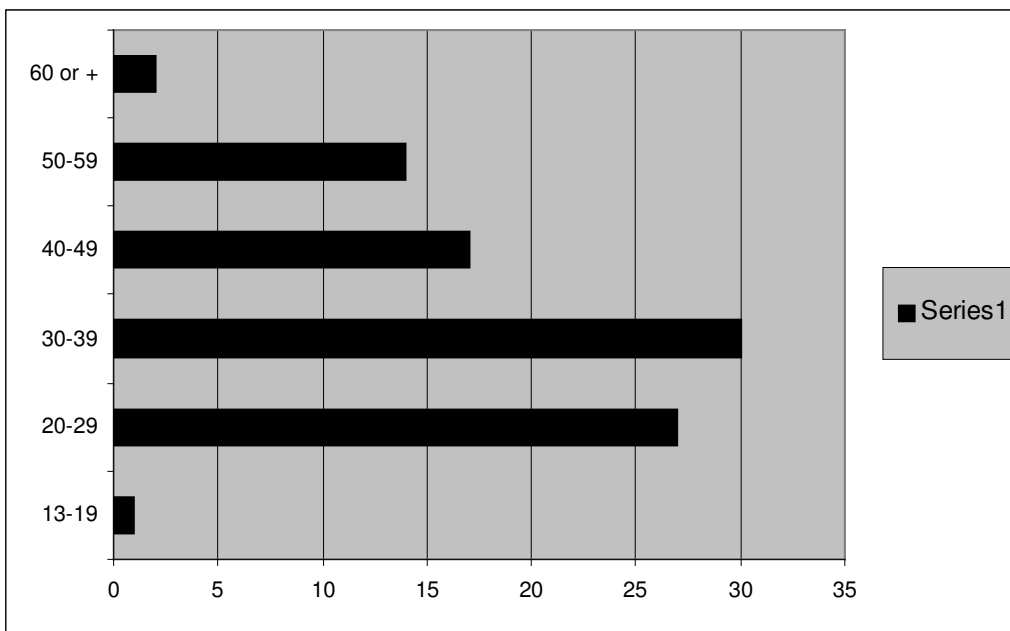
⁴ Although Muslims are more accepted than ever, at the same time, “Islam remains largely unknown to most Americans.” This is the conclusion of a national survey of 1,500 people, taken on September 19, 2001, with results released on December 6, 2001 (Pew Forum, 2001). A follow-up survey several months later reported that nearly two thirds of Americans still knew little or nothing about Islam and its practices, virtually identical to the first poll (Pew Forum, March 20, 2002).

life and later in their careers. Despite the numbers however, only 12, nearly all Caucasian, had admitted to contemplating a suit and only a small handful (4) had ever done so—2 Caucasians and 2 of mixed race. Yet it is widely accepted that “litigating for one’s right to religious freedom is certainly one historically hallowed way of being an American. While some . . . are reluctant to put themselves in the position of plaintiffs in court, doing so is an important form of engagement within the American system” (Eck, 2001, p. 68). It is imperative for the sake of the children and the next generation, just as the mothers of these women fought to gain access to these professions, with all the accompanying battles for equal pay and respect. Says one doctoral student, “my family is very achievement oriented and always encouraged my academic and occupational interests. My desire to work and study is related to this modeling and encouragement as well as my Islamic belief in the importance of seeking knowledge and using the knowledge that you have in the best of manners to help others.”

Despite some recognition and gains domestically, the high toll of litigation is offsetting, with its associated monetary and psychological costs. Major changes in the federal laws against employment discrimination were made in 1991 enacted in part to reverse several Supreme Court decisions limiting the rights of persons protected under law. Significantly, the Supreme Court “has interpreted Title VII to be most concerned about employers’ practices and not necessarily their motivation” (Ma, 2001 p. 3). There are two types of cases that can be brought--disparate treatment cases and disparate impact cases. To prove the first, plaintiffs must use direct evidence of discrimination; after which the employer must then set forth a legitimate business reason for taking the action adverse to the plaintiff. On the other hand, disparate impact cases “allow plaintiffs to stop employment practices that are neutral on their face, or even in intent, if the

practice has a discriminatory effect” (Ibid). However, “if the employer is able to assert a legitimate business reason for taking the action, the burden then moves to the plaintiff to show that the asserted reason was merely a pretext” (p. 4). Moreover, “individuals who believe that any employer, governmental or private, has engaged in discrimination prohibited by Title VII against them must first exhaust their administrative remedies by filing a charge of discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and follow that process to its conclusion before filing a suit in court” (Ibid).

Perhaps this aversion to stirring things up is not so surprising, since there was a collective acceptance of spiritual destiny by the women surveyed herein. One woman who embodied this spirit, had this perspective: “while the road that led me to Islam was very rough, I don’t regret Allah’s *qadar* (destiny) in bringing me to Islam I [am] able to accept things that happen as part of my test in this world in order to be happy in the next world, InshaAllah (God willing). “This is not to say these women are going to simply stand by and accept these newly laid obstacles. They are young and at the pinnacle of their respective careers (see accompanying age graph).



Many of them are also wives and mothers and are actively involved in the education of their children. In my sample it was evenly split between those sending their children to Islamic schools and those sending their children to public schools, but with an active presence on the PTOs and other school bodies. These latter parents were also supplementing their children's education with weekend religion or Arabic-language lessons. Another smaller group was homeschooling. In all these ways, these women are preparing the next generation to gain the skills to engage in a civil society and workforce of the future. Writes one such role model emphatically:

I became a Muslim four weeks after the World Trade Center tragedy (in which I nearly lost my brother!) . . . Despite the abuse, I continue to love the Quran and love my new life. It is hard to be an American, an educated, politically-involved feminist, and a Muslim--and then--it isn't--it makes 100% sense to me!

To hundreds of others as well it seems to make sense. Despite the numerous obstacles faced, and the choices being made to remain in non-Islamic sectors or not, these educated, ambitious, and courageous women are carving out their own roles--and creating a better more pluralistic society because of it.

To be a practicing Muslim requires a certain degree of control and self-discipline and standing up for what you believe in and I think courage in a lot of ways. I think as

Muslims we are not supposed to be isolated from the rest of the world. There is a perception on the part of many people that we want to be, or that we need to be, but this is really not true. Muslims are told to be active participants in society, and to be visible, to be contributing members of whatever community they live in (Quoting Sahli, B. in Tobias-Nahi; Garfield, 2003, p. 28).

These women are neither willing to isolate themselves or insulate themselves; but rather they wish to break open the new glass ceiling.

American Muslims have a personal interest in strengthening and defending our country's values of tolerance and civil rights, under which we have thrived. So much is at stake, for us and for our country. Because when and if our daughters chose to wear the hijab in public, they should do so in an America that recognizes Muslim women as its proudest freedom fighters.⁵

⁵ Zainab al-Suwaij, Executive Director of the American Islamic Congress.

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