

Muslim Women at Work: The Connection Between Familial Support and the Level of Public Sphere Activity of Muslim Women in Sydney.

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One of the most striking features of Muslim communities is the importance attached to the family. The family unit is regarded as the cornerstone of a healthy and balanced society. Family approval and support appear to be essential to Muslim women's participation in the public sphere in Sydney. The data for this study was drawn from fifteen interviews with Muslim women that explored the topics education, employment, volunteer work, gender roles and political activity. Several ethnic groups were interviewed including Palestinians, Malaysians, Lebanese, Pakistanis and Singaporeans. This paper argues that family support is integral to Sydney Muslim women's activity outside the home and that increased activity by Muslim women in the public sphere is becoming more apparent in some cases to counter misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. The level and frequency of these activities are reliant mainly on family encouragement and approval.

Introduction

Issues concerning Muslims living in Australia have become increasingly present in the news media over the last ten years, with coverage of the Cronulla riots, the Sydney gang rapes and issues of veiling featuring prominently. Issues of national security and terrorism, women's rights and gender relations are at the centre of Australia's media

discourse on Muslims. The visibility of some Muslim women due to their distinctive dress places them at the forefront of the debate concerning the compatibility of Islam and the West (Göle 2002). Previous research into Muslim women and their career roles in the U.S. has established that family dynamics have a larger impact on women's public sphere participation than level of religiosity (Read 2004: 72). Interestingly, women with young children were found to be much less likely to be active participants in the labour force.

The enduring orientalist-inspired image of the muted Muslim woman, swathed in black, gazing pleadingly from the grim shadows of religious oppression, adorns a plethora of books about Muslim women published over the last two decades or so. It is an image that signifies Islamic orthodoxy; that marks Muslim women as subordinate, backward, oppressed; and that masks a deep concern over the threat of an Islamic presence in Australia to an ill-defined set of Australian values. *My Forbidden Face* (Latifa and Hachemi 2003); *Princess* (Sasson 1993); *Mayada: Daughter of Iraq* (Sasson 2004); *Voices Behind the Veil* (Mehmet Caner 2003); *Price of Honour: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World* (Goodwin 2002); *The Face Behind the Veil* (Gehrke-White 2006), and *Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women* (Brooks 1995), are mostly authored by non-Muslim women who claim to have somehow infiltrated the Islamic world and offer readers a compelling (Western oriented) insight into the clandestine lives of Muslim women. The first Gulf War in 1991 marked the beginning of the veiled symbolism in the Australian popular media. During the mid 1990s, news headlines began using the *hijab* in reference to news articles about Muslims, mostly in connection with the status of women under Taliban

rule in Afghanistan. Seldom do the news media offer an alternative image of Muslim women (Shohat and Stam 1994). This media discourse has positioned Muslim women as inactive, powerless and unable to speak for themselves.

Previously, it was hypothesised by Jen'nan Ghazal Read that religion exclusively restricted women's labour force participation (2002). This article seeks to extend on this, and to challenge it, by taking a broader perspective on women's participation in the workforce and the public sphere, including community work and volunteerism. Read's work is particularly relevant in connection to this research as it sets out findings that challenge the stereotypes attached to Muslim women in the West and in particular challenges misconceptions that Muslim women's labour force participation rates and public engagement are solely linked to their level of religiosity. My research sought to test this claim within a sample in the Muslim communities of Sydney. Read's findings are significant for this research and the interview questions have been structured around her qualitative finding in order to investigate family support for Muslim women's education and employment in Sydney. It is then hypothesised that, similar to the situation for Muslim women in the United States, the labour participation levels of Muslim women in Sydney are also mainly contingent on family support and their attitudes to gender roles, and further that levels of religiosity have little or no bearing on women's labour force participation levels.

This article will demonstrate that family influence is one of the most important factors in Muslim women's public sphere activity. Similarly, Read reports that having children in the home greatly reduces women's labour participation rates but conversely, having

older children can create more work opportunities for women because children assist them with domestic responsibilities (Read 2002: 25). Hence this paper begins by looking at the definition of the public sphere in an Islamic context. Following this it will examine family and gender influences on public sphere activities in the form of a case study and will later branch out to examine the areas of education, volunteerism, and employment respectively.

Methodology and Approach

This paper is based on research conducted for my masters thesis entitled ‘Chained to the Kitchen Sink? Public Sphere Activity of Sydney Muslim Women’. Women in my sample felt they have been stereotyped as inactive within the public sphere in a number of ways. My argument seeks to dispel these myths by showing how this is untrue.

Participants from my sample are involved in education, volunteer work and paid employment. Within Western Muslim communities, women’s participation in the public sphere is conditioned by several factors. Religiosity, ethnic identity, family support and social class often exert “contradictory influences” on women’s attitudes and behaviour (Read 2002: 22). As such my research sets out to understand more about the level and types of public sphere activity that women in my data sample are undertaking and also the factors effecting their participation.

This article presents an exploratory study built around data collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews including open-ended research procedures. In addition, a richer understanding of women’s lives is gained through participant observation, which included spending time (over the period of a year) with Muslim

women in their homes and at other social gatherings such as; Ramadan dinners (iftar), weddings, birthday celebrations and Eid festivities. Each method informed the others to create a constant process that could produce a sociological understanding of Muslim women's lives. Interviews were conducted in Sydney and are comprised equally of Muslim women who are active in the public sphere and also those who primarily take part in activities within the home. Interviews ascertained what type of employment, voluntary work, or family commitments these women have. Observations were undertaken and recorded in a notebook both at the participants' homes and at other social gatherings, to which I was invited. These observations allowed a further insight into participants' lives and their social circles and interactions that cannot be obtained even through lengthy interviews.

For practical and cost reasons, it is often impossible to collect information about the entire population of people or things in which social researchers are interested. In these cases, a sample of the total is selected for study. Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique. Firstly, beginning with two personal acquaintances and then sourcing additional participants via respondents introducing me to other potential participants. Fifteen participants took part in semi-structured interviews in Sydney. Interviews were ceased at fifteen participants as saturation point had been reached. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found through their study that involved sixty interviews that theme saturation was achieved after twelve interviews. A broad demographic spread was sought, in terms of migrant status, ancestry, socio-economic status, employment status, housing-ownership status, level of education, and age. This was achieved, however the study was not designed to be statistically representative. The

interview questions were asked in English, although respondents were given the choice of using a language other than English for their responses.

Much of the scholarship on Muslim women's public sphere participation in the West is achieved via quantitative research methods. Read's work (2004) and (2002) also utilizes a quantitative approach. It is hoped that my research can take a more in-depth look at the influence of family support on public sphere activity through a smaller number of in-depth interviews and observations. Quantitative research has succeeded in teasing out group identities and affiliations and labour force and educational patterns but qualitative research allows researchers to search deeper into the reasoning behind public sphere activity and inactivity and also to differentiate between types of activity undertaken.

The Public Sphere in an Islamic Context

Although the idea of the public is Western in its origins and its basic features are understood as universal access, individualism, equality and openness, it circulates and moves into contexts other than the West (Göle 2002: 174). How does Islam, as one of the vibrant religions of the contemporary world, differentiate between the public and private? What is the extent of privacy in the Islamic point of view? What similarities and differences are there between the Islamic and the Western perceptions of privacy? (Kavidar 2003). Does the extent of the private sphere change or perhaps shrink in a society that is run according to Shari'a? What is the Islamic point of view on such concepts as the individual, family, society and government? Islam has acquired new forms of visibility over the last two decades as it has made its way to both Muslim and Western societies (Göle 2002: 173). The terms of public debate are being transformed

by the eruption of religious issues; Islamic films and novels are becoming popular subjects of cultural criticism; new spaces, markets and media are opening up in response to the rising demands of recently formed Muslim middle classes. Islam carves out a public space of its own as new Islamic language styles, corporeal rituals, and spatial practices emerge and blend into public life.

The terms 'public' and private are not rooted in the heart of Islamic doctrine. The two terms occur neither in the Qur'an nor in the traditions conveyed from the prophet and the imams (Anderson 2003: 901). Three distinct yet related meanings may be gleaned for what is 'private' from the available literature (Boruch 2001: 1267). First, that which is personal or exclusive to the individual; second, that which one would rather keep concealed and protected from others; and third, that over which the individual exercise exclusive authority and control. In contrast, in the public sphere, nothing is kept secret from or rendered by the citizens: the management, improvement, and alteration of the public sphere are prerogative of the citizenry. The public sphere is the sphere of influence for governmental authority (Anderson 2003: 905). This domain is jointly owned by all citizens, and as a transparent container, its contents are in everyone's plain view. Islamic jurisprudence, in accordance with the two criteria given here, fully acknowledges the sanctity of the private domain: there is ample admonition against prying into the affairs of others (Kadivar 2003). All matters are assumed to belong to the private domain unless they are proved to belong to the public sphere. On this basis, selecting an occupation, spouse, form of living and clothing are the component of private life. Adhering to Islamic criteria, people are completely free in the private

domain. But as soon as the individual enters the public domain, there are limitations that are imposed on him or her by the law, in any society.

Individuals in the public domain are limited with regard to clothing, sexual behaviour, and certain forms of social conduct that may vary from one culture to another. These limitations, which can be grouped into such categories as clothing, sexual relationships, eating and drinking, along with economic and even religious relationships, show the private sphere in Islamic culture to be smaller than the norm in the contemporary world, and accordingly show the Islamic public domain to be further stretched than that prevalent elsewhere in the world. Individual freedom in the public domain becomes limited by this necessity; therefore, we need to describe the scope of its effect and the sphere of its influence. In other words, the boundaries of the private sphere would most likely shrink to those of one's private domicile: all individual matters visible to the public eye, even those of completely personal and private nature, would be considered as belonging to the public sphere. By taking into account these points, the public and private spheres in Islamic society will remain a balanced equilibrium. The articulations and tensions between two different cultural codes, modern and indigenous, intervene in distinguishing and defining public and private spheres, interior and exterior spaces.

Women are symbols of the social whole: home and outside, interior and exterior, private and public. They stand in for the making of the modern individual, for the modern ways of being private and public (Göle 1997: 56). Women's corporeal and civic visibility as well as the formation of heterosocial spaces underpins the stakes of modernity in a Muslim society. In that respect, some common spaces are transformed as they gain

additional symbolic value and become public sites of visual modernity and gendered secular performances. In addition to schools and the workplace, spaces such as beaches, opera and concert halls, cafes, fashion shows, public gardens and public transportation all become sites of what Göle refers to as “modern self-presentations” (Göle 2002: 67). When Muslim women cross the borders between inside and out, multiple senses – sight, smell, touch and hearing – feature in concerns over redefining borders, preserving decency and separating genders. A public Islam needs to redefine and recreate the borders of the interior, intimate, illicit gendered space. The notion of modesty underpins the Muslim self and her relation to the private and public spaces (Göle 1997: 123).

Due to the public visibility of Muslim women especially those wearing the *hijab*, particularly within the West, it can be argued that the concept or the extent of their definition of the public sphere has been stretched far beyond what is considered to be public in the West. As such my participants considered many of their activities ‘public’ even volunteering within Muslim organisations and their children’s schools.

Participants acknowledged the performativity of their roles while in public explaining that while at work or university they, “changed people’s perceptions by wearing their *hijab* and acting in a good manner”. Even education, as I will explore later, was seen as a public matter as it leads to labour force participation and possibly political activity.

Case Study: Gender Roles in Muslim Families - Amal and Ibtisam¹

Following Dorothy Smith’s argument that the individual ‘case’ is also a point of entry into larger social and economic processes (Smith 1987), this work begins the focus on

¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of participants.

Muslim women's activity with the stories of Ibtisam and Amal, a mother and daughter living in South Western Sydney. I refer to Ibtisam and Amal's stories to provide part of a larger study, which explores the levels of activity of Muslim women in Sydney. These women's stories provide access to the larger social organisation of which each woman is a part. However, I make no claim to explain their lives in totality, instead from my interviews and observations I draw specific examples of how family support and structure are critical to Muslim women's participation levels. By elaborating on what it means to be a Muslim female in Australia, this discussion has the potential to destabilise monolithic assumptions about Muslim women in the West.

Amal is a twenty-four year old woman of Palestinian decent who was born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon and now lives in South-Western Sydney. She holds a Bachelor of Computer Science and is currently working as a web designer. She explained to me that she thought it was extremely important for Muslim women to be present in the workforce and to challenge the stereotypes surrounding Muslim women. She said that she is not only earning a living and securing a future for herself but that she is also changing people's perceptions of Muslim women. She upheld the assertion that women's appearance in public doesn't affect Islamic practice, but said there were boundaries to keep in mind. She explained that a lot of activism or activities can be done within Islamic boundaries. In her eyes women's public sphere activity doesn't contradict Islamic values or laws. Amal believes that Islam encourages women to work and study and that education is important especially in contemporary society.

Amal had also been undertaking volunteer work in the Muslim community. She has volunteered with an association that assists Muslim converts, a university Muslim student association and also a local Muslim youth association. As part of the Muslim student association she was in charge of the newsletter and its distribution. She was a moderator on the online forum and also organised many fundraising events. However she was very firm in her belief that family always comes first. Her family is very supportive of her involvement in community initiatives and interacts with the community more than she does. Her father established the local youth association. Her mother Ibtisam is also involved and looks after the women's religious classes. Both of her parents attend many community events and her father gives a lot of community lectures, both about religion and Palestine. He also raises money for the community and for the Palestinian cause.

Amal points out that it is easier to voice one's opinion within one's own family than in the wider community. She explains that if one says something within one's family it stays within the family. She says she is not afraid to speak her mind within her family:

Our voices (women) are heard within this family, I have a say, but in the end it's up to my father. Oh the community though, it's harder to speak out, people are very judgmental, especially if you have other ideas to others you could be shunned. If things are said outside of the boundaries it makes it hard. Women are heard now more than they were before. Women's opinions are considered now.

Ibtisam is a 45-year-old mother of four of Palestinian heritage. She is currently not working outside of the home but when she was single and lived in Lebanon, she worked

as a secretary and a childcare worker. She has been quite active in a volunteer capacity and explains proudly that she used to teach Islamic scripture in Muslim youth associations and in schools to over 400 children a week. She takes part in reading groups at the local primary school and has also been involved in fundraising for Cancer Council events. She represents volunteering as a good experience; she says that through teaching she gains confidence and also makes new friends. Her family is very supportive of this. For her, Muslim women are usually active in the community and when they are not, it's usually because they have small children to look after. She believes Muslim women have equal rights in the workforce but that as a mother, whatever their religion, women can't do all jobs as children become a priority.

Ibtisam studied for TAFE² certificates in flower arranging, childcare and hairdressing. She studied part-time so that she could fit study around her family commitments. She believes education is important for a Muslim woman as it provides her with security for herself and her children. She would like to study more but the responsibility of her children prevents her from doing so. Ibtisam pointed out that she can still go back to work when her children are older.

In their home women undertake the majority of the domestic roles. Ibtisam prepares most of the main meals and her daughters assist her and take care of the clean up afterwards. The girls share the household chores. Amal's father and brother take no part in the domestic chores and contribute to the gardening and maintenance of the house. While attending a meal at Amal's home I noticed the men did not get up and help with

² Technical and Further Education (college)

serving the meal, nor did they get up if they needed extra drinks or condiments from the fridge. A fight even breaks out between Amal and her brother because he wanted her to get the tomato sauce from the fridge even though she had already begun eating.

Amal generally holds the same beliefs about women's roles as her mother but goes a little further saying that she thinks it's unfair sometimes and that household labour should be divided more equally between the sexes. She wants to leave work after marriage/having children to focus on caring for her family. Amal's outlook is very similar to her mother's.

Results Discussion

Contemporary social and postcolonial theorists Trinh Minh-Ha (1989), Gayatri Spivak (1993) and Homi Bhabha (2004) have argued for the understanding and expressions of ethnicity that move away from the notions of authentic and original culture and identity only being present in their countries of origin (Bhabha 2004: 62 in Khan 1998). Rather they claim that individuals' daily interactions constitute their cultural expression (Khan 1998: 464). In particular, Bhabha's notion of hybridized subjectivity in the third space helps to explain how individuals negotiate the contradictory demands and polarities of their lives (Bhabha 2004). Third space theory, like hybridity theory, reconceptualises the first and second spaces of human interaction (Moje 2004: 32). First and second spaces are binary, often competing, categories where people interact physically and socially. Binaries in literacy are the first and second spaces of everyday versus academic knowledges. Third spaces are the in-between, or hybrid, spaces where the seemingly oppositional first and second spaces work together to generate new third

space knowledges, discourses, and literacy forms. These third spaces are particularly useful for the study of Muslim women in diaspora communities.

Drawing from postcolonial discourse, the third space challenges the fixed notions of certain signs and symbols that represent the dominant views of culture and language. Third space generates new interpretations of both everyday and academic knowledges as it is “produced in and through language as people come together” (Moje, Peek-Brown et al. 2004). The struggle to integrate competing knowledges and discourses can be fruitful if the people are not defined according to the dominant discourse.

Sydney Muslim women, from the above case study and also from my wider sample, are generally strongly supported by their families as well as by the broader Muslim community to undertake higher education. Some participants viewed education as more beneficial and necessary however than entering paid employment, especially after having children. To ascertain the levels and types of family support participants were asked who influenced and supported their decision to study for a higher degree. All but one participant answered in a positive manner.

Certainly not my husband (laughs). It's not a direct thing, you get the feeling you need more and more skills in the workplace. It's becoming a necessity to have a degree. I try to observe what's happening in the market, I do what I can.
(35y/UAE).

Participants alluded to a growing need to enter the workforce and contribute to their families not just in the in the form of domestic duties but also through paid work. The

increased need for tertiary education was also widely recognised by the women in my sample. Apart from the vocational benefits of a tertiary degree participants also referred to their degrees as security. The overwhelming response from the research participants was that both their families and the communities were very proud that they were attending university and TAFE. However, some families felt concerns about other issues of female attendance at university, including mixing with men and the social life on campus. There is also, for a minority of families, the issue that Muslim women should marry early and concentrate on having children and establishing a family life. Contemporary Islamist literature often represents women's primary role as that of a mother and a wife in the primary domain of the home (Sherif 1987: 159).

Not very important [education], maybe TAFE would at least benefit that woman if she likes to enter the workforce. It's a back up. I tell my daughter to finish uni before she marries (35y/UAE).

The family in Islam is the basis for creating a stable community and underpins the values of the participants on matters such as gender roles, education, employment, volunteer activities and social life, which will be explored later in this article. It is clear though in some cases that the private domain is privileged over the public. In the following section I would like to take an in-depth look at some of the themes that have emerged from the above case study including gender roles in Muslim communities, family roles and structure and family influence on public sphere activity.

The Muslim Family Structure

A traditional Muslim household is a three-generational unit that comprises grandparents; parents; married sons, their wives and children; unmarried sons and daughters; and sometimes an unmarried, widowed or divorced uncle or aunt. However, such large joint families are very rarely found amongst Muslims in diaspora, mainly due to the housing structure in Australia in this case. Even so, sons and daughters almost invariably live with their parents until they are married and elderly parents spend their old age in the homes of their children enjoying their grandchildren. This is the case in my sample with all unmarried women still living with at least one of their parents.

The notion of children leaving home at eighteen or elderly parents going into care is almost inconceivable. Marriage is the usual way in which young Muslims establish their freedom from parental authority. Nevertheless, the point that is so often missed in the literature is that Islamic teaching obligates Muslims to show such courteous regard to their parents even after they are married and throughout their lives (Ahmad 1981).

Muslim parents are often amenable to their daughters' desire to work if they are able to attain a good education and go into a career perceived as safe and respectable: one which does not jeopardise the safety and reputation of these young women (Basit 1996: 110). Two of my participants spoke of maintaining a 'good reputation' through their daughter's education and entrance into a 'respected profession' such as medicine, teaching or nursing.

Discussions of *shari'a* family law reflect these concerns, as Qur'anic family law defines relations between men and women through legislation on marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, and polygamy. Islamic family law currently operates in most

Islamic countries, with the exception of Turkey and Tunisia. In the 1980s a number of countries moved to stiffen the application of *shari'a* family law, argue for greater family cohesion in what is perceived as a rapidly changing, unpredictable, and hostile world, where families are being stretched, fragmented, and broken. However, the Muslim family is adjusting or reorganising in response to contemporary needs. Modern states have taken over some functions of the family, through programs and policies of social provisioning. Public schooling, health care, childcare, government employment, family allowances, pensions, bank loans, and unemployment insurance are among the social services and social policies available to citizens. Nonetheless, especially in parts of the Muslim world devoid of a welfare or development state, the family is an essential focus of solidarity and support for its members, and affective ties remain strong.

Two of my participants were from family units that had been dispersed by war, natural disaster and economic need and as such the values and functions of the family have resurfaced in different forms. At times families joined together for support on the basis of their ethnic and religious similarities. Women with husbands who are working abroad often make close ties with neighbours and women in the workforce continue to rely on family ties for support. Through its adaptations and evolution, the family unit in diaspora communities, has proven to be an interdependent and flexible social institution. For many, it remains the best way to provide for individual needs as well as group survival.

Muslim Perceptions of the Western Family

Western family life is perceived by some Muslim families to be highly insecure and distant. Four of my participants stereotyped Western families to have remote relationships with little concept of family solidarity. They believe that elders appear to command little love or respect and are sent into homes instead of being looked after by the younger generation. One participant commented, “family is the most important thing for us, not like with the Australians.” Sexual license is thought to be rife and according to some there is hardly any regard for the institution of marriage. Parents seemingly divorce and remarry without any consideration for their offspring, who may have to go into care. This kind of behaviour is viewed as outrageous by Muslim standards, a culture not worthy of emulation (Ballard 1994: 27).

The literature shows that families with a Muslim background are mainly close-knit, cohesive units and family loyalties are very strong (Ahmad 1981). Relationships within a Muslim family are affectionate, but hierarchical. Great emphasis is placed on respect for elders, on restraint in relations between the sexes, and on maintaining the honour of the family. This is exemplified in my interview data:

If my family hadn't supported me I wouldn't be where I am today. It's hard culturally for women to be out in the community mixing with men. It's a big ask for them to understand (22y/Lebanon).

My husband is very supportive of anything I want to do. He used to look after my daughter while I taught; I rely on my husband a lot (28y/Pakistan).

The interests of the group take precedence over those of the individual members. Within the group, roles are clearly defined, goals are shared and no great emphasis is placed on the development of an exclusive personal identity (Sharpe 1976: 68). This latter was also evident in my research:

Yeah I can voice my opinion and influence in my family if I go the right way about it. I feel I can say what I want in my family. In the society I feel I have been raising my voice since I started working. I'm learning to assert myself more.

Somali culture is against this but we were not brought up like that (28y/Somalia).

Contrary to the belief that an extended family model and collective identity are the exclusive forms of Muslim family life some of my participants exhibited leanings towards neoliberal conceptions of identity. In the majority participants commented on their family dynamics insisting that all decisions should be made in consultation with the entire family. Further, each individual member is accountable to the group because her/his actions impinge on the entire family.

Robert Ballard notes that not to maintain a sense of honour is to ignore an essential aspect of human dignity, while to ignore the emotional and material reciprocities due within the extended family is to neglect one's most fundamental obligations (Ballard 1994: 27). This is the usual ideal as perceived by families of Muslim origin, wherever they live.

Although most of the women in this research lived in nuclear families, several had relatives living in the same street or within walking distance from their homes. Whilst the families had their privacy due to personal preference or smaller housing, they still

had the support of the extended family nearby, if needed. This indicated the presence of a quasi-joint family, whereby the families did not share accommodation with relatives, but saw them frequently. Further, one family had the paternal grandmother living with them, whereas two had a married son, his wife and young child living in the same house. This pattern, which is quite common in their countries of origin, was being perpetuated in Australia as a distinct aspect of Muslim Australian subculture. The parents of two participants were divorced and the participants and their siblings lived with their mothers who felt no need to remarry as they had the tacit support of their extended family or ethnic/religious community.

Muslim Women's Position and Status Within the Family

Thirteen participants said they were more comfortable expressing their opinions within their own family unit than within their wider communities. Ten felt that they escaped the judgment of the Muslim community by only voicing their concerns or personal feelings within a supportive or 'safe' private family atmosphere. Women were very aware of social boundaries and social taboos. Participants said they were careful about discussing progressive religious views, gender roles and politics. Many commented that things are changing and that they are now heard more than women in previous generations. This point was emphasised by many participants as mentioned above.

First let me point out it's easier to voice your opinion within your own family. If you say something within your family it stays within your family. Within my family I speak my mind, if I think something is wrong I say so. Our voices (girls) are heard within this family, I have a say, but in the end it's up to my father. Oh the community though, it's harder to speak out, people are very judgmental,

especially if you have different ideas to others you could be shunned. If things are said outside of the boundaries it makes it hard. Women are heard now more than they were before. Women's opinions are considered now (23y/Palestine).

It matters within my family. In the outer society they listen, but in the family my voice is heard more (51y/Singapore).

Here we see a definite distinction between women's situations in the public and private domain. Many participants were more comfortable voicing their opinions in the privacy of the family environment; this was viewed as a safe zone. Some were concerned that their actions or speech outside of the private domain would bring about gossip and a bad reputation in their communities. Actions outside of this safe zone were governed very much by a mixture of cultural and religious codes that strongly regulate women's behaviour.

A few participants commented that they felt they had been able to become leaders within their families. Some were introducing new ideas on religious issues and others giving their input on the education of younger siblings. Women did not feel that their status as a female should diminish their ability to give advice or lead within the family.

In our family I feel I have pushed the boundaries, I wear the *hijab* and a lot of my family don't agree. My father was very against *hijab*. I think I've reintroduced Islam into our family. I feel that Muslim women should move from a position of defense. Women always cry victim (22/Australia).

Conclusion

It was hypothesised by Jen'nan Ghazal Read that religion exclusively restricted women's labour force participation (2002). This article extended on this, and challenged this idea, by taking a broader perspective on women's participation in the workforce and the public sphere, including community work and volunteerism. However, Muslim societies, even in diaspora, require women and men to behave in accordance with social, religious and cultural codes. These gender roles are learned within a particular social and cultural context and are affected by class, education and socio-economic status. Family remained the most important aspect of life for most Australian-Muslim women and private sphere activities were often preferred. This was demonstrated through my participants attributing their participation in educational and work activities to the support of their families. Within many Muslim families, roles are clearly defined, goals are shared and no great emphasis is placed on the development of an exclusive personal identity or achievements.

This article has demonstrated that family influence is one of the most important factors in Muslim women's public sphere activity. Outstandingly, women put their responsibilities as mothers above their careers, and for many they need a flexible career to allow them to balance their work and home duties. As indicated in my sample some conservative Muslims are not against women receiving an equal education up to the highest level, but some view working outside the home after marriage as eradicating a woman's fundamental Islamic 'right' to stay with her children.

Women's behaviour and actions require regulation allowing for a good family

reputation, which can often be different from their individual aspirations. Ultimately many women from my sample had more family-oriented aspirations instead of career-oriented or personal goals, including wanting a higher education to help their children later on, not simply to become more employable. Since family influence and characteristics do not explain why Muslim women work less than their non-Muslim counterparts further examination is required regarding the impact of education on Muslim women's public sphere activity.

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