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“Neither East nor West”: Shia Women Negotiating Gender Norms in America

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“Neither East nor West”: Shia Women Negotiating Gender Norms in America.

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

With growing hostilities towards the *Ummah* (Muslim global community and Diaspora) in Western countries and the fear of *Sharia* laws, the socialization of international human rights norms within religious institutions, makes for a timely case study. Specifically, this dissertation project aims to capture the process of norm transformation at the grassroots level by investigating the religious, cultural, and social encounter between Islam and the West by interviewing Shia women at a local mosque in Florida. Critical constructivism, post-colonial feminism, and qualitative interpretive methods, are used to address the following: how practicing Shia women are navigating between competing liberal gender equality and traditional Islamic gender complementarity norms in regards to women's rights and status in society? How are they self-identifying themselves and consciously picking and choosing what gender norms to follow and practice and teach the next generation? Finally, as "norm entrepreneurs," how are these Shia women creating an alternative path which is neither purely liberal nor Islamic?

It is argued that Islam is not a homogeneous religion and that Shia women are actively researching, self-reflecting, questioning, and proposing a new approach to Islamic gender norms. This dissertation seeks to show that these empowered Shia women are willfully paving a new path for more progressive Islamic gender norms centered on gender justice rather than gender equality which is still closely in line with the spirit of CEDAW, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms Discrimination against women. To improve the power dynamics of the global system which is bias in favor Western liberal norms, more focus should be put on why countries and people may oppose or challenge such norms. As such, progressive Muslims need to have their voices heard within international human rights discourses.

Chapter 1:

The Liberal West vs. Shia Ummah

“It is not easy to talk about “patriarchy” or to put ones finger on how power works” (Abu-Lughod 2013, p. 6).

Introduction:

This dissertation project aims to capture how gender norms are transforming within Shia communities in America by interviewing women at a local mosque. It is argued that these Shia women are constantly navigating between liberal and traditional Islamic gender norms to choose how they want to live in America. In this pursuit, they are actively researching and debating and finding progressive Islamic interpretations to follow and teach the next generation of Muslim Americans. Studying the gender norms practiced in local Shia American communities allows for a grassroots level of analysis that will unravel the negotiations that take place when Shia women debate the universality of liberal gender equality norms versus traditional Islamic gender complementarity norms. These women are simultaneously challenging both traditional Islamic gender norms that are outdated and culturally biased; and liberal gender norms, advocated by Western powers and the UN, as imperialistic, and that do not incorporate or value their Islamic beliefs. American Shia women are overcoming this problematic gap between liberal gender norms and traditional Islamic norms by building an alternative path that is a hybrid of both.

While Orientalists’ and Islamophobes continue to essentialize all Muslims under one banner of a radical version of Islam without considering the diversity of interpretations, they miss the opportunity for constructive dialogue and the many nuances within the practices of the

religion. Progressive changes in gender norms are occurring, however scholars need to broaden their scope to include religious dialogue as an important factor in the construction of norms in order to explain this phenomenon.

Description of Problem: Competing Perspectives on Gender Norms

In order to achieve greater universality of human rights norms, and in particular gender justice, respect and inclusion of different civilizations, histories, economic stratification, cultures, and religions, must be considered. Otherwise, true universality and practice of Conventions such as CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of all forms of All Forms Discrimination Against Women) will not be actualized. Instead, Western countries and the liberal human rights regime will continue to be perceived by Muslim communities, as dominating the world order, and their liberal norms regime will ultimately fail at protecting women. Finding common ground across civilizations is key to making legitimate substantive human rights norms. Bridging this gap, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im discusses a process to advance and strengthen human rights norms by encouraging internal cultural discourses and cross-cultural dialogue. He explains that internal discourses relate to "the struggle to establish(ing) enlightened perceptions and interpretations of cultural values and norms," while cross-cultural dialogue promotes "broadening and deepening international (or rather intercultural) consensus" (An-Na'im, 1992, p.27). Such constructive self-reflective and diplomatic dialogue amongst civilizations can reduce conflicts, Islamophobic tendencies, anti-Western sentiments, and change the world for the better.

The Shia *Ummah* or Muslim Diaspora community, crosses borders, regions and other institutions to organize all Muslims around the world as a larger Islamic family. Conventional international relations theories such as realism and liberalism do not account for the power of religion and the diverse interpretations or understand how such an institution can influence

people. This is a huge factor in misunderstanding the Muslim world as homogeneous. Shia Muslims in America are in a unique position to be studied as they are part of this larger *Ummah*, which connects them globally as they come from diverse backgrounds from around the world. These networks influence their identity and should be studied as an outcome of globalization. Yet, if scholars concentrate their analysis on the two extremes of Western liberalism and traditional Islamic thought, then they miss what is happening in between. More moderate Muslims are taking a progressive Islamic path that incorporates aspects of liberalism and traditional Islamic thought and creating new reformist Islamic practices. Focusing on limited binaries are missing the reality that norms are ever evolving. Therefore, the pivot of study should turn to the transitions that are occurring at the grassroots level, to better explain norm dynamics.

Gender Equality and Waves of Feminism

Gender equality and Western feminist movements are associated with the French Revolution and ideas of freedom, liberty, secularism, rationality, choices, and equal opportunities for each individual (Southard, 1996; Badran, 2009). Western feminism as a movement has been pre-occupied with advocating for gender equality and establishing equal political and legal rights in the interest of women. Their main premise is that patriarchal societies discriminate against women by treating them as second-class citizens, who by nature are considered intellectually and physically weaker than men. This second-class status is considered to be based on cultural practices and legal restrictions that prohibit women from being treated equally to men. For example, restricting women from traveling without a male “guardian” or escort, child marriage, FGM, or the practice of polygamy. Framing these norms as oppressive, and wanting to “free”

women from these patriarchal practices, liberal feminists push for gender equality through political and legal reforms. This goal of gender equality has been incorporated into universal norms by Western countries through the international human rights regime. The following will briefly explain the trends in feminism.

In the 1900s, the first wave of Western feminist movements focused on political inequalities between men and women and called for suffrage, the right to vote, and the right to be heard. Emerging from suffrage movements in Great Britain and the United States, the early women's suffrage movements and their political gains became the stepping stone to the contemporary feminist movements. In the second wave of Western feminism, during the 1960's civil rights movements, liberal feminists focused on social and cultural inequalities and ending discrimination and mistakenly assumed that all women around the world had the same challenges and needs as white middle-class women. Based on such early writings as *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedman, 1963), there was no attention to the differing situations encountered by women in various economic statuses, women of color, or from non-Western cultures. This second wave still continues today, alongside the third wave which critiques it. Meanwhile, internationally there were discourses surrounding women's rights and human rights that were being codified into international treaties.

By 1979, a legal mechanism was in place to frame and promote gender equality globally. Through the United Nations General Assembly adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, a gender focused addition to the human rights regime emerged. The Convention outlined and defined what would qualify as discrimination towards women as:

“any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field” (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 2014).

Yet, in establishing this basis for a universal standard of gender equality, CEDAW has not accounted for the socio-economic, political, cultural, geographical power structures that divide women across various intersections of society both locally and globally. CEDAW provided a formal, overarching legal standard, but remained a limited standard for empowering or promoting all women. This gap between women’s social oppression and the limited standard that CEDAW provided, allowed for a third wave of feminist movements. During this time, many feminisms were emerging, including socialist, Marxist, radical, black, and postcolonial, who were challenging liberal feminism as essentialist and solely focusing on the experiences of White bourgeoisie women. These third wave feminists included lesbians, African Americans and other global women, including those from developing countries, whose life experiences were different than the average heterosexual, White, middle or upper-class women living in the West. Furthermore, the meaning of important terms such as feminine and masculine and gender also varied amongst these women and across the globe, suggesting that women’s identities were both fluid and complex (Abu Lughod, 1991).

As Ziba Mir Hosseini explains “gender roles and relations, and women’s rights, are not fixed, not given, not absolute. They are negotiated and changing cultural constructs, produced in response to lived realities, through debates that are going on all over” (1999, p.6). The self is always being reconstructed, as people navigate the world and learn and distinguish themselves from “Others,” and within a web of relations including gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, culture, religions and all systems of difference (Abu Lughod, 1991). The third wave showed that

multiple feminisms are possible and need to be valued and in addition, that feminist scholars need to be aware of their positionality and biases and consider that they are intertwined with their works (Abu Lughod, 1991). Yet, as Chandra Mohanty (1988) warns, we should also be aware not to lump together all Western feminisms as one and instead distinguish that there are differences. This dissertation project will be critiquing the classical liberal feminists of the second wave that view non-Western women as a monolithic homogenous group and as victims that need to be “saved.” Whether consciously or unconsciously, these liberal feminists have created “contemporary imperialism” (Mohanty, 1988) as they promote through CEDAW individual liberties and gender equality norms without allowing a discursive space for the diversity and complexity of class, religion, ethnicity, age, geography, and overall contexts of non-Western women.

As follows, this dissertation identifies closely with postcolonial feminist works (Abu Lughod, 1991, 2013; Badran, 1999; Kardam, 2004; Mohanty, 1988, 1991, 1996, 2003; Lorde, 1983, 1984; Spivak, 1988;) as well as related works (Said, 1978; 1980) that generally critique the hegemonic Western production of knowledge based on their interests in maintaining their dominance in the world economic system. Specifically, postcolonial feminists critique Western liberal feminists for producing academic research which is essentialist and subordinates the values and experiences of women in developing countries as oppressed, victimized, poor, ignorant, and needing to be saved. Western liberal feminists may see themselves as educated, modern, independent, and free to make their own choices, but the concepts they use can also marginalize women’s experience in the developing world (Mohanty, 1988). From a postcolonial feminist view, then, gender equality norms tend to remain Western social constructs, which have been imposed by more powerful Western countries whose dominant position in the “world

system” has influenced policy-making in the United Nations (through CEDAW) and seem to offer ethnocentric visions of justice (Kardam, 2004). Furthermore, postcolonial feminists relate gender issues to power relations or the spheres of influence, within society, and expand the limits of liberal feminism, to expose the dynamic layers of oppression that exist within any given society (Salem 2013). Consequently, the meaning of emancipation for women, does not mean the same thing to all the women of the world. Instead it is all relative.

Case in point, from a traditional Islamic perspective, gender equality is not the goal, instead it involves gender complementarity, which prescribes different roles and duties for men and women in society, and takes a holistic approach at the relationship between genders as being mutually dependent. Gender complementarity lies at the root of traditional Islamic laws regarding personal status; it reflects a corresponding balance of rights and duties based on the biological differences of men and women (Mir-Hosseini, 1999). The duty or obligations of the man is to provide financially for his family. As Amal Treacher states, “women’s roles as wives, mothers, and daughters are seen as central to the spiritual well-being of the family and the maintenance of the social order” (Treacher, 2003, p.62). It should be added that from a traditional Islamic perspective, the roles of men and women are cooperative rather than competitive in the form of balancing or complementing each other to maintain a stable family unit and society. With this framing, one can situate the competing hegemonic viewpoints (liberal vs. traditional Islamic) that surround the practices of Shia women today and now open this study to interpret what these women living in America are choosing to follow and how.

Theoretical Framework

This dissertation project will be guided by critical constructivism and postcolonial

feminist theories. Both help us understand how Shia women are identifying with and managing rapidly changing gender norms. Also, this study builds critical knowledge by taking into account the individual and community level vantage point of identity formation and transformation of norms within religious institutions. Currently, the dominant positivist International Relations (IR) paradigms of realism, neorealism, liberalism and neoliberalism are limited in explaining the structural challenges that global politics produces today. Focusing solely on the state level of analysis and the undisputed and ultimate acceptance of new norms, they ignore the actual complex power relations and the process of norm transformation, and how individuals and communities, debate, argue, and manipulate these norms, which are often pushed upon them by more powerful states or institutions in the world system. Over the past 25 years, critical international theories have emerged to address these limits by configuring new political spaces that go beyond the constraints and suppression of the dominant state-centric Westphalian constructs (Linklater, 1998). Encompassing a wide array of approaches, including: Marxist, neo-Marxist, poststructuralist, post-colonial, constructivist, neo-Gramscian, and Feminist theories; critical theory identifies, dissects, and actively resists, oppressive power structures by “becoming or being self-aware of the benefits of such resistance” (Roach, 2010, p. 2). As reflexive post-positivist theories, they offer more diverse and inclusive lenses to view and analyze political and social phenomena in this fast transforming world. Generally, as Price and Reus-Smit explain, critical international theorists are motivated by social justice, in which they “consider the opportunities and restrictions bearing on emancipatory political action, geared toward changing the existing order to realize greater human freedom and well-being” (1998, p.285).

Critical constructivist approaches represent a newer generation of critical theorists who study the “socially constructed” human knowledge of the world. Utilizing interpretive

methodologies, constructivists analyze inter-subjectivity, agency, and changes in norms and practices (Widmaier, 2012, p.126). Specifically, they explore three overlapping ontological areas: the impact of normative and material structures and how actors understand their positions in relation to these structures; how actors identities are formed based on interests and how they shape their actions; and finally how, as Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit write, “agents and structures are mutually constituted” (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998, p.266-267). Overall, constructivists look at the “how” questions and unravel the dialectical relationship of identity formation and norm-generation in which people and societies co-construct, or help establish, each other. By explaining how norms are changing, or what circumstances are necessary for agents to engage in changing norms, critical constructivists can determine factors for change. This includes both intrinsic reasons based on the nature of norms as interpreted, and extrinsic based on the sociopolitical environment, surrounding norms (Muller, 2013).

In applying critical constructivism, this dissertation focuses on the politics of inclusion and exclusion and shows how this politics shapes the international order and moral communities of Shia women. Critical constructivism helps illuminate the emergence and reproduction of the boundaries of “us” versus the “Other” and the power disparities that create these categories by determining who are “legitimate actor(s) and how such actors are entitled to behave...to be recognized as a rightful member of society, enjoying all of the rights and benefits pertaining to that status” and those who are not privileged (Price and Reus-Smit, 1998, p.286). In this context, as a moral community, CEDAW determines those states and actors who are included as signatories and practitioners and those that are excluded.

In adopting a critical constructivist theoretical lens, therefore, this dissertation examines the global transformation of the Shia *Ummah*, and how this can serve as a new alternative

category to analyze these relations of power and knowledge, beyond the confines of the nation-state. Through this awareness it is assumed that gender norms in Shia mosques in the United States have been impacted by both intrinsic factors such as the way traditional Islamic and liberal norms are interpreted and practiced, and by extrinsic factors such as the Muslim Diaspora and their cultural influence on the network of practicing immigrants and converts. Within this dynamic web of social constructs, American Shia communities are actively self-reflecting on their Islamic gender norms and negotiating new progressive meanings.

Critical Progressive Islamic Thought

Amongst the transnational Muslim *Ummah* there is an active group of Muslim intellectuals, laity, and clergy that are establishing an interpretive Islamic discourse challenging Conventional social and political norms (Sharify-Funk, 2003). These critical progressive Muslim scholars adopt various vantage points to discuss key topics such as the foundations and meanings of gender norms in Islam and promoting new reformist Muslim identities (Sharify-Funk, 2008). They are reinterpreting Islamic norms and tearing down the boundaries of both Western secular liberal thought and Islamist fundamentalism. Progressive Islamic thought reflects how the Muslim worldview incorporates religion, and, as Adis Duderija argues, how “religious expressions and motivations of Muslims are inseparable from their social, cultural and political values” (2013, p.69).

Thus, the impact of religion on all aspects of Muslim life is fundamental in understanding how new norms can emerge and change the status quo. Reformist Muslim thinkers, including Islamic feminists, reinterpret this inseparability by evaluating early Islamic texts that look at the historical circumstances, sociopolitical situations, and assess the relevance of traditional norms

in modern Muslim societies. They search analytically for answers within the religion and use the same frames of reference of language, concepts, and root sources to radically question traditional interpretations of Islamic norms. Through “critical, constructivist, feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern approaches” progressive Muslims search for religious freedom and gender justice (Duderija, 2013, p.76).

By studying Shia communities, critical constructivists can better understand and engage with Islamic civilizations and avoid the ethnocentric tendencies to lump all Muslims together stereotypically. Hence, there are many debates within Islam today, in which, as Amina Wadud explains, “multiple, contested, and coexisting meanings of Islam (which) are integral to the struggle for justice in Islamic reform” (2006, p.5). Consequently, universal human rights can be achieved if progressive Muslim thinkers, such as Islamic Feminists, are included in the discourses on human rights and when Islamic precedents for human rights are acknowledged by both the Muslim community and Western powers. Shadi Mokhtari, for example, contends that Islam and the Universal Declaration of human rights can be compatible since the most fundamental principles of Islam are rooted in the notions of respect for human dignity and human rights (2004, p.472). As such, Islamic laws should be interpreted based on time, place, and context of society, which allows for changes in norms.

In addition, Mir Hosseini argues that in today’s modern era when both men and women are actively participating in social, political, and economic life, one is able to determine which traditional gender practices are acceptable. Since Islamic thought has always strived to uphold justice, if the role of women in society needs to change, then it is up to Muslims to fight for this (Mir-Hosseini, 1999). By determining what women and men’s rights and duties are based on, when they were constructed, under what historical and sociological circumstances, “norm

entrepreneurs” as agents of change (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), can push for new gender norms that better reflect today’s Muslim society. Subsequently, Shia communities in the United States have this opportunity and context, to initiate changes in traditional gender norms.

Meanwhile, intellectuals in the Shia-dominated Iranian state have created a dialogue for transforming these norms. For example, the Iranian reformist scholar Abdolkarim Soroush, has pushed for reconciling Islam with the discourse on human rights, democracy and gender equality. In distinguishing between Islam and Islamic knowledge, Soroush argues that Islamic knowledge is based on interpretations of the *Quran* by fallible humans and they should be considered as “time and context-bound” (Razavi, 2006, p.1227). His works have inspired Iranian religious intellectuals to move away from a discourse of duties and obligations towards a discourse on the rights of a man and woman as individuals. This means that Islamic knowledge can be debated, allowing space for the diversity of opinions and more pluralism within religious thought. Similarly Najmabadi, introduces the position of Shia Islamic Feminists in Iran who have come to insist that gender discrimination has a social rather than a natural (or divine) basis, and that true authentic Islam (not biased by patriarchal cultures) is more compatible with gender equality and democracy. Shia Islamic feminists furthermore seek to keep the male clergy from dominating in the domain of interpretation, by placing more women as interpreters (Najmabadi, 1998, p.65-67). Consequently, progressive Muslim intellectuals such as Najmabadi, Mir Hosseini, and Soroush’s discourses on gender being socially, rather than divinely constructed, as a framework, have empowered Shia women in the *Ummah* to legitimately and publicly demand for more equal rights in line with the international human rights regime.

Research Questions

Today people have become increasingly aware of competing gender norms through education, technology, travels, migration, media, etc. and have more power to choose what to follow. As a result, with greater communication between the Muslim and non-Muslim world, and growing numbers of Muslims living outside of the Middle East, extending the *Ummah*; they are constantly being exposed to liberal democratic thought and many are renegotiating traditional Islamic norms. Members of Shia mosques, and especially women, are reframing gender norms and as active agents, by consciously picking what norms to adhere to and how. Specifically, this dissertation project will address the following: How are practicing Shia women navigating between competing liberal gender equality and traditional Islamic gender complementarity norms in regards to women's rights and status in society? How are they self-identifying themselves and consciously picking and choosing what gender norms to follow and practice and teach the next generation? Finally, as "norm entrepreneurs," how are these Shia women creating an alternative path which is neither purely liberal nor Islamic?

Argument

I argue that the human rights regime, including CEDAW have not incorporated the different voices of the Muslim World and until there is legitimate constructive dialogue, universal human rights and justice will not be achieved. Understanding that religion is a crucial aspect in the way Muslims self-identify is the first analytical step, which has been systematically ignored by Western scholars and liberal feminists. Leila Abu Lughod, for instance, warns researchers to be aware of our position and power and to create dialogue and connections between ourselves and the "Other" instead of creating new hierarchies of oppression (1991). A step towards understanding can be made by using the theories of critical constructivism to

engage with Muslim societies and to study how gender norms are changing. Shia Islamic Centers in the United States are sites where constant critical dialogue on gender norms can be observed while new meanings are exchanged amongst practicing Muslims. As part of the greater Muslim *Ummah*, these institutions serve as new structures to study the power dynamics in the development and promotion of norms.

Having exposure to both Western and Eastern values, and living in the United States, allows members of these Shia mosques to freely choose how they want to live. I argue that Shia women in these communities do not need to be “saved” and are instead, active agents with the capacity and determination, to shape new gender norms through negotiation and dialogue with the presence of competing gender norms. It is contemplated that the “standards of appropriate behavior” in regards to gender norms practiced will follow either:

1. A model of what Muslim majority countries promote based on Islamic *Sharia* and the norms of gender complementarity.
2. A model of what CEDAW promotes based on liberal norms such as gender equality.
3. A new approach based on critical progressive Muslim thought that emphasizes religious reformation and reinterpretation of Islamic texts that promote gender justice.
4. Totally new gender norms that have not been seen before.

This dissertation project will unravel the nuances of gender norms in Muslim societies and help deconstruct the stereotypical myths about American Muslims and Shia communities, in particular.

Significance of Study

There have been many studies on the influence of Western liberal gender norms on developing countries such as Iran (Sameh, 2010; Razavi, 2006; Kar, 2008; Shahidian, 1998; Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010; Vakil, 2011). The reverse impact of Islamic norms and their influence on the Muslim *Ummah* in the West has been less studied. Evaluating how practicing members of

these mosques living outside of the Middle East, navigate between liberal, religious, ideological, and/or cultural competing norms can help extend the study of norm dynamics from its over occupation with unidirectional and vertical norm diffusion, into the reality of a more intricate and dynamic system of norm production and dissemination. Additionally, this study can lay the groundwork for further studies to developing CEDAW into a truly universal project by advancing a discussion that emphasizes compatibility and/or coexistence between critical progressive Islamic discourses and the liberal international human rights regime. Exposure to various competing norms and standard practices and learning from one another's culture, religions, and lived experiences, allows for a constructive dialogue and positive exchange among civilizations instead of a "clash of civilizations."

Western liberal gender norms also have room for change. Women are pushed to catch up without considering that men and women are in fact different. In addition, discrimination can occur for various reasons including race, ethnicity, class, age, education, religion, etc. If true substantive equality is the goal of CEDAW, then this can only be achieved if these various intersections of oppression are considered and dealt with. More dialogue amongst progressive Muslim thinkers and Western liberal scholars is needed to stimulate effective change. Neither gender equality nor gender complementarity systems have adequately answered or addressed the actual situation of today's women that have been impacted by such situations as economic need, conflicts, migration, security etc. As a result, there is still a need for a better system to emerge.

Methodology

Once more, the goal of this dissertation is to use a critical constructivist lens to conduct qualitative research. Specifically, a feminist case study method, such as an ethnography, will be

applied to better decipher what occurs locally, as the collective identity of Shia Muslim communities, in the United States, are negotiating between liberal and traditional Islamic gender norms. This study will be gathering a snapshot of the current production of gender norms of local Shia women. Since constructivists shed light on the dimension of dialogue and the use of interdisciplinary approaches, a feminist perspective can be utilized to further understand the process of socialization of gender norms in these communities. As critical approaches, both constructivism and feminism confront and challenge the injustices and oppression in society, by aiming to understand, connect, and interpret the relationships between societal power structures, ideological practices (including cultural and religious), and social struggles, to explain overall social change.

In the field of International Relations, Ann Tickner, explains that IR feminist scholars “fall into methodological frameworks that have variously been described as post-positivist, reflectivist, or interpretivist” (2005, p.2). Tickner cites Reinharz throughout her article “*What is Your Research Program? Some Feminist Answers to International Relations Methodological Questions,*” and claims that there is no single standard method that feminists use or a particular “feminist way” to conduct research (2005, p.3; Reinharz, 1992, p.243). However, feminist research does differ from other research in the Academy because there is a shared methodology or as Tickner puts it, “a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed... and what makes feminist research unique...a distinctive methodological perspective that fundamentally challenges the often unseen androcentric or masculine biases in the way that knowledge has traditionally been constructed in all the disciplines” (2005, p.3). Thus, feminist IR scholars are critical of conventional and hegemonic knowledge and actively conduct research to contest, reconstruct, and transform knowledge. In this way, feminist inquiry is inherently political, and

acts as a criticism to the standard conventional knowledge basis, which has privileged men, and ignored the role of women, in the social world (Tickner, 2005).

There are four methodological guidelines, which push and motivate a distinct position for feminist research. First, feminist scholars have a deep concern for which questions should be asked and why. Second, they aim to conduct research that is useful for women in particular, but that also can be applicable to men. Third, the feminist scholar is situated in the research, and there is reflexivity to insure the subjectivity of the researcher. Finally, feminist scholars are devoted to being participatory action researchers who are advocating for social justice, change, and the emancipation of knowledge. Here, , knowledge is first deconstructed and then reconstructed based on women's lives, asking feminist questions, and using socially constructed terms such as gender, as a unit of analysis (Tickner, 2005).

Feminist case studies, like other case study approaches in political science, usually focus on a single phenomenon. Particularly, feminist case studies focus their research on the experiences of women and other marginalized populations with an element of social justice (Reinharz, 1992). Shia Muslim communities in the United States share a collective identity and are a minority group that have often been ignored by scholars. The structures and institutions of Shia mosques or Islamic educational centers can be thought of as “dialogical sites,” or sites of rights production, as Arzoo Osanloo explains “discourses and practices of rights are not limited to certain sites and people, but are more widespread” (2009, p.12). The investigation of these “dialogical sites” such as this Shia mosque, is an inclusive approach that looks at the “heterogeneity of groups that are developing interpretations of rights” and unravels the inner dynamics of rights discourses as they shift, depending on political and social contexts (Osanloo, 2009).

Generally, the case study method can, as one scholar explains, include the study of “a person, a group, an episode, a process, a community, a society, or any other unit of social life” (Theordorson and Theordosrson cited in Reinharz, 1992, p.164). Conducting a case study, calls for an in-depth investigation by gathering all the relevant data, organizing it, and thoroughly analyzing the facts. Furthermore, the case study method is used to make generalizations to other cases that may be of a similar type (Theordorson and Theordosrson cited in Reinharz, 1992, p. 164). Thus, this method allows the researcher to focus on a single particular phenomenon and the many variables that can affect it.

Within this feminist case study, I have targeted a local Shia mosque in Florida based on having a relatively large minority immigrant population, available website to view published details of their organization, and that also provided a school to teach youth. These above criteria as well as my familiarity with local Shia mosques in Florida were used to pick the viable place to observe and attempt to understand “how” gender norms were evolving. To conduct interviews ethically, I have gone through the University of South Florida’s IRB approval process. Upon receiving IRB approval, I began attending the mosques regularly and interviewing the women with demographic and semi-structured questions. To protect my participants, I have used subject numbers instead of their names, and have kept their consent forms in a password protected secure location. I have also taken field notes to self-reflect as well as voice recorded the interviews, and allowed my participants to review their responses for accuracy. Once more, my open-ended research questions generally asked how Shia Muslims living in the U.S. identify, relate to, define, and interpret, terms like feminism, women’s rights, gender roles, equality, complementarity, and guided me to a better understanding of the situation of women in these communities. The following are the four main objective of this dissertation project:

- 1) To better understand the roles and status of Shia women in Muslim communities in the U.S.;*
- 2) To interview 35 Shia women and ask about their lived experiences of being exposed to both liberal and Islamic gender norms;*
- 3) To observe gender norms and how they are practiced and socialized at a Shia mosque;*
- 4) To better understand the competition between liberal gender equality norms and Islamic gender complimentary norms and their power structures.*

More details about the methodology, interview questions, findings, and analysis, will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

Finally, as Leila Abu Lughod states: “standing on shifting ground makes it clear that every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking is speaking from somewhere” (1991, p. 141). As a female Iranian American Shia Muslim, my worldview crosses between both liberalism and Islam. Being born in the United States and growing up in Florida, I have frequented many local Shia Islamic centers/mosques and participated in their activities. I have also visited Iran seven times in my life and have experienced the culture and religious practices first hand. As a PhD candidate in Government at the University of South Florida, I know that I am situated in a powerful locus to analyze the position of these particular Shia women. Throughout my dissertation work, I have been keenly aware of my positionality and the implications of bias that may arise. I have strived to keep a journal and be reflective in my analysis after each intimate interview while maintaining an adequate distance from subjects. While interviewing, I verbalized that I valued their input and maintained professionalism and respect at all times as well as observed and participated in all the religious ceremonies while attending the mosque. Yet, I also am aware that I am privileged because of my unique position as an insider, I have access to a population that a White, non-Muslim researcher could not gain or be trusted. With this background, I have attempted to better understand the dynamics of gender norms practiced in the communities that I have been brought up in. As I myself am a

product of these religious institutions as well as liberal secular public schools, and am at the crossroads between Eastern and Western thought. I am also keenly aware that studying Shia women in these communities is only showing a partial picture of the gender norms practiced. This project is only a beginning look at the situation of Shia women in America and I will leave this broader and more inclusive study for my next academic endeavor.

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation will consist of six chapters. The first chapter has been an introduction that discussed the research problem, questions, argument, and methodology used to understand the dynamics of gender norms. Chapter two will be a review of the norms literature and introduces key concepts and terms, while chapter three moves on to explain the human rights regime and CEDAW and gender equality. Chapter four will give the background of the traditional Islamic perspective that promotes gender complementarity. And chapter five will investigate the process of how Shia women are negotiating between competing gender norms. Finally, chapter six will further summarize and deconstruct my interpretive findings and relate them to the objectives of the study and suggest possibilities for future research.

Chapter 2:

Literature Review: The Limits of Norms Literature

“Human action distinguishes itself from mere instinct-driven behavior precisely because of its involvement in socially fabricated structures of meaning. Agents are equipped with the capacity to evaluate new contexts reflectively and to creatively update and change their views. Norms are an important component of these processes of reflection, evaluation and change” (Hofferberth and Weber, 2015, p.88).

Introduction

How do norms travel across the globe? How are they translated and adapted? How are they interpreted and practiced at the local level? How do individuals and collective identities negotiate between their own values and practices while being constantly exposed to new norms and ways of living? Over the past five decades, a hegemonic liberal human rights regime has promoted and embedded gender equality norms through international laws and conventions such as the Convention on Elimination of All Forms Discrimination against Women, multilateral institutions, regimes, and by other transnational actors and activists. At the same time the field of International Relations (IR) and early constructivists have supported the hegemonic norms by conducting positivist studies that focused solely on analyzing the state level top-down linear processes of liberal norm diffusion; as if it were inevitable. Consequently, it is argued in this chapter that they have neglected the actual study of how norms change by social interactions and have ignored the individual groups of people who are affected. That is, those at the grassroots level who are interpreting these norms and reflecting and sometimes changing their habits or challenging the dominant liberal norms. Furthermore, it is suggested that early constructivists have assumed that globalization is unidirectional and static. However, in the interactive world,

globalization is multidirectional and involves the interexchange and promotion of both Western and Eastern values and results in constantly evolving norms. The aim of this chapter is to review and explain the limits of the literature on norms and show how critical constructivism can help us better understand and identify the process of norm change at the local level.

Literature on Norms

In every setting, norms are continuously being debated and renegotiated based on social exchanges amongst people as they are exposed to new ideas, environments, and events. Norms themselves are organic and depending on the discipline, they are often synonymous with values, principles, beliefs, rules, frames, institutions, or regimes (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Zwingel, 2005, 2012; Acharya, 2004). Instances of norms can be seen in: 1) international treaties or conventions such as the human rights regimes and CEDAW 2) by social movements and their claims for justice, and 3) hegemonic ideas or popular frames (Vleuten, Eerdewijk & Roggeband, 2014). Norms constitute one of the elements of regimes, which consist of shared principles, rules and decision-making procedures where actor's expectations unite in a given area of international relations (Krasner, 1983). Norms are always embedded in larger social systems that link power structures, ideas, and practices and carry a quality of "appropriateness." They help us understand and distinguish between what is good and what is bad. These "standards of appropriate behavior" are not just given by the outside world but are products of political struggles and negotiations (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Wiener & Puetter, 2009).

The Evolution of Constructivist Thinking

Constructivist, IR scholars, in the 1990s, began looking at "non-material factors" such as culture, identity, the role of ideas and beliefs, and their impact on actors, to explain the changes

that were occurring in the international system (Katzenstein, 1996a, 1996b). They argued that in world politics power structures, rules, and institutions were not just pushing states to act, but instead were products of social interaction (Wendt, 1992). With a fresh look at international relations, constructivists argued that world politics were socially constructed and that power structures, rules, and institutions were not just pushing states to act, instead their actions were products of social interactions and meanings interpreted by the actors involved (Wendt, 1992). These IR scholars set out to explain the diffusion of “international” norms, where positivist rational theories fell short.

The constructivist literature offers two types of theoretical frameworks for studying norms. On the one hand, early constructivists who were influenced by positivist research methods, focused narrowly on the structuring power of norms that influenced the behavior of states in international politics. They were preoccupied with explaining cause and effect relations and failed to explain the dynamic process of normative change. On the other spectrum, there are more critical constructivists that use interpretive methods to understand how norms are created and promoted. They focus on the relationship between agency and structures and seek to expose the details of norm changes that emerge from this process (Weiner & Puetter, 2009).

Early Structural Constructivism

In order for early constructivists to prove themselves in the field of IR, they abided by research designs that could produce (positivist) empirical evidence. They set out to work towards research designs that isolated norms independently from other factors. Treating norms as “independent variables” that “regulated” state behavior meant that actors passively adapted to “international” norms (Risse & Sikkink, 1999). Based on such limited views, early

constructivists developed a cultural-determinist framework that was not suited for explaining change. In other words, norms were treated as a structural force imposing clear-cut prescriptions for an automatic-like change on state behavior. It was thought that once governments had ratified international treaties, the norms contained in them secured a clear and direct quality that pushed state officials and other citizens into, unquestioning rule-consistent behavior (Risse & Sikkink, 1999).

The early study of normative change was then restricted to explaining the diffusion and eventual internalization of norms, in unidirectional causal pathways. In other words, early structural constructivists, conceptualized actors as unconsciously internalizing international norms, and automatically conforming. Normative change was reduced to the structure of the international system and interpreted based on cultural terms (Finnemore, 1996; Katzenstein, 1996a). Structural constructivists saw norms as what states “ought” to do, in a moralistic way, which set norms apart from other rules (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). With this cultural-determinist framework, these scholars were restricted to explaining and applauding how certain states, usually liberal Western democratic states, complied with norms based on their liberal democratic cultures and then punishing those illiberal countries that did not comply. Ultimately, they pushed for the establishment of international norms that could condition or constrain state behaviors (Reus-Smit, 2005, p.188-211).

In order to fulfill positivist research designs, and prove their place at the IR table, structural constructivists had conceptualized norms as static rules, independent from the actors (states), and their understanding of norms. Their research was limited to a binary of whether a fixed norm was internalized or not. Thus, changes in state behavior were understood as being possible only from external international norms (ex. Treaties) that were pressed onto states and

their decision to comply or not to comply. Moreover, structural constructivists over emphasized identities that were formed by institutionalizing certain standards of appropriateness. This culturally-deterministic “logic of appropriateness” or what was collectively morally considered as right and just, meant that norms were already predetermined and rooted in a social and cultural structure that foreshadowed, as Peter Katzenstein states, the “collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity” (Katzenstein, 1996b, p.5). However, structural constructivists could not explain the process of how actors would decide to comply with norms or how new norms emerged. For them, norms functioned as independent variables that regulated state behaviors (Finnemore, 1996; Risse & Sikkink, 1999). This understanding created another layer of domination of Western powers with the more powerful countries in the world system determining what norms were morally just and who was complying or not complying with international norms such as human rights.

Within the constructivist trend there is a divide between those who look mainly at the state and those who go beyond the state; that is those that identify a more state-centric or institutional constructivist theory (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997) as opposed to a sociological constructivist theory that promotes the fundamental role of non-state actors as “norm entrepreneurs” in the process of norm emergence and socialization (Risse et al., 1999). Those who promote the influence of non-state actors have emphasized the importance of transnational movements across borders (Risse-Kappen, 1995). They have broadened the dynamic of the study of norm socialization from a top down uni-linear approach to interactions between the international and domestic spheres. This includes the influence of civil society through non-governmental organizations and social activists who work towards awareness-raising, agenda-setting, and the overall promotion of the domestic socialization of such regimes

as human rights (Zwingel, 2005). This opens the discussion to focus on how international norms are diffused onto society in general.

Two Models: Norm Life Cycle Model and Spiral Model

In an effort to better explain norm dynamics, structural constructivists have created two models: the “norm life cycle” and the “spiral model.” Finnemore and Sikkink argued that norm evolution represents a constantly changing process or what they call “norm life cycle.” First, comes norm emergence which is instigated and promoted by “norm entrepreneurs” who practice agency and push for strategic change. Next, through the hard work of these “norm entrepreneurs” and their collaboration with other important local and global actors and institutions, a “norm cascade” occurs where states adopt norms as a response to international pressure. Soon following is “norm internalization” where norms are really socialized and become natural and unchallenged (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p.895-898). Yet, this “norm life cycle” identifies the stages of change, but does not explain the details of “how” this process occurs and what the setbacks can be. It is assumed that norm change is always in a positive direction and is predictable. This explanation does not account for push back of certain norms or the negotiation, discussion, and persuasion that occurs when new norms are introduced into society and how people choose how to interpret and follow new norms or alter them for their own needs.

When applying this “norm cascade” model to such issues as women’s rights norms, Susanne Zwingel argues that, even though the “norm life cycle” model might be “a helpful construct to operationalize norm diffusion, it (still) remains too static and too linear” (Zwingel, 2005, p.39). She explains that the complex process and dynamics of norm internalization is important to the understanding of whether transnational norms actually have a transformational

effect on behavior at the local domestic level. Thus, Zwingel criticizes the “norm life cycle” as being too focused on the international level of norm promotion and ignoring the dynamics of the internalization of these norms into local domestic practices (Zwingel, 2005).

Attempting to unravel the “norm life cycle model,” the “spiral model” has been developed. This model looks at domestic internalization and socialization of international human rights norms and under what circumstances, the behavior of a norm-violating State eventually moves from (1) repression to (2) the denial of validity of international norms to (3) tactical concessions and increasing argumentative self-entanglement to (4) prescriptive status, in which the validity of human rights norms is recognized and, finally, to (5) norm-consistent behavior (Risse & Sikkink, 1999). The spiral model builds upon important earlier works by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, whose pioneering study, *Activists beyond Borders*, emphasized the complex processes by which transnational advocacy networks negotiate between domestic and international levels in all three stages of the “norm life cycle” in a “boomerang effect” (1998). Their study, however, is mostly focused on the potential of such advocacy networks to, “multiply the voices that are heard in international and domestic politics” and not what has actually happened in the process (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p.x).

These studies show how transnational networks have strategically put pressure on states that violate norms to conform to international standards, or risk public shaming and their legitimacy, as international actors. However, these models are still focused on the state level and successful cases of norm diffusion, and do not address the failures and the setbacks when norms are challenged at the local level. Norm change is usually considered as a positive progressive evolution of improving norms for the greater good. This ignores what happens once norms are internalized, why some norms survive and others fade away, and the contestation of norms. By

only empirically studying the positive examples of norm diffusion, this is still a partial view of the socialization and manipulation of norms. These models also overlook how norms are first created, how actors interpret, alter, or modify norms, and take actions. Instead, they assume a causal relationship between norms and actions, as a one-way street. In focusing to appease a positivist agenda on producing methods-based empirical research, these early structural constructivists seem to have missed the point of their main foundation: that norms are social constructions that are created and transformed by people who interpret and give meaning to them through social interactions (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015).

Norms and Frames

When bringing together the literature on norms and frames, it becomes clear that “standards of appropriateness” are manipulated, constructed, transformed and subject to change and contestation (Vleuten, Eerdewijk, & Roggeband, 2014, p.44-45). Therefore, framing and norm diffusion are ever changing processes as international norms are not just simply decoded but are renegotiated, translated, manipulated, and adapted to local institutions. Together they form a dynamic evolving process in which something is being done by someone. It is disruptive because it generates frames that not only differ from, but also challenge existing ones. Norms travel in different directions as ideas come from multiple sources and frames of reference; different actors are involved in transmitting; receiving and interpreting ideas, translating and contextualizing, and thus creating new norms (Zwingel, 2012). In addition, power is an integral part of the processes of social construction and norm negotiation at different phases, in different contexts, and at different levels (Vleuten, Eerdewijk, & Roggeband, 2014). The power is in whom or what institution (global, national, local, community, and individual level) is promoting

a frame and how they are manipulating the picking and choosing of what to push and what not to promote; and then determining who is complying or not and holding them accountable.

Logics of Appropriateness, Action, and Consequentialism

As explained previously, the issue with the approaches and conceptualization of norms, in the norms literature, has roots in the great debate of the early 1990s between the more rationalist schools of IR, and constructivists. Within this greater discussion, there was a “logic of action” debate, as rationalists proposed interest-based approaches to norms and constructivists focused on sociological roots of norms or: “the logic of consequentialism” versus “the logic of appropriateness” (Risse, 2000a; Risse, 2002a; Risse, 2002b; Keohane, 1988; March & Olsen, 1989, 1995). It was thought that norms regulated the behavior of actors in international relations based on a “logic of appropriateness” or what was commonly agreed upon acceptable behaviors or morally right and just. Meanwhile, rationalists limited the role of norms to the “logic of consequences” based on utility maximizing interests and calculating costs and benefits of abiding by norms. Interestingly, both the constructivist and the rationalist debate were linked, in a dialectical relationship, as norms were expressions of institutionalized interests, and these interests were determined by the same norms. Accordingly, the “logic of consequentialism” and the “logic of appropriateness” can be thought of as just one special instance of the other and constitutive of each other (Muller, 2004).

Overall, the constructivist approaches that lean closer to positivist rational theories have tried to create a testable research program to prove that norms matter and have been criticized for their structuralism and static descriptions of norm dynamics. As Jacob Sending explains, the “logic of appropriateness” has a structural bias that cannot fully explain the complex logic

behind individual actions. Although norms are constitutive for actors' identities, agents, and the structure, are not mutually constitutive, and changes in normative structures, do not automatically result in changing political practices (2002). Therefore, for early structural constructivists, the impact of norms was only partially considered as a unidirectional causal relationship. This left little room for agency, and possibilities of change, and competing norms (that are always present in the international system), and instead, over exaggerated, the direct links between norms and cultural identities, as explanations of action (Sending, 2002).

To take the discussion of "logics" further, Thomas Risse elaborates on Habermas's "communicative action theory" and discusses the "logic of arguing" in which actors need to negotiate and to actively decide what kinds of norms to follow, to act appropriately. Risse proposes that actors continuously deliberate which norms to follow by arguing and seeking truth. From a critical constructivist point of view, Risse explains that there is a process of argumentation, deliberation and persuasion that occurs in the spectrum between what early constructivist claimed versus what rationalists claimed in order to come to a mutual understanding (Risse, 2000). From this perspective, norm diffusion can be viewed as a dynamic negotiation process with give and take from all parties that are participating from the state level to the grassroots and average citizens. In fact, for new ideas and practices to be seen as legitimate and enforceable and a general consensus to be made, all parties should be involved in these processes of arguing, debating, persuading, strategizing, and bargaining. In addition, those who are engaged in the process must be open to change, as their worldviews will be challenged, and sometimes this leads to the formation of new identities.

Critical Constructivism

At the other end of the continuum of constructivism is a more reflective critical constructivist approach, which uses interpretive methodologies, and focuses on inter-subjectivity, agency and change (Widmaier, 2012). They reject positivism's assumption that a social reality exists separate from the researcher. Critical constructivism analyzes history, common practices, shared ideas, and identities, to determine how states and non-state actors are active agents in the social creation and transformation of power structures. Thus, actors are not just motivated to follow rules and norms because of a cultural structure that determines what is "appropriate." Instead, actors are in a position to reflect upon, evaluate, challenge and choose what norms to follow and are active agents in determining how to behave. These critical constructivists look at the "how" questions and unravel the dialectical relationship of identity formation and norm-generation in which people and societies co-construct, or establish, each other. Specifically, they explain how norms are changing, or what circumstances are necessary for agents to engage in changing norms. The factors for change can include both intrinsic reasons, based on the nature of norms as interpreted, and extrinsic, based on the sociopolitical environment surrounding norms (Muller, 2013). These critical constructivists consider norms as a point of reference, or guides, as actors can draw from a "basket" of norms to make sense of situations (Hjarpe, 1997; Roald, 2003). In social reality, there are always options to choose from a variety of norms, and agents manipulate, mold, and give meaning to norms. Therefore, norms are constantly changing. How people creatively take actions by referencing various combinations of beliefs and worldviews to interpret situations, yields innovations. Thus, communities come to different interpretations of norms, and this gradually transforms structures of meaning (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015).

Moreover, the critical constructivist approach helps explain, understand, and identify the characteristics and meanings of new institutions by emphasizing the role of consistent practices and the unintended and intended consequences of institution-building. It looks at the socialization of norms or as Risse and Wiener put it, “the process by which actors internalize the norms which then influence how they see themselves and what they perceive as their interests” (Risse & Wiener, 1999, p.778). By understanding how actors develop their interests, critical constructivists, can explain a wider range of international political phenomenon such as: how countries choose and seek to comply with certain human rights norms and not others, diplomacy vs. war, democracy vs. authoritarianism, etc. (Risse & Wiener, 1999). They can evaluate ideas, norms, and interests by specifying which exact ideas and which interests and as Risse and Wiener further explain, test “whether actors are motivated by principled beliefs or norms of appropriate behavior or ... the instrumental search for power or material resources” (Risse & Wiener, 1999, p.779).

Although there are clusters of common norms practiced in Western democratic countries, norms vary widely across the world based on societies, regions, nations, localities, etc. Transformations and changes in institutions, which are built upon common norms, and the meaning of individual norms, within regimes, are a new area of focus. Accounting for agency and international actors that do not follow common norms, and instead, may follow or promote “bad norms,” or competing norms, are also a fresh area of critical constructivist research (Muller & Wunderlich, 2013). As new situations and problems arise, deep-rooted norms can be questioned and reconstructed as actors search for creative solutions to overcome new predicaments (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015). To understand this, critical constructivists value the

importance of communication, language, reason, and overall dialogue among civilizations (Deitelhoff & Muller, 2005).

Furthermore, norms can also be seen as ethical, social, and legally legitimate values that can be influenced by worldviews or ideologies (Dietelhoff, 2009). Studying the conditions that favor one ‘mode of action’ over another are not sufficient enough to create a cause-effect relationship. As norms literature has developed, critical constructivists have looked at where and when norms matter and how and why norms change (Hoffmann, 2010). This allows them to uncover the conditions needed for the spread and compliance of norms. In the interactive global environment, norms are introduced and manipulated from both strong state powers in the international system, and also from weak powers, that may object to certain norms, and create, change, or compete, by promoting their own standards of appropriate norms. Thus, norms are in constant movement and are self-renewing. They need to be interpreted and manipulated in order to be practiced and internalized. Agency occurs when consciously making decisions and choosing which norms to follow or not follow, and justifying why. As such, interpretations can vary across states and even within countries. State and non-state actors sharing a common collective identity, may even hold different views, about certain norms, and this can bring up even more complex issues with norm implementation and promotion (March & Olsen, 2004). Norms are then strategic social constructions diffused amongst states and other actors by “norm entrepreneurs” who manipulate ideational or material resources to promote certain norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Risse, 2000; Muller, 2004).

Once more, scholars should focus on “how” certain conditions are perceived and taken in and internalized by actors in the norm process and especially at the grassroots level. Actions can be considered as based on many variables including opportunity structures, resources available,

and standards of appropriateness that can help in the arguing or bargaining process of implementing new norms (Deitelhoff & Muller, 2005). Nicole Deitelhoff further discusses the complex relationships between norms, modes of action, and institutionalization by explaining that strategic action takes place when norms are stable and institutionalization is low; rhetorical action or strategic arguments are needed when norms are contested and there are weak institutions; communicative action is taken when norms are contested and there are strong institutions; and finally norm-regulated action or the “logic of appropriateness” is promoted when there are stable norms and stronger institutions (Deitelhoff –mimeo in Muller, 2004). With these insights, studies can now turn towards analyzing the degree of institutionalization and the progressive evolution and transformation of norms. At the least, this now allows for a space for understanding the internal dynamics and conditions of the norm socialization and learning process, which lies beyond the structuralist approach (Sending, 2002).

The Possibility of Challenging “International Norms?”

Vagueness in the meaning of norms and conflicts of interpretation and challenges against hegemonic “international” norms have been largely ignored by early structural constructivists (Wiener, 2004). Their research findings, which considered the international system as the point of authority of norms, contradict the original idea that social phenomena and social norms were created and transformed by interpretive agents through interaction. In short, the domestic and local creation, innovation, translation and the dynamic directions that norms travel were overlooked (Zwingel, 2012).

Muller and Wunderlich have unpacked norm diffusion, and have described it as a continuous negotiation process, where “norm entrepreneurs” actively work to consolidate certain

norms, by promoting and manipulating their meaning, and continue to defend it against challengers (2013). From this view, the “norm life cycle” becomes even more fluid and dynamic, as the internal reactions to norms can have multiple responses such as competition, compliance, rejection, evolutionary change, and slow progression, amongst other paths. Intrinsicly, the internalization of norms depends on how local actors interpret and understand new norms, based on their own normative structures, precedents, or competing norms (Acharya, 2004). This can lead to diversity in norm compliance based on various meanings given to the same set of norms.

There are nonetheless different histories, cultures, religions, economic standings, and overall identities and ideologies that can impact the interpretation and practice of norms. It is only natural that norm conflicts will occur based on the social context. Extrinsicly, the internalization of norms can come about based on events or crisis that alter the international order and force change. However, changes will not occur without the agency of “norm entrepreneurs” taking advantage of these opportunities and pushing for change (Muller & Wunderlich, 2013).

Furthermore, Muller and Wunderlich have pointed out, norms followed by those who oppose the existing international order that is governed by Western democratic countries have not been adequately addressed. Such “revolutionary norm entrepreneurs” oppose the existing dominant normative order, and it’s so called “international norms,” and promote the overthrow of the system, and instead want the establishment of a new order, or a return to traditional older practices. These “revolutionary norm entrepreneurs” can exist within a state that has adopted a new set of values that are incompatible with the international regime and provide an alternative path (Muller & Wunderlich, 2013). For example, this could be a result of a revolution, which

transforms all aspects of a society, such as the 1979 revolution in Iran, which established a new set of Shia Islamic norms and set out to spread their worldview.

Additionally, the direction that norms diffuse have to be questioned, as power relations are not just assumed, but are manipulated by hegemonic powers. Some actor's voices are included while others are muted and excluded (Vleuten, Eerdewijk, & Roggeband, 2014). Research that looks specifically at the state level of the global spread of gender equality norms, misses how these norms emerge and are negotiated at different levels, including the local level. What is chosen to be included, and legitimately considered as "international norms," and what is excluded, is important, in uncovering the power dynamics in the international system.

Relational Conceptualization, a Good Option

A more useful way of understanding norms is as points of orientation and reference. Researchers can conceptualize norms as a "basket" that individuals and groups of people "with a given identity," can choose from (Hjarpe, 1997; Roald, 2003). In a relational or interactive approach, within the framework of critical constructivism, there are two research assumptions: 1) norms have an essentially contested quality and gain meaning in relation to the specific context in which they are enacted; 2) norm contestation is a necessary component in raising the level of acceptance of norms. Actors ascribe to norms through social interactions. Scholars need to distinguish between social practices that are formally organized through conventions and constitutions and those informally structured through social interaction. Through such distinctions, it is possible to observe multiple cases of diverging interpretations of a single norm, across different cultural contexts, instead of assuming one set of norms is superior to others (Weiner & Puetter, 2009). These contexts may coincide with the boundaries of a particular

nation-state, but may also apply to specific cultural communities or sub-communities, which are transnational in nature such as the Shia *Ummah*. Norm contestation may emerge as the conflict between multiple recognized international norms such as gender equality vs. complementarity vs. patriarchy.

Likewise, norms are connected to agency in two particular ways. First, by unconsciously drawing on norms as guides, people are able to make sense of new situations. Actors are constantly choosing from a “basket” of different and sometimes conflicting norms and relating them to their particular social environment and condition (Hjarpe, 1997; Roald, 2003). Second, in a given situation, agents engage in action by drawing on specific combinations of beliefs and worldviews from their “basket” of norms to make sense of circumstances. Agents are situated in various webs of meaning that form a diverse moving structure which is continuously transforming. By analyzing different interpretations, human beings creatively construct different meanings to legitimize their actions. Hegemonic norms can be challenged, especially in situations of new social environments in which established ways of thinking do not address the problems that can emerge (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015). This is exactly what is happening in Shia mosques as people are confronted with new ways of living and need to sometimes reevaluate their traditional Islamic norms and adapt to a new environment, living in the West. Ultimately, norms form a vital part of the existing “cultural reservoir” from which actors draw upon, to justify their actions (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015). In order to better understand this process, when applying a relational-processualist perspective, “this” Hofferberth and Weber claim, “(1) increases the analytical specificity of research questions and methodologies; (2) allows us to conceive of norm success, norm failure and norm change; and (3) enables us to account for the contingency of these processes” (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015, p.89).

What Can Be Gained From The Literature?

Overall, what can be gained by reviewing the literature on norms is that norms are dynamic and powerful and that they are manipulated with strategic intentions by states, non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations, transnational networks, individuals or collective activists. Norms are constantly changing, as contexts change, norms can change. Critical constructivists using interpretive methods can look at the tensions and struggles surrounding so-called universal “international” norms such as human rights, “instead of searching for an alleged consensus on moral purpose, one (can) focus on conflicts of interpretation” (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015). To view norms as static and unidirectional means to ignore the impact of the process of globalization and the speed and flow of information and ideas moving across all boundaries. There are always competing norms that provide alternative paths of life and practices. In today’s age, people are more aware of these competing norms through education, technology, travels, migration, media, etc. and they have more power to choose what to follow and how. From a relational-processualist perspective, norms can be thought of as a point of reference (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015).

Norms might be shared and accepted widely but there is no such thing as complete norm internalization or in a fixed or final sense. As such, “actors might internalize habits and routines of behavior by emphasizing the possibility of norm internalization and focusing on norm success apparently owes more to a certain functionalist optimism inherent in a liberal version of constructivism rather than to a sound conceptual analysis” (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015, p.90). Thus, we need to look at collective identities such as Shia Muslims in the United States, and analyze the interpretations, reasons and justification that female members offer for their actions.

Studies of normative transformation should focus on the meanings that creative agents ascribe to their actions, in specific situations, how they refer to norms to legitimize these actions, and how previous interpretations of norms are modified in these communicative processes. Researchers have to try and understand the interpretations of actors. From an analytical perspective, norms are “cultural resources” invoked by actors in particular situations. The idea that gender equality norms are assumed to be a shared normative consensus in international society makes it difficult to see frictions or instances of hegemonic imposition. In fact, the term gender itself can be misunderstood.

Gender Defined

When focusing and speaking of gender, I am referring to socially constructed roles, performances, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a society considers as appropriate standards of practices for the roles of men and women (Butler, 1988). These are the roles males and females “ought” to and are expected to take in society. The term "gender" refers to the social differences between males and females, which is different from "sex," which denotes whether someone is biologically male or female. Since gender is a social construction, gender roles, and thus related norms, are constantly changing, evolving, and adapting to new social environments.

Furthermore, gender is performed by distinguishing both public and private tasks and roles for women and men in society. Women as well as men shape gender roles and norms through their activities and reproduce them by conforming to expectations. Men as well as women can promote changes in gender norms, which are reproduced, and taught to the next generation, through for example, the relationships of mothers and daughters and fathers and sons. Gender relations can be studied in all intersections of race, age, sex, religion, ethnicity, socio-

economic status etc. that can all provide opportunities or challenges towards transforming gender norms. Understanding gender norms as “sense-making processes” implies that norm dynamics are not only limited to the way norms travel between levels and actors but also how norms themselves change on their long journeys (Zwingel, 2005).

The main role that men and women play in the family, community, and society can be traced to the dominant cultural and religious background that can influence the process of socialization of gender norms. However, there are many more factors such as immigration, socioeconomics, education, etc. that can be attributed to a change in the practice of norms. Additionally, gender norms can be an area where people display acts of resistance to the status quo, or the version of the state religion (Bayat, 2010, p.103). Therefore, gender, as Judith Butler states, “is primarily (a) political interest which create(s) the social phenomena of gender itself” (Butler, 1988, p.529). Gender norms as a unit of analysis are inherently political and need to be studied further, to explain how people as active agents choose what norms to follow and how. Instead of joining Orientalists’ and assuming and predetermining that Muslim societies will always follow strictly traditional Islamic norms, researchers should see the diversity amongst Muslim perspectives and religious thought, and find common bridges of reference.

Conclusion

This chapter critically reviewed the literature on norms and focused on the norm internalization and socialization process, especially, in regards to how collective identity communities negotiate between various competing norms; how norms can be reinterpreted; appropriated, and how the meaning of norms can be changed and redefined by actors. Critical constructivists have extended the field of IR, as this chapter explained, to study the process of

how actors are transforming norms. These interpretive researchers are not limited in studying whether or not a norm is being practiced, but instead how it is being promoted, manipulated, challenged, and overall altered, based on the context.

Shia mosques in the U.S., provide an example that tests how gender norms are being negotiated, based on various worldviews present within these communities, and in relation to the “basket” of norms they can choose from. Shia women, as we shall see, are reframing gender norms, and are active agents or “norm entrepreneurs,” as they pick what norms to adhere to and how. In doing so, they are transforming gender norms for themselves and the next generation of the Shia American *Ummah*. Having exposure to both Western and Eastern values and frames of reference, allows them to freely choose how they want to live. Challenging the liberal hegemonic gender equality regime, as the only causal path, I will argue that these Shia women do not need to be “saved” and instead, they are championing new gender norms through negotiation, persuasion, debate, and dialogue. Furthermore, as Muslim ambassadors, they are even setting an example and new ways of thinking for non-Muslim women and liberal feminists.

Ultimately, the door is open for any entity to manipulate and influence norms (Muller & Wunderlich, 2013). Evaluating how practicing Shia members of these mosques navigate between liberal, religious, ideological, and/or cultural competing norms can extend the study of norm dynamics from narrow unidirectional and vertical norm diffusion into the reality of a more multilayered and dynamic system of norm transformations. This study can help deconstruct the dichotomy between universalism and cultural relativism by advancing a discussion that emphasizes compatibility between heterogeneous Islamic cultural and religious discourses and the hegemonic liberal international human rights regime. Finally, this dissertation serves to begin a discussion on Shia Muslim communities in the United States that are pioneering new gender

norms, and to add to the literature on norms. The next chapter will explain the human rights regime and CEDAW and the liberal discourse of gender equality.

Chapter 3:

The Human Rights Regime and Gender Equality

“Formal equality is achieved if policies are merely gender neutral, while substantive equality is concerned with the effects of equality policies and takes into account the need to correct prevailing inequality” (Raday, 2012, p.515).

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to expose the flaws of the international human rights regime, and in particular CEDAW, and second wave liberal feminists, who while promoting the “universality” of gender equality norms, have ignored the diversity of women and their values, interests, and belief systems. To better understand this dilemma, as explained previously, the lens of constructivism and postcolonial feminism will be applied to analyze the structural power dynamics of the promotion of gender equality norms. I argue that Western liberal feminism and CEDAW have failed in engaging with diverse women and in particular those who are religious, like the Shia women in this community. Through their secular view of the world, religion is seen as static and unchangeable, and an inherently patriarchal institution that excludes women and renders them unequal to men. At one level, liberal feminists do not understand the significant position of religion, in the everyday lives of some women; at another level, liberal feminists and those promoting the Convention only see and judge women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Muslim communities through the lens of religion (Salem, 2013). By not considering the diversity in interpretations of the religion, they are missing the agency in which Islamic feminists and Shia women use to reinterpret the *Quran* and *Hadiths* (words, habits, actions of the Prophet Muhammad) to challenge cultural patriarchy. As a result, the human rights

regime is restricted in their capacity to enforce substantive change in gender norms beyond their Eurocentric borders. A way out of the predicament is by focusing research on the lived realities of women and specifically, minority branches of Islam: Shiism. This allows a discursive space for multiple feminisms, including religious feminisms.

Discourses Surrounding the “International” Human Rights Regime

Following the tragedies of World War I and II, the development of the concept of human rights paved the way for an “international” liberal legal standard, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, that sought to protect people from discrimination based on sex, race, ethnicity, religion, social, and civil status and to promote equality for all human beings. Traditionally, international law was addressed to the public or official activities of states, without dealing with the private activities of individuals. As a result, as Samar El-Masri writes, “when states decided to sign multilateral treaties to ban certain violations of the rights of individuals and groups, human rights started to enter the realm of international law, and some “private” acts became a public concern” (2011, p. 932). By accepting and ratifying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, member-states are obligated to guard the human rights of their people. If they are unable to do so, the international community (mainly North America and Europe) through the United Nations, can hold them accountable.

Within the evolving dialogue on human rights, women’s rights and gender equality norms have emerged. As mentioned before, this concept and standard of gender equality arises from Western liberal thought, and is associated with secularism, rationality, choices, and equal opportunities for each individual (Southard, 1996). By 1979 with the United Nations General Assembly adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against

Women, a legal mechanism was in place to frame and set up the promotion of gender equality globally. With this new legal standard, it obscured the public and private dichotomy traditionally recognized in international law and produced tensions amongst non-secular, religious societies and non-Western cultures. Although, international conferences were held to incorporate many voices, including those from developing countries there were still those who dominated the negotiations (who were mainly liberal feminists from the upper class, elite intellectuals), who had studied in Western universities, and were part of a global cosmopolitan community, but not representative of the average citizens of their respective countries (Kardam, 2004). As seen from a postcolonial feminist view, they ignored and marginalized female voices from the developing world as well as religious communities (Salem, 2013). Consequently, this so-called “universal” standard for gender equality was representative of some, but not all global citizens.

Yet, cultures around the world coexist and can be categorized by the following amongst various other subcultures: religion and ethnicity; institutionally at different levels of family, community, job, state, educational system; and through globalization, an international cosmopolitan culture which promotes the human rights regime. While gender equality can be accepted conceptually in some cultures or subcultures, at the same time, patriarchy can remain active in others nearby. Within this web of cultures, CEDAW is accommodating traditionalist patriarchal cultural norms that resist its framework for gender equality. For example, by not accounting for or valuing the various interpretations of Islam that progressive Muslims practice. However, CEDAW should be aware, as constructivists have explained, culture and norms change and adapt and this is an interactive process (Krook & True, 2010). They need to realize gender norms are constantly evolving and changing and there are legitimate competing norms which are also evolving simultaneously. Norm diffusion, as discussed earlier, is a process where

norms are created and disputed and socialized into society and locally manipulated to fit the needs of various communities (Zwingel, 2005). For CEDAW to be successful in the long run, it will need to understand the dynamics surrounding norm production and promotion.

From a post colonialist feminist view, historically, gender equality norms have been pushed by more powerful Western countries that have a dominant position in the “world system”; and their ethnocentric vision of gender equality assumes that women are homogenous and have similar experiences and needs. Their prescription to “save” women is to have them model Western women and their individualistic, self-interests and ignore the oppressive power relations that surround the lived experiences of women from other parts of the world. To unravel this dilemma, postcolonial feminists, have sought to expose how gender issues are related to spheres of influence or the power relations within individual societies and the dynamic layers of oppression which exist locally and globally (Salem, 2013). Through this enlightened thought, the meaning of gender rights or emancipation can mean different things to different women depending on their situated position. As such, the meanings of feminism, equality, discrimination, empowerment, etc. can mean something different to Shia women living in the U.S. vs. her non-Muslim counterparts locally and globally. This should be obvious, and yet we all are prone to stereotypes and lumping cultures and people together instead of seeing the nuances of their ways of living and questioning the roots of their practices.

Nonetheless, Muslim majority countries and communities have been suspicious of so called “universal” legal standards, and although, a majority have accepted and ratified CEDAW; they also have declared many reservations and upheld their own standard of contemporary Islamic gender complementarity norms (Sisters in Islam, 2011). Similar to ideas of postcolonial feminists, many in the MENA region perceive CEDAW and the human rights regime as a

modern form of imperialism that is trying to impose their Western view of society on the Muslim world (Kandiyoti, 1995). They point out that human rights stem from culture and that since cultures are diverse, so too are the standards for human rights (An-Na'im, 2010).

Both gender equality and gender complementarity norm belief systems attempt to guide people towards modernity. Although some in the West may not consider gender complementarity as a rightful form of modern living, many in the MENA and within Muslim communities in the West, would disagree, and instead, emphasize the unique differences between genders and their equal positions before God. Although modernity representing the economic and technological success of Western development is often idolized and modeled, the Western culture of secularism, individualism, materialism, and consumerism, is not. Furthermore, it is often assumed (by those in the West) that the path to modernity is linear, as religious societies will ultimately end up secular. Yet, in practice can there truly be only one standard system of gender norms that all people must follow? Or can there be more than one reality or progressive path allowing for competing norms to coexist? Are Western liberal gender equality norms the only path to modernity and development? And can we build a more inclusive and sustainable human rights regime?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to trace the creation and evolution of CEDAW. As a legal document, the Convention or at least its components in spirit are organically being discussed and debated across the globe from the state level women's organizations, down to grass roots women's movements, and amongst religious communities. The Convention's ratification and reservations each represent the further development of the human rights regime. Today as Krook and True states, CEDAW is "the most ratified human rights treaty but also the one with the most reservations, mainly citing traditionalist religious arguments. The definition of

gender equality thus remains contingent upon ongoing struggles at international and domestic levels, frequently resulting in inconsistent and uneven implementation” (2010, p.112). Until women gain justice across the globe and their lived experiences and beliefs are valued, CEDAW will not be a success.

Background to the Creation of the Convention

After the adoption of the UN declaration of human rights, a special Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was formed to promote, report on and monitor all the issues that related to women’s rights. The CSW conducted annual surveys on women’s political rights around the world. The General Assembly recommended that CSW prepare a single treaty with a comprehensive character. They started this process by holding annual meetings to define and develop UN policies on women and gender. By 1952, the General Assembly passed the Convention on the Political Rights of Women, which promoted the equal political rights for women to vote, the right to participate in government (hold public office) and gain access to public services. Soon thereafter, international seminars were held on specific women’s issues: 1957 Bangkok, 1959 Bogota, 1960 Addis Ababa, and 1965 Ulan Bator on the ‘participation of women in public life’; 1967 Helsinki and 1968 Accra on ‘civil and political education of women (Krook & True, 2010, p.113-114).

At this time, in the 1950s and 1960s, the UN remained more concerned with social and economic development of women. As more former colonies gained independence and became recognized as member states, the push for modernization and development policies ensued. The approach, was ‘women in development’ and neoliberal elites in the newly independent states, specifically former colonies, argued for social justice and equality for women as a path to

economic development and modernization of their countries. The goal at this time was to increase women's participation in the labor market. Funding and resources were allocated for bringing women into the workforce to strengthen the economy; both, however, ignored how development could actually serve the basic needs of women. In response to growing criticism from postcolonial and Marxist feminists, the UN shifted its policies and identified the political-economic gendered power relations that restricted the empowerment of women. This shift in UN policies exposed that women joining the workforce did not automatically mean that they would have a more powerful position in the family or in the household economy. Women needed political representation at the government, national, and local levels, to gain self-empowerment, and through this, a more sustainable development could occur (Razavi & Miller, 1995).

To address these issues, the UN adopted the International Women's Year (1975) and the UN Decade for Women from 1976 to 1985, which allowed for three global conferences (Mexico City 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985) to be held that would draw up proposals for an international women's rights agenda. These early conferences focused on women in developing countries and providing aid in supporting their empowerment, through governmental and non-governmental organizations that advocated women's needs. In 1995 another conference was held in Beijing which outlined a Platform for Action and two main strategies for gaining equality between women and men: gender-balanced decision-making which called for equal participation of women in decision making positions as policy-makers (promoting 30% gender quotas); and gender mainstreaming, which incorporates the need for gender perspectives in all areas of policy-making. This conference set the stage for raising the standards of political participation for women in all countries and were part of a rapidly evolving practical discourse on women's rights (Krook & True, 2010).

This discourse started out with a narrow focus on getting women voting rights and bringing them into the workforce to help speed up economic modernization in developing countries. However, it now shifted towards political change: namely, obtaining full political participation and bringing women into decision making positions, and analyzing how policies would affect both women and men. Empowering women was not at the expense of men but instead, needed to include men to change the overall gender power relations and norms in society. Yet moving away from the word “women” in the UN campaign slogans provoked some development practitioners, scholars, and women’s rights activists, to feel that the UN was ignoring the needs of women. Specifically, they believed that as an oppressed minority group, resources were spread thin and the term ‘gender’ was now being used because it was deemed more inclusive and marketable (Krook & True, 2010). Echoing more neoliberal Western influences on the UN, while organizations adopted the language of gender mainstreaming in practice, their policies, continued the “women in development” neoliberal economic models of the past. The main tensions formed around the term ‘gender’ as states and international organizations now reframed their focus from women to the promotion of gender balance (Krook & True, 2010).

Still, in more recent years, there has been a shift in the discourse towards women’s rights as now human rights. Moving forward with gender mainstreaming and incorporating human rights for all, means that women’s rights could be valued as equally important and not just a marginal goal for women’s organizations and movements, but as an integral component of achieving human rights for all global citizens. Furthermore, in recognizing a need for a more gender balanced perspective within governments, UN Resolution 1325, and UN Security Council Resolutions 1820 and 1888, called for incorporating women’s voices in the negotiation and

implementation process of maintaining peace and security at the local, national, and international levels (Krook & True, 2010).

Including women's voices and empowering them at the decision-making table is key to changing the status of women globally. With or without mandatory quotas, the impact that women can make at the state level needs to be acknowledged and sought after by women who want to make an impact. However, it is important to note, just because women gain positions of authority, this does not automatically mean they will advocate for women's rights. Women in powerful positions can have various goals and projects based on their education and work and life experiences that shape their agendas in office.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

As a result of the growing international human rights discourses through conferences and the exchange of information about the status of women, a legal standard to promote gender equality was drafted by the UN. CEDAW was passed by the General Assembly in 1979 and serves as an international bill of rights for women. The Convention consists of 30 Articles that frame what qualifies as discrimination against women.

Generally, the articles of CEDAW promote changing local laws, policies, and institutions, granting public individual rights to women, establishing equal opportunities for employment, and confronting marriage and family laws (which are often thought of as the most controversial by Muslim societies). Specifically, CEDAW Articles are divided into six sections: Articles 2-6 confront the institutional legal and social aspects of discrimination against women; Articles 7-9 establish standards of political rights for women to vote, hold public office, pass nationality to their children; Articles 10-14 secures educational, health care, housing,

employment, and economic rights to women; Articles 15-16 promotes private rights to women such as owning property, entering contracts, choosing domicile, and in marriage and family relations; Articles 17-22 designs the CEDAW committee which reviews the state reports on progress and setbacks towards achieving gender equality; and finally, Articles 23-30 discuss the management of CEDAW and its relations to other international treaties. The next paragraphs will highlight a few of these Articles and chapter 4 will go into further detail of the most disputed by MENA countries. For a full list and details of the Articles of CEDAW, please see the Appendix.

Article 1 of CEDAW sets the standard for what is to be globally considered as discrimination against women:

“any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field” (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women).

Article 1 stems from the UN charter which first recognized the equal rights of both men and women. With the passing of CEDAW, the standard was set to formally identify, protect and prohibit institutional discrimination against women and actively promote equality between the sexes in all aspects of life, as the only legitimate path to emancipation for women.

Consequently, in Article 2, the responsibility is put on states to “take all appropriate measures” to correct gender inequalities in political and social systems, customs, and practices. Thus CEDAW sets the legal standard, and states are to ratify and implement gender equality policies. From the constructivist perspective, it can be understood that each state has unique historical contexts and social conditions, and the implementation of such laws will be received differently based on the strength of the indigenous patriarchal system, which is at the root of

discrimination against women. Therefore, the practice of CEDAW will vary as the local norms are questioned, challenged, transformed, or sometimes strengthened, depending on the reception of the discourses of CEDAW by the society. Also, women need to be actively involved in the process to help write and amend the laws to fit the reality of women's lives. Otherwise, the new laws will be written and framed by men and from their standpoint (Southard 1996). Lastly, comparing women to a male standard limits the capabilities of creating a more equal society where responsibilities are shared amongst everyone and not based on their gender.

As mentioned above, Article 6 discusses the exploitation of women in prostitution. CEDAW officials judge what conditions are considered as oppressive to women. However, in many parts of the world, prostitution is the most lucrative job for women, which allows them to survive and to feed and provide for their children and families. CEDAW is not looking at the circumstances that average women face on a day to day basis, in the poorest areas of the globe, and understanding their unique needs; but instead, making a judgement that if prostitution is considered a taboo in most Western countries, then it should be outlawed globally. Yet from an economic standpoint, the sex-industry, in underdeveloped countries, is attracting business tourists from developed countries, and they are invested in the continuation of this system (Southard, 1996).

Compared to Article 6, Article 7 guarantees individual rights to women to allow for their representation and active participation in public life locally and internationally. Again, ignoring the lived experiences of women in developing countries, this article does not address why women have systematically not been able to participate in the political system. As Jo Southard explains, "women are allowed to become government ministers and judges, but only if they can function in the same fashion as men. That is, women can be employed in these positions if they

do not have primary child-care responsibilities, if they have managed to receive the necessary education and if they can act like men” (1996, p.35). Subsequently, even CEDAW exists in an entrenched patriarchal system that does not see value in womanhood and continues to honor the male standard and expect women to “do as men do.” By focusing on the experiences of Western women and liberal feminism to create this legal framework, CEDAW itself is adding a layer of oppression as they are blind to the power dynamics of social structural impediments such as poverty, access to education, resources, childcare, etc., that hinder the active participation of women in developing countries.

Article 11 guarantees equal rights of employment to women. With this Article, CEDAW is determining that if women can emulate men, then they can be rewarded in the labor market. Although, the convention does also address job discrimination on the basis of marital status and maternity, the reality is that work outside the home, is mainly controlled by and for men. By addressing the special position of women as also caregivers for children, the elderly, and often heads of households; by allowing a flexible work-schedule, this would give more women the opportunity to compete at an equal standing in the public job market. Also, this could slowly produce a culture of co-parenting and sharing household responsibilities that can really transform society. At the same time, if CEDAW identifies and puts emphasis on including housework, raising children, running family farms, as valuable “work,” this would honor the productivity of what a majority of women do in the world, especially within societies that practice gender complementarity (Southard, 1996).

Finally, Article 16 discusses women having equal rights to marriage and family. This is the most controversial in regards to customs and restrictions of civil rights and where most reservations toward CEDAW occurs with Muslim majority countries and communities.

However, there are many Muslim scholars, Islamic feminists, and activists that are working towards changing traditional gender norms by reinterpreting the *Quran* and *Hadiths* and finding justifications for gender justice within Islam. They are offering alternative perspectives but in close alignment with the spirit of CEDAW to eliminate discrimination against women. The following chapter will discuss this Article in further detail.

The Optional Protocol (Reporting Mechanisms)

Once countries ratify and accept the Articles of CEDAW, the Women's Committee reviews reports from each member state, and evaluates their progress towards achieving gender equality. At the beginning, the reporting procedures were restricted to inter-state complaints towards states that were not complying with the treaty obligations and there was no real enforcement mechanism in place in which individuals could complain about the violations of their rights. Initially, the Women's Committee was set up to review how states were implementing CEDAW and nothing further. In an attempt to address the shortcomings of the Convention, the Secretary General to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) recommended to strengthen the power of CEDAW. Resolution 1995/29 was adopted which allowed the CSW to create an Open-Ended Working Group which then drafted an Optional Protocol. As a positive development of CEDAW, the Optional Protocol would allow for individuals and groups to petition to the Women's Committee and directly file complaints about violations of the Convention (Kardam, 2004). The hope was that it could now empower more people to be engaged with CEDAW and work together to hold their governments and other violators of the Convention, accountable.

Such progress was supported by the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies and the 1995 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing which further set up the legal forms of action, rights, and obligations of governments, and international organizations, that would be responsible for monitoring and enforcing CEDAW. Member states to CEDAW were no longer just reviewed for their steps towards meeting gender equality norms, rather now, individuals, NGOs, minority groups, and other non-state actors, could file suit and have their voices be heard. This was a move towards recognizing that the private sphere was also where women were vulnerable and NGOs were closer to people at the grassroots level and could submit cases on their behalf with their consent. As a result, the UN funded development assistance programs for women was given to countries that agreed to accept the UN Optional Protocol and abide by the rules and regulations (Kardam, 2004). Thus, it is possible that some countries ratified CEDAW in order to receive the much-needed development aid, and not to truly eradicate discrimination against women. However, at minimum, once a country ratified the Protocol (even if partially ratified with exceptions), this meant that they were obligated to report to the CEDAW committee, every four years, with an update on measures the state has taken to eliminate discrimination against women and include factors that have impeded the progress (Baldez, 2011).

Regardless of the intent of member states, the Women's Committee reviews cases from both member-states and nongovernmental actors and now has more access to assessing and analyzing the development, challenges, and evolution of gender equality norms across countries. Over the past few decades they have been able to track and document the struggles and the progress that women have endured. UN development policies have moved from working towards advancing women's status to understanding that development could not be achieved without the full active participation and empowerment of women. With this insight (since the

1985 Nairobi conference) the push has been towards re-evaluating institutions and the structure of society, towards empowering women to be treated equal to men. Today, 187 countries have ratified CEDAW and the only countries that have not include: the United States, Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Nauru, Tonga, and Palau (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). However, being amongst this minority of nations does not mean that “international” gender equality norms have not influenced the people of these countries or their government policies. Through globalization, the exchange of ideas and information, internet, and social media, education, migration, etc., there are discourses occurring that are slowly challenging more traditional cultural gender norms.

CEDAW and Neo-Imperialism

Although CEDAW acknowledges diversity and cultural context, it is dominated by a single hegemonic Western liberal democratic vision for humanity that ends in gender equality as the only path to gender justice. CEDAW was conceived by statesmen, the governing elite bourgeoisie in both developed and developing countries, liberal feminists, intellectuals, and cosmopolitan citizens that represented a small portion of the overall global population (Kardam, 2004). Analyzing this convention through the lens of constructivism recognizes that gender norms are always changing and vary based on culture, history, religions, social status, etc. Therefore, CEDAW’s assumption of one single way to achieving gender justice is a naïve pursuit. Without valuing and including the voices of average local people, CEDAW is limited as Makia Himat explains, and sees women solely as an “independent, one-dimensional unit, unsocial and uncivilized, who have nothing to do with the family, the community, or the

historical and moral reference(s)” (2015, p.122). Meanwhile, this is far from the reality of the non-Western construct of self.

Accordingly, postcolonial feminists stress the need for social justice and development for all society, both men and women, and do not see gender equality as the only path for women. They understand that gender norms are locally founded and cannot be imperialistically forced upon a culture and people (Salem, 2013). Furthermore, from this perspective, we can ask the following question: What is gender equality if people in many developing countries are still fighting for basic needs? The fact is that both men and women suffer from political rights violations and granting a right per se does not guarantee its true practice and fundamental changes within the system.

Since the end of the Cold War, resources and opportunities have opened up for global women’s networks and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) funded by Western foundations (American, European and Canadian donor agencies) to push the agenda of gender equality. Having such funding has additionally made these NGOs and women’s organizations suspect of pushing gender equality as a neoliberal hegemonic agenda (Kardam, 2004). At the same time, developing countries in desperate need of funds, welcome this aid. By revealing these power dynamics in the social construction of gender norms, constructivists can allow us to understand the formation of the gaps between the honest intent of CEDAW to eliminate discrimination against women across the globe and their Western imperialistic notions of spreading democracy through cultural infiltration. Thus, by focusing their studies on the social and cultural construction of sexual difference, critical constructivists, can explain the structural power dynamics that surround discourses on gender norms.

CEDAW has the potential to secure gender justice. However, it should also be addressing its own biases, neoliberal globalization, and the global inequalities that are rising. Consequently, as Jo Southard explains, “a change in the way the international community views equality will address many of the shortcomings of CEDAW and will procure the systematic changes necessary to promote the human rights of women” (1996, p.10). There is a crossroad here in which there are two legal choices, CEDAW can ignore the differences and continue to push universal conformity towards the Western liberal notion of individualism, or it could celebrate differences and the various paths to gender justice, as long as societies themselves do not feel oppressed. Every community has their own vantage point of the world and as Jo Southard states, “oppression appears different to those who are experiencing it than it does to those who are looking through the filter of their own privilege” (1996, p.89).

CEDAW and Constructivism

Therefore, the translation of “international” human rights norms such as CEDAW to national levels is obscure and is confronted by local competing gender norms. As Nuket Kardam explains, there needs to be an “open debate on competing gender norms and identities, and parallel notions of “gender equality” advocated or promoted by different institutions (the legal system, the bureaucracy, the market, religious establishment or kinship and family systems)” (2004, p.98). Constructivists who question state interests and focus on the social construction of norms look at gender as an analytical category similar to race, class, and ethnicity which are all socially constructed. Every culture, society, historical epoch constitutes and interprets sexual difference in a certain way. Studies need to focus on the social and cultural construction of sexual difference. Since gender is socially constructed, gender identity can change as Nuket

Kardam elaborates, “social interaction enacts gendered scripts; social institutions fix gender norms; (and) social communication engages in gendered rules” (2004, p.99).

Constructivism, can explain the challenges that face CEDAW by questioning how norms are enhanced through the social interaction of its key actors and their values, beliefs, and interests. They examine how gender identities are shaped and contested and negotiated within different institutions locally and globally and how as Kardam writes, “a particular society may have different and sometimes opposing or complementary gender norms in institutions such as marriage, the legal system, politics, or religion (2004, p.99). Therefore, studying gender norms through a constructivist lens allows one to see the limits of liberal morality and unravel the process of internalization of new norms. With the goal of bringing substantive progressive change to the status of women worldwide, CEDAW cannot be successful without the inclusion and consideration of religion in the lives of people, and specifically the heterogeneity of Islamic values and determining where there are points of similarities.

In reality, institutions, as this dissertation has already stated, are connected in society. When change occurs in gender relations in one of these institutions, it can also affect gender norms and power relations in other related institutions. And when investigating Islamic gender norms, it is important to study the religious discourses and debates and renegotiate them on their own terms. Reinterpreting the verses of *Quran* and other religious texts, and identifying the patriarchal interpretations, and understanding the context in which Islamic gender norms were first established, allows scholars and Islamic feminists to re-approach Muslim gender norms and cross paths with liberal feminism and CEDAW. Therefore, as Kardam writes, the:

“translation of global gender equality norms to local contexts in Islamic countries will take an engagement with competing norms established by different institutions, and an attempt to begin to integrate and synthesize them to create “workable” gender equality norms applicable in real life situations. This is also true in many developing countries

where different gender norms may be promoted by different institutions (be they legal, bureaucratic, religious, ethnic, familial or market-based institutions)” (2004, p.100).

Accordingly, constructivists unravel these power relations that reinforce the social structure by critically examining the dynamic transformation of norms (Weiner & Puetter, 2009). These structures are upheld by the practices of active agents who are self-reflective, and get to pick and choose from the rules and norms, that best fit their life styles, and incorporate them in their everyday social habits (Hofferberth & Weber, 2015). Overall, as Kardam outlines, a constructivist approach to the global gender equality regime can explain the following:

1. “analyzing, defining, and renegotiating competing gender norms and identities in different institutional contexts and thereby beginning to “fill in” global norms and render them more meaningful;
2. analyzing how global material changes have become opportunities for the introduction of new definitions, new interpretations for women’s movements as active agents;
3. showing avenues for the empowerment of women through continuous “intersubjective” sharing, defining and redefining global gender norms in local contexts and through local activism” (2004, p.99).

What these points suggest is that gender norms are constructed through a long and complex process of negotiation within and outside international institutions.

Conclusion

As norms are constantly changing around the world, the networks between the local and the global are becoming more porous as people are all connected through technology, travel, migration, education, etc. Gender relations and norms also travel and have no boundaries and cross different levels of social organizations such as the family, the community, the state and international organizations, and therefore, changes in gender identities are negotiated and challenged at different levels of these social structures (Vleuten, Eerdewijk, & Roggeband, 2014). From this context, it can be understood that religious institutions such as Shia mosques in

the U.S. include those: of all classes, genders, races, immigrants, citizens, and non-citizens, families, various generations, active in multiple international and local organizations, that have diverse political views that are secularly educated and/or religiously educated; amongst so many other cross sections. Any of these attributes can influence their viewpoints and gender performances. Considering these unique standpoints, one can analyze the structural power relations and how the concept of human rights based on a Western notion of self is confronted and how gender norms and identities are interpreted, transformed and shaped, contested and negotiated, within the local setting of this community.

Through a postcolonial feminist lens, this chapter has shown that CEDAW is not inclusive to the experiences of diverse people and those living in Non-Western countries. As more awareness of the convention spreads the world and its implementation confronts and exposes the state and local structural inequalities and gender power imbalances, it continues to be one of the most controversial international human rights treaties (El-Masri, 2012). Pushing for gender equality without addressing deeply rooted patriarchy, threatens real substantive change that can help women. As such, there needs to be a revolution of thinking about the way people live and not just new laws to add to an already deeply entrenched patriarchal system. The next chapter will discuss in further detail, the Muslim perspectives on CEDAW and explain the alternative perspectives on achieving gender justice.

Chapter 4:

CEDAW and Islam

“Despite being divinely inspired, the Sharia is open to multiple human interpretations, all of which are equally valid. Thus, interpretations of Islamic law that incorporate international human rights norms are just as authentic as traditional interpretations” (Mokhtari, 2004, p.472)

Introduction

Although today’s international human rights norms have predominantly emerged from the West, this does not mean that MENA countries and the *Ummah* cannot help shape the discourses on human rights and their legitimacy. Recognizing that Islam is not a homogenous and restrictive religion is the first step. In fact, there are many interpretations of Islamic laws through *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning by qualified Islamic scholars, to find religious legal solutions to everyday problems. Thus, there is room for more progressive Islamic norms to emerge, as new situations occur, and *Mujtahids* or Islamic scholars and experts in Islamic jurisprudence, search for religious answers, to growing societal issues. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how Muslim states and communities interpret and interact with the Articles of CEDAW. I argue that there is an Islamic human rights discourse developing and there is room for dialogue between Western and Non-Western countries, and religious communities, to negotiate the meanings of human rights norms. Ultimately, this is the key to improve CEDAW and its enforcement for future generations to achieve gender justice.

Understanding how gender norms are changing in different contexts such as Shia mosques in the United States, opens a door for more cultural and cross-cultural dialogue and productive exchanges of ways of living. Consequently, gender equality norms as Nuket Kardam

explains, can be “analyzed to reveal how global norms get interpreted, reinterpreted, filled in and contested on a continuing basis within different and sometimes competing institutions” (2004, p.85). Every culture practices its own unique set of norms, and therefore, gender norms are relative. However, there is space to learn from one another and gain a best practices approach to gender justice.

Culture and CEDAW

Across the globe there are 1.6 billion Muslims and just like every other religious group, there is diversity of knowledge and practices. As more and more Muslims migrate to Western countries, they encounter other ways of thinking. They look deep within their own religious teachings and distinguish between what was culturally practiced and what was Islam based on the interpretations of the Qur’an and *Hadith* (teachings of the Prophet). When studying Muslim societies it is important to distinguish between what are cultural expectations and what are Islamic. As many attribute inegalitarian practices with Islam instead of looking at the historical and cultural norms that were present and still are present in some Muslim majority societies. Consequently, when considering Muslim heterogeneity, scholars should distinguish and analyze “claims to ethnicity, religiosity and gender (which) might become means of expressing frustrations with prevailing cultural norms” (Roald 2003).

The clash between culture (cultural relativist argument) and gender equality (liberal Universalist argument) is touched upon in Article 5 of CEDAW:

“The Parties shall take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women” (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women).

CEDAW also holds that each state is obligated to “modify or abolish” any “customs and practices” that discriminate against women. Yet, traditional cultural norms are maintained through customary practice and passed along generation after generation. CEDAW is confronting traditional cultural practices and determining liberal gender equality as superior and “universal.”

Interestingly CEDAW challenges discriminatory cultural and customary practices and does not outwardly attack religion, in particular. Therefore, Muslim states have found it more acceptable to agree to the framework of the Convention when approached with the term culture instead of “religion, which is a more rigidly defended construct than culture” (Raday, 2012). The importance of these terms can be understood by looking at the number of state reservations that have been made to CEDAW which fundamentally cite religious laws or practices that conflict directly with the Articles. Most of these 20 or so reservations are directly debating Article 16 which deals with equal rights in the family and touches the subjects of polygamy, divorce, inheritance, child custody, and marriage (UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women).

In states and communities with Muslim majorities, the family remains the most important unit in society. The role of raising and educating children is essential in establishing or maintaining and developing an Islamic society. The Muslim woman is regarded as the fundamental member of the family; her position is revered in Islamic literature. She maintains a highly respected position as mother, who teaches her children to be productive Muslim citizens. Thus, “the maintenance of the family’s spiritual status seems to be regarded in terms of the role of women in Muslim society” (Roald, 2001, p.xi). Having a central position means that any change in gender norms is perceived as a threat to the family unit and social system. However,

as postcolonial thought reminds us to see diversity amongst people, it is important to note here that Islam is practiced differently across the globe, based on local cultures and contexts, naturally, there will be variations in attitudes and perceptions of women and gender relations. Even within Islam, there is a variety of religious opinions on the roles and practices of women in society (Badran, 2009). Generally speaking, Shias tend to lean towards a more liberal interpretation of the *Quran* and *Hadiths* than Sunnis. However, this also depends on the country, urban, or rural community, class, education level, age, etc.

Once more, religion is a very important factor in the everyday lives of Muslims. In fact, religion and culture are intertwined and it is difficult to distinguish between what is customary or historical cultural practices and what is cited in the *Quran*. Yet, the disparity between religion versus local culture and customs is key to creating a discursive space for Muslim women to contest the patriarchal components of Islamic gender norms. Through the practice of *ijtihad*, Shia Islamic scholars are independently analyzing the *Quran* and *Hadiths* and coming up with new religious opinions on how to confront contemporary legal issues (Badran, 2009). Furthermore, as Anne-Sofie Roald writes, “the historical development of Islamic law is an indication of how interpretations of the social issues in the Islamic sources are the result of dynamic interactions between Islamic scholars and society” and these were and still are influenced by the local culture and social environment (2001, p.vii). Therefore, the *Quran* and the *Hadiths* (words, actions, habits of the Prophet and his family) are the main sources of *ijtihad* and the various interpretations and schools of thought in Islam that develop *fiqh*. *Fiqh* is an Islamic science of jurisprudence in which practicing laws and religious duties and obligations of Muslims are researched and evaluated and through reason, logic, and consensus of the *Mujtahids* (Islamic scholars), are adjusted to reflect today’s needs. Through the exercise of

ijtihad, there is a rich diversity in Islamic discourses, and therefore Islamic practices are not as homogeneous as people in the West may believe. Indeed, Muslim and Islamic feminists, and religious scholars through the practice of *ijtihad*, can advocate for gender justice and develop more egalitarian laws. They can do this by reinterpreting the *Quran* and challenging the validity of *Hadiths*, both of which once formed a patriarchal culture, as a result of being written and interpreted from the male perspective (Roald, 2001).

The main issues that are often perceived by CEDAW and Western countries to be oppressive Islamic practices are actually cultural practices. These practices in the MENA which are not specifically linked to religion that violate the human rights of women and girls, include as Francis Raday explains:

“female infanticide; female genital mutilation (FGM); forced marriage and child brides; patriarchal marriage arrangements denying women rights to land, property, or freedom of movement; husband’s right to obedience or commit acts of violence against his wife, including marital rape; family honor killings; witch-hunting; compulsory restrictive dress codes; discriminatory division of food producing female malnutrition; and stereotypical restriction of women to the roles of housewives or mothers, without a balanced view of women as autonomous and productive members of civil society” (2012, p.518).

The above are a few of the types of practices which CEDAW is directly confronting in their annual Country Reports. These patriarchal practices are not universal and instead are geographically specific to certain regions and cultures. While tackling these issues, many of these practices have been eliminated in some areas or evolved and survived in others. However, today there are public discourses in which such social practices are discussed at the local and national level and there are more “eyes watching” and legal consequences either through CEDAW or state constitutions that prohibit these traditional customary practices.

Diversity in Islamic Law

As explained previously, there is diversity in the interpretations of Islamic laws. With more than one billion Muslims living around the world today, there is no wonder that there is no single code that applies to all. Islamic laws are perceived and practiced somewhat differently in Muslim communities across the globe due to the significant theological and legal differences between various *mazhabs* or the main Muslim schools of thought (*Hanafi* -Sunni, *Maliki*-Sunni, *Shafii*-Sunni, *Hanabali*-Sunni, *Jaafari*-Shia) and the fact that Islamic laws have been modified through culture and socio-political-economic policies. Within each of these *mazhabs* there are differing interpretations of the divine revelations. For example, polygamy and also *muta* or *sigha* (temporary marriages) are practiced or not practiced differently across the MENA. Furthermore, in many Gulf countries, with mixed sectarian populations, *Sharia* courts are separate for Shias and Sunnis and rulings are based on the individual judge's interpretation of Islamic Law (Altoik, 2015).

Reform in Muslim family laws have been occurring in the MENA since the start of the 19th century when many under colonial rule, adopted European legal systems, allowing governments to administer the rule of law. On the path to modernization and independence from colonial powers, feeling threatened and oppressed by external powers, nationalists brought the women question into public discourse as women were assumed to represent an "authentic culture" (Ahmed, 1992). Traditional religious scholars saw the family unit as the last stronghold of the Islamic legal system that was protected from liberal Western colonial influence, as family law remained under the private realm of religious courts (Altoik, 2015). With newly independent countries in the 1950s, (Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco) the Islamic laws that were incorporated into their constitutions were designed to "protect" Muslim women from any

remaining Western influences on an authentic form of Muslim culture. In this post-colonial era, Islamism became a reaction to Westernization, and a secular world view, and instead governments put forth the most conservative elements of Islam as an alternative path towards modernization. Islamism can also be viewed as a reaction to globalization of Western liberalism and cultural values. Instead Islamists called for a turning back to the fundamental and “pure” sources of *Sharia* (*Quran* and *Hadiths*) (Roald, 2001).

At this same time, a political social consciousness of feminism amongst Muslim women was developing, including both secular and Islamic feminisms. According to Margot Badran, nationalists, along with Islamic modernists, and those advocating for human rights merged together forming secular feminism within Muslim countries (2009). These secular feminists were active in social movements pushing for equal rights, “and a state protective of religion while not officially organized around religion” (Badran, 2009, p.3). Meanwhile, Islamic feminists emerged within anti-Western political Islamist movements, in countries like Iran and its Islamic Revolution which established a theocratic state incorporating Islam and politics. These Islamic feminists were introducing a new interpretation of Islam and gender and reframing Islamic gender discourses to promote political, and societal reforms towards more egalitarian laws (Badran, 2009). Both Islamic feminists and secular feminists may have seemed to be on opposing spectrums, however, they often worked together on issues that affected all women such as improving divorce laws, child custody, marriage age, access to education, healthcare, and in overall efforts to achieve greater gender justice (Mir-Hosseini, 1999). Today with more exchanges between the Muslim and Western world, and more Muslims than ever living in the West, Islamic thought is transforming and this can be an opportunity to positively affect gender norms.

CEDAW and the Islamic Frame

The conflict between traditional, religious gender complementarity norms and the human rights gender equality constructs of society are prevalent across the globe. Religion is one of the most institutionalized aspects of culture and holds significant political power within Muslim societies and is less adaptive to external pressures. Even within more secular states, religious institutions are a haven for those that feel threatened with the erosion of the family unit. Most claims against CEDAW have been made by monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam which are also the world's most widely practiced religions. The traditional interpretations of these religious texts have been highly patriarchal (El Masri, 2012).

Although, the *Quran* establishes that both men and women are equal under the eyes of God, socially, orthodox religious practices promote patriarchal gender relations that contravene this precept. Generally, within traditional perspectives of Islam, both men and women are equal in human dignity and before God, they are going to be punished equally for their bad deeds and sent to heaven for their morality on Judgement day. Islam sees marriage as the foundation of society, in which men and women enjoy this institution. Yet, the majority in Islam claim that the man is the head (the *Imam*) of the family and should be respected and obeyed. Women, on the other hand, are expected to follow and assume a more biological role in society. The woman is thought to be better fit for domestic responsibilities and less rational than man. Her primary purpose is to bear and raise children and look after the household. As such, traditionally women were often excluded from becoming religious clergy and interpreting and reading the texts; the male interpretation of religion and subsequent laws remained dominant and affected areas such as marriage, inheritance, guardianship of children, and divorce (Raday, 2012). As Islamic

feminists in countries such as Iran emerged in the late 1980s, women who were once restricted to the private sphere, could now join religious clergy and began challenging these traditional patriarchal male interpretations of the *Quran* and *Hadiths* (Mir Hosseini, 1999).

As already mentioned, religion is not static; it is made up of a plurality of fluid interpretations of religious texts, different schools of religious thought, and many reform movements (Raday, 2012). These movements today need to confront the patriarchal interpretations that are still practiced and are considered by CEDAW as discriminatory against women. Determining what has a cultural historical origin and judging the original religious texts on the time period they were revealed, helps Islamic feminists' foster new interpretations and a movement towards more gender egalitarian laws. The CEDAW committee and affiliated International Organizations need to be aware of the diversity of interpretations and help promote the voices from within these communities which are aligning themselves and justifying their struggle more in line with the universal human rights gender equality norms. This way CEDAW can truly achieve its aim to eliminate discrimination against women and with the collaboration of Muslim majority countries and communities, reduce the injustices against women across the globe.

Consequently, global movements for more equality and justice in the Muslim family such as MUSAWAH (equality in Arabic) are attempting to fill the gap between CEDAW and Muslim countries by studying the Convention and making Islamic feminist arguments based on reinterpreting Islamic laws in accordance with the spirit of gender equality. Working towards more egalitarian laws, MUSAWAH acts as an active voice at international CEDAW meetings and conferences and works to make sure that Muslim women are represented and heard. They gather information and make recommendations to the CEDAW Committee to build more

understanding between Muslim family laws and practices, and international human rights norms (MUSAWAH).

Although it may seem that Islamic laws are incompatible with human rights norms, this is a common misunderstanding of the differences between *Sharia* and *fiqh*. In Islamic terms, *Sharia* is divine and unchangeable and made up of laws dictated by the *Quran*, laws revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and the *Sunnah* which was the habits of the Prophet. Again, *fiqh* on the other hand, is based on these same sources that make up *Sharia* but also involve male religious scholars' (*Mujtahids*) interpretations and coming to a reason-based consensus. Consequently, *fiqh* can confront new challenges in society and change religious norms that are outdated (Altoik, 2015). State reservations often cite *Sharia* laws as the principal source of law and the rights and duties of men and women. However, both Muslims and non-Muslims confusingly perceive *Sharia* as Islamic laws while others see *fiqh* as Islamic laws. Yet, through the process of *fiqh* there is room for more progressive gender equitable laws to emerge. In fact, there is a vast diversity of opinions or *ikhtalaf* among different *mazhabs* (schools of thought) and across time (Altoik, 2015). To understand that through *fiqh*, Islamic laws can change, is key to challenging those that only rely on *Sharia* laws as a way out of the discussion on establishing progressive rights.

The original Classical Islamic jurists of the 8th through 10th centuries lived in the social and economic context (mainly Saudi Arabia and Iraq) that was very different than where Muslims live today. At that time, Islam was progressive in regards to women's rights in societies where they were burying baby girls alive, Islam was making this illegal. Many gender norms and attitudes in the MENA are based on these traditional cultural practices in society rather than on

Islam per se. Since Islam is interpreted according to local customs, there exist multiple interpretations of the religion and culture (Altoik, 2015). For example, personal status laws or Muslim family laws that govern issues including inheritance, marriage, polygamy, divorce, and child custody are practiced differently across the Muslim world. Muslim family laws outline gender norms, rights, and responsibilities between men and women in Muslim communities.

At the basis of Muslim family laws and the unequal status and perception of discrimination of Muslim women are the concepts of *qiwamah* (protectors/maintainers) and *wilayah* (authority/guardianship) in which Classical Islamic jurists from the 8th to 10th centuries have interpreted to mean that men have authority over women. The Iranian Islamic feminist, Ziba Mir Hosseini (2012), links *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and interprets them through a more gender equality lens: to a marriage based on friendship and mutual support and not authority of male over female (Ziba Mir Hoseini in Altiok, 2015). She explains that the meaning of words change over time and therefore so has the meaning of *qiwamah* and *wilayah* and their practice. However, traditional Islamic jurists see *qiwamah* and *wilayah* as supporting gender complementarity and a husband's duty to financially provide for his wife and the wife's corresponding responsibility to obey him. From this point emerge the traditional Islamic laws that discriminate against women in favor of men. The differences and levels of discrimination faced by individual women depends where they fit on the intersections of culture, class position, age, ethnicity, religious and national context (Altoik, 2015). For example, daughters receive half the inheritance of sons and this is justified by the fact that the sons are responsible for the guardianship and welfare of the sisters and their family. However, what happens when there are no sons, or the father has no money or land to distribute, or the daughter is left with equal inheritance because the father willed this, or the daughter is more well off than her brothers, or

the many other reasons that can justify a change in the Islamic law of girls getting 1/2 the inheritance of their brothers? In these scenarios, religious clergy are asked to determine what justice should be, and here, progressive clergy have the opportunity to incorporate new Islamic gender practices more in line with international human rights norms. Once a consensus is made, it will hold as precedent and will slowly reduce discriminatory practices.

Other areas in which Muslim family laws clash with CEDAW includes the right of women to movement and the freedom to choose their residence. In most Muslim majority countries, women cannot travel without a male guardian/escort or stay in a hotel alone. Additionally, child marriage (age in some countries like Iran is 13 for girls and 15 for boys unless the consent of the father of the bride in which the daughter can be married earlier) is common in some areas within the MENA region. Subsequently, there are other conflicts with Articles 15 and 16 of CEDAW including equal rights in marriage, during marriage and in regards to declaring and getting a divorce. Such practices are cultural but are to be considered justified on the basis of *Sharia* law and, CEDAW grants member states, through Article 28, the right to place reservations if they are not incompatible with the object and purpose of the Convention, and allows states to withdraw at any time by giving notice to the Secretary General of the UN (Raday, 2012).

Of the 57 members of the Organization of Islamic Conference, all but Iran, Sudan and Somalia have signed and ratified CEDAW. Yet, many Muslim-majority state parties to the Convention have cited reservations on key Articles, and have manipulatively justified this by claiming that they conflicted with *Sharia*. Specifically, the Articles that Muslim majority countries are in direct conflict with include: Article 2: which demands changing discriminatory laws, policies and institutions to implement CEDAW; Article 9 which guarantees women's

rights to obtain, change and retain their nationality, and transfer it to their offspring; Article 15 which ensures that women have full legal capacity, right to freedom of movement and choice of their residence; and finally Article 16 which calls for elimination of discrimination against women with respect to marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance (Altoik, 2015).

At the grassroots level, there are many activists both secular feminists and Islamic feminists in Muslim majority countries and the greater *Ummah*, who argue for gender justice and advocate for human rights. Those who argue within the framework of Islamic feminism are reinterpreting Islamic texts through *fiqh* and are advocating that times have changed and that universal human rights and gender equality are social justice causes that fit within the moral ethical message of Islam. They believe that gender inequality is based on culture and patriarchal practices and not established from the *Quran* but rather the male dominated interpretations of the religious texts (Altoik, 2015). Ultimately, at its core, they believe that Islam has always been revolutionary in transforming societies in the pursuit of social justice. If gaining gender equality is the social justice cause of today, then progressive Muslims believe Islam should be at the forefront of this discourse. Even if the political powers are claiming *Sharia* to be incompatible with CEDAW, there is room for change.

Muslim World and Cross-Cultural Dialogue with CEDAW

The average number of reservations documented by countries that belong to the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) account for nearly 45 percent of the total number of reservations to the Convention (Ali, 2000). However, as mentioned above, state reservations are often inaccurately based on reference to *Sharia* laws, citing that Islam outlines its own gender norms and gives women even more rights than CEDAW. As explained previously, through the

Classical traditional Islamic interpretation, the role of men and women are complimentary and although their duties and responsibilities are different, they are socially equivalent. Yet, as Islamic feminists and Muslim intellectuals are confronting Muslim majority states and classical traditional Islamic scholarship and their male biased interpretations, increasingly, there is an Islamic human rights discourse developing.

Hence, a transformation of gender norms within Muslim societies as Abdullah An-Na'im explains, reflects a process of advancing and strengthening the legitimacy of universal human rights norms through national cultural discourses and promoting cross-cultural dialogue (1992). Discussing human rights and women's rights at the national level helps legitimize CEDAW through aligning it with local Islamic values. Having international conferences and cross cultural dialogue can strengthen CEDAW by exposing the various approaches to gender justice, and learning from other cultures and people. As a result of globalization, there are more hybrids of cultures and exchanges of ideas and social justice partnerships and collaborations across the globe. For example, a grassroots movement that started in Iran back in 2006, the One Million Signature Campaign, involved people going door to door to gain signatures to end discrimination against women. This promoted an Islamic human rights discourse on the situation of women in Iran on the internet which gained support amongst Iranian Diaspora communities across the globe. As a result, Islamic feminists and secular feminists and women's rights activists worked together to further publicize the campaign through conferences, writing articles, and gaining more signatures, to bring awareness and progressive change to the situation of women in Iran (Sameh, 2010).

Thus, even where MENA states are resistant to aspects of CEDAW, there is an increasing global human rights culture that is embodied in social movements, transnational advocacy

networks, non-state actors, and Islamic feminists, that all work beyond the state at a transnational level (Afkhami, 2000, p.484; Merry, 2001, p.41–43). In the meantime, social norms are in a constant process of “adaptation to a changing environment,” where they “routinely outlive their usefulness, and cultural values change either through internal dialogue within the cultural group or through cross-cultural influences” (Zechenter, 1997, p.333). As Muslim communities confront gender equality and through internal dialogue and the consensus of progressive religious scholars decide how to approach CEDAW, there will be new gender norms that emerge.

Muslims in the West

For Muslims in the West, Islam has two cultural functions as Anne-Sofie Roald explains:

“in terms of cultural understanding, Islam has a conserving effect in the preservation of identity in a new cultural context and, as interaction with social majorities increases, Islam offers Muslims an opportunity to distinguish themselves from the majority in the acquisition of identity. On the other hand, the flexibility of interpretation of social issues in the Islamic sources affords the possibility of developing new interpretations in the new cultural context” (2001, p.79).

Shia Muslim intellectuals and laymen are consciously reviewing the religious text and sources to uncover answers on how to live in their current social environment which is a non-Muslim, Western liberal country. At the unconscious level usually due to socio-economic changes, if they do not find an exact answer to their social questions and problems, then they may be “filled in” with new and sometimes revolutionary content. With the pressure of living in the West, and the majority of society pushing them to assimilate, their social values and gender norms are in a constant reevaluation. Whether they decide to be segregated and live in an enclave or fully assimilate to American social norms which are also evolving every day, is the question. Naturally, the transfer of religion from one culture to another brings more perspectives and interpretations and change (Roald, 2001). With more Muslims migrating to the West, the next

generation of Muslims will be confronted with a new social environment and will need to be self-reflective in their decisions on how to practice their religion in a hostile setting. One should study the social reality of the lived experience of everyday Muslims in the West and their use of *fiqh*, their interactions with Islamic laws, and see what justifications they express for any changes in their norms. This will bring about a new religiousness and what it means to be a Shia Muslim in America.

Living in the setting of America, Western culture will ultimately influence their Islamic social ideas and norms. Cultural and religious practices which do not align with the new environment, could be renegotiated consciously or unconsciously. Specifically, as new social experiences emerge, Shia communities will find themselves asking questions from their *Imams* and *Sheikhs* (mosque clergy) as to how to reselect and reinterpret traditional Islamic sources to meet their current environment. Consequently, as more Muslim women are educated and enter the public workforce, as Anne-Sofie Roald states, they are questioning “the traditional Islamic gender pattern as an androcentric social construct, rather than as reflecting a divine order in terms of gender” (2001, p.ix).

Likewise, the Swedish professor in Islamic studies, Jan Hjarpe has examined change in the cultural encounter between Islam and the West in the European setting (1997). As mentioned in earlier chapters, having created a metaphor to understand the process of change, he treats all religious traditions and ideologies, rituals, customs, etc. as a “basket.” This “basket” can leak old concepts from the inside and absorb new ones from the outside (Hjarpe, 1997). Concepts which were once used and practiced centuries ago can disappear forever. However, as Anne-Sofie Roald explains, “the basket with its contents is there to choose from in times of need” (2001, p.84). Muslims can select what they need from the basket which fits their particular

present need. Roald further unravels this basket metaphor to explain that Muslims are self-reflecting on their practices and are actively picking and choosing from the Islamic traditions and laws that make up the “basket” to be relevant and fit their new surroundings (2001).

Furthermore,

“on any particular issue many different interpretations have been promoted. These interpretations are based on particular circumstances and are influenced by factors of time and space. In the various regions of the Muslim world, Islamic law was established with an emphasis on one form of legislation rather than another due to the specific situation of each society and the preferences of scholars in the area” (Roald, 2001, p.85).

An example of how this applies to women is that female participation in Muslim society has increased in recent years as women are more educated and joining the workforce based on economic need. As the global market economy is making it more difficult for single income households, women are entering the market and gaining some independence through this path. However, this creates tensions with gender relations and the family unit. If women oversee domestic affairs, as well as, now working outside the home, to help maintain a basic standard of living, she still is considered responsible to make sure to fulfill her traditional Islamic duty of maintaining the household. This also puts the traditional Islamic gender norm of the dominance of male support, and guardianship of the family, and the role of women as domestic manager, into question. Moreover, this could cause erosion or change in gender complementarity norms. Or it can further maintain and support gender complementarity but instead hold men more accountable to share in household duties. Many in this position pick stories from the life of the Prophet that show how he would perform domestic chores and help raise and educate his children, to justify changes in their family dynamics (Roald, 2001). Choosing to focus and relate these stories from the “basket” to the present life of Muslims in America is an example of what will be analyzed in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed how Islam consists of various interpretations and schools of thought, and how these constitute a space for opening cross cultural dialogue in regards to CEDAW. As more Muslims move to Western countries, they approach new situations and through *ijtihad*, new Islamic norms can be established. At the same time, CEDAW and liberal feminists need to be attentive to the diversity of gender norms practiced in the world and incorporate the postcolonial and Islamic feminist critiques that can help bring more legitimacy to the Convention.

Just as Western liberal gender equality norms have gradually developed, the social values and justifications for Islamic gender complementarity norms have also evolved over time. Interpretations of social issues in Islamic sources have been continuously debated amongst Islamic scholars and society. In particular, the Islamic discourses surrounding gender norms have also increased as more women are becoming actively engaged with the public sphere and are changing the Muslim social order. The renegotiation and reinterpretation of Islamic sources is the process that the next chapter will be capturing. Through observing the social environment of the mosque and reviewing the interviews of Shia Muslim women and their conceptualization of gender norms, the discourses occurring in regards to women's rights can be better understood. Whether the women are aware of CEDAW or not, the spirit of the Convention and its push for gender justice within its Articles are common knowledge and discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5:
The American Shia Women

“Islam is Islam, there is no need for it to be labeled as feminist. The *Quran* has advocated for women’s rights since the creation of humanity and will continue to do so until the very end” (Participant 15, personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the competition between liberal gender equality norms and traditional Islamic gender complimentary norms, by analyzing the interview responses of Shia women in a Muslim community in the U.S. Within this ethnographic case study, I have captured the unique situation of these women as they negotiate between their Islamic, American, and other indigenous identities, which all influence the way they choose to live and give meaning to and practice gender norms. I argue that these Shia women are “norm entrepreneurs” who are consciously researching, debating, negotiating, and choosing elements of both liberal and traditional Islamic gender norms and building a hybrid of more progressive Islamic practices. To explain their motivation for reformist change, the themes discovered through our discussions and reflected upon in this chapter include: gender justice, culture vs. religion, importance of education, unique role in the U.S., critique of liberal feminism, and the relativity of discrimination. Examining the situation of Shia women in these communities and how they navigate various gender norms, provides a case for testing the power relations between liberalism and Islamism and the overall social encounter between “Shia Islam” and the “West.”

As Muslims living in the United States, post 9/11, it is important to consider the political and social insecurity that these communities confront, and to protect their anonymity, is my way of defending them, while valuing their input in my study. Throughout my field studies, I have been guided by the cautions that Judith Stacey has warned: “fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave” (1988, p.23). With this wisdom, I kept field notes to self-reflect on my own, and consider my special position, in the evolution of my research. Furthermore, to maintain an interactive and ethical relationship with my subjects, at the request of my interviewees, I have allowed them to review the transcriptions, for accuracy. In addition, I have used subject numbers instead of their names, to maintain anonymity for their own security. Overall, being aware of ethical issues that can occur in interpretive ethnographic works, I have tried my best to value by subjects and give them the respect they deserve.

Background Observational Data

Before assessing the themes discovered from the interview responses, I would like to review my observational data and establish a background setting of this diverse mosque. In keeping the anonymity of my interviewees, I can say that I conducted the interviews at a local Florida Shia mosque. This mosque was founded in the early 1990s as people first gathered in homes and then rented office buildings to have a safe space to conduct prayers and religious ceremonies, lectures, and an Islamic school for the youth. Slowly, the community grew and the members organized to establish a permanent location for construction of a mosque. Through years of fundraising and struggling to gather all the funds, the construction of the mosque began in the early 2000s. The process was tough since the leadership agreed to not use any loans, and

instead, wanted to build in phases, with cash donated by members (Participant 5, personal communication, March 24, 2017). Today the mosque is finally completed, with a huge industrial kitchen, a main prayer room, a multi-purpose dining area for women and an equal sized one for men, 2 large multi-stall bathrooms, an office for the *Imam*, and a children's play room, along with 2 portable classrooms, a playground, and a large gated parking lot. Their newest construction project is a nearby Muslim burial ground, as their support and needs are growing.

As mentioned in chapter one, this mosque, as a “dialogical site” cannot be considered as just a mosque where people go to pray or listen to lectures (Osanloo, 2009). It is more of a community center for members and where traditional gender norms are being discussed, challenged, and transformed. As members use the multipurpose rooms and backyard to get engaged, married, have baby showers, birthdays, tutoring, playing, exercising, watching movies, etc. While the two multipurpose rooms are usually gender segregated, on special occasions, such as an engagement, everyone gathers in one of the rooms. The main prayer/lecture room has a portable wall between men and women, dividing half of the room vertically, but still allowing visibility of the Imam, or guest lecturer and the media screen behind them, to be visible by both male and female members. As one interviewee explained, it was important to make sure the mosque was designed so that both men and women had equal visual access to the *Imam* and be able to be seen and heard when asking questions and listening to the sermons (Participant 4, personal communication, March 17, 2017). Similarly, another subject expressed she “likes to see the speaker... dividers are here because we are more comfortable. I can learn more when I can see that person” (Participant 11, personal communication, March 31, 2017). The leaders of the mosque wanted to make sure they had equal space for women and men as they found this to be

an issue in other mosques, where women were sometimes in separate smaller rooms, and viewed the lectures through a TV screen (Participant 30, personal communication, May 19, 2017).

When first walking through the mosque doors, one can see that there is only one main entrance, women turn left and men turn right. There is an area to take off their shoes, and then walk into the prayer room. Once they walk in they are in a prayer room (grand room) so the room must be kept *pak* (clean). Members can either sit on the floor or in chairs. Many of the elderly sit in chairs as they can no longer physically perform the prayers as others. Women with children either sit in the prayer room or rotate the responsibility of taking kids to the playroom. This area is on the women's side of the mosque and has regular activities such as movies, games, art projects, etc. to amuse kids while their parents are praying and listening to the lectures in the main room. Other women who want to listen to the lecture and also watch their children, can go into the women's dining area, where there are speakers. Children can of course remain in the grand room as long as they do not disturb the lectures. They can also run across to the male area and be with their fathers, brothers, and/or grandfathers. In fact, oftentimes children go back and forth between the partitions.

This attention to the equal space for genders is likely due to the equal opportunity for women to lead, amongst the executive board of the mosque, which is made up of both men and women. According to these women, their voices are equally heard on all decisions that need to be made (Participant 2, personal communication, March 17, 2017). Currently, there is one female member on the board of directors and one on the board of trustees. When requesting permission to conduct my research, I spoke mainly to the female member of the board of trustees. She relayed my request to the board of directors which voted to allow me to conduct my research. This democratic process is how they approach everything from organizing events, to hiring new

Imams, to budgeting. As a collaborative executive board, they meet often and confront new challenges together, openly (Participant 5, personal communication, March 24, 2017). This allows for transparency and I believe this has been influenced by the multicultural representation within the board from: American born, Pakistani, Iranian, Lebanese, etc.

Another key area where women are involved is the Islamic learning center located in the portables in the backyard of the mosque. Every Friday from 5-8pm, a number of women teach the following courses: Arabic, Farsi, recitation of the *Quran*, and Islamic studies. When walking into the classrooms, one sees approximately 20-25 children between the ages of 3 to 16. The classrooms are divided by age groups as elementary children are separate from the middle school and high school kids (Participant 6, personal communication, March 24, 2017). During their breaks from class, female volunteers bring snacks and help clean up. There is a male principal or head of the Islamic learning center that organizes and manages the education program. When visiting the mosque on numerous occasions I witnessed his collaboration with the female teachers and admired his respectful inclusion of their opinions and how he used their support and guidance to plan events for the youth. Frankly, he seemed to be lost without the help of the female teachers, yet the atmosphere was professional and friendly.

Overall, this is a very active community of people and the mosque is made up of multicultural members. I can attest that I have seen people of all races enter the doors of this structure. They bring with them their background, their culture, experiences, and expertise to make this a unique mosque that crosses all preconceived notions of single race or ethnicity places of worship. Of the 35 female members interviewed, 12 were Iranian, 2 were Iraqi, 1 was Lebanese (yet 4 others were born in the U.S. but were of Lebanese descent), 7 were Pakistani, 1 was Moroccan, 1 was born in Saudi Arabia (but of Pakistani descent), and 11 were born in the

U.S. and identified as American (were converts or second generation American) (See Appendix for Chart). As participant 30 best describes the demographics of this mosque:

“I feel at home at (this mosque) because the congregation is diverse and I have met converts there like myself. I see more equality at this mosque than at others that target one kind of population because it all ties back to culture. If we want to see equality in Islam, Muslims need to stop associating culture with their faith. At (this mosque) there is equality. Men and women, help with cleaning the kitchen when food is served and after; the entrance is also equal aesthetically and right next to the entrance for the men” (Personal communication, May 19, 2017).

Having conducted many interviews during the month of Ramadan when Muslims fast from dusk to dawn, I witnessed exactly what this interviewee was trying to relay. One *iftar* (Ramadan dinner) can demonstrate this with all the various kinds of food spread, from Persian tea, to Saudi dates, Pakistani Naan, Lebanese hummus, Iraqi rice and meat, and American donuts, there is something that everyone is contributing to this mosque.

Statistically speaking, according to the 2011 US Mosque Study, there are approximately 7 million Muslims living in the United States with around 2,106 mosques, of which, 7% of these mosques are Shia (around 147) (Bagby, 2012, p.4-17). Florida ranks as the number four state with the most mosques at 118 (Bagby, 2012, p.6). As Islamophobia has been growing in the U.S., lists and addresses of mosques are difficult to find online. However, from my own knowledge of Florida and the Shia mosques that I have visited in the past, I have identified approximately nine Shia mosques: three in South Florida, three in Tampa bay, and three in the Orlando area. This of course does not include informal gatherings and women’s circles within private homes and Shia that attend Sunni mosques, due to lack of nearby Shia mosques. According to the head of the board of trustees of this particular mosque, on average there are 65 active female members and approximately 70 active male members (Participant 5, personal

communication, March 24, 2017). I have interviewed approximately 54% of the female members.

Data and Field Work

In January 2017, I emailed the Florida mosque that I had chosen as my research site with the proposed research study. After their board of trustees had a meeting and reviewed the proposal, I secured their letter of support for conducting interviews (see Appendix for copy). This letter of support was a mandatory process and part of the application for getting approval for the IRB. By early March 2017, I obtained IRB approval, and began attending the mosque weekly to ask women if they would like to participate in the 1 hour long study. I had planned 14 site visits to the mosque for a span of 3 to 4 months. I did not use any recruitment materials and instead used word of mouth as potential participants would be recruited from other participants that would be directed to myself, for initial contact. Therefore, I used snowball sampling which is a non-probability based sampling method which involves asking interviewees to recruit other subjects from their acquaintances. Each participant was given an informed consent form with a detailed explanation of the research study before participants were allowed to engage in study related dialogue with the researcher (See Appendix for copy). Participants were informed that engaging in the research study was absolutely voluntary and withdrawal from the study could be done at any time without risk, harm, or repercussions to the participant. Opportunities were given to the participants to ask questions related to the construct and procedures of the research study at any time during the interview process. Every subject was asked to answer a short demographic questionnaire with nine questions and then they were asked nineteen identical inductive, semi-structured open-ended questions. During these semi-structured questions, I was recording the

discussions and taking notes. Overall, the time commitment was one hour from each participant for one time.

Before interviews were conducted, subjects were asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire, with the following questions that helped establish a background glimpse of the person. This allowed me to situate the interviewee when analyzing their responses to the interview questions.

1. National Origin (where were you born)
2. What do you closely identify as: American, Muslim American, Shia American Muslim, Muslim, Arab American, Iranian American, Other?
3. Age
4. Education (high school, college, graduate, post graduate?)
5. Occupation
6. Years living in the U.S. (please also indicate if ever lived outside U.S.)
7. Marital Status: Married, Unmarried, Divorced?
8. Do you have children? If so how many?
9. How often do you participate in religious activities? (example: attend mosque)

Following the demographic questions, each interviewee was asked nineteen semi-structured questions. However, as these were open ended questions, there were other questions that organically emerged in discussions and their responses will be included later in this chapter.

Here are the questions that were consistently asked of every interviewee:

1. What cultures do you identify with?
2. What does Islam mean to you?
3. What thoughts come to mind when you think of women's rights?
4. What is feminism?
5. Do you see a difference between Liberal feminism and Islamic feminism?
6. Are gender issues discussed at this mosque? If so, how? By whom?
7. Do you think you practice Islamic gender norms differently than your parents, grandparents? If so, why?
8. Could you describe where/ how you have gathered your Islamic knowledge?
9. Are you aware of the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms Discrimination Against Women? If so, what are your thoughts on this Convention?
10. In your opinion, what are the rights that Islam has awarded women?
11. What are your thoughts on religious interpretations and women in Islam?
12. Do you see any tensions in what "Universal" Conventions such as CEDAW see as Women's rights and what Islam outlines as women's rights?
13. Do you think Islam promotes gender equality for women?
14. What are your thoughts on women interpreting *Quranic* verses?

15. How would you describe the role of women in Muslim societies in the U.S.?
16. What are your thoughts about Inheritance?
17. What are your thoughts about who can ask for a Divorce?
18. What are your thoughts about the age of marriage?
19. What are your thoughts about proper dress for Muslim women?

These questions were designed to be open-ended and touch upon controversial gender issues that have been considered to be oppressive by second wave liberal feminists and the idea of “saving” Muslim women from Muslim men (Abu-Lughod, 2013). As CEDAW fights for reducing discrimination against women and promotes gender equality, tensions with topics such as Islamic inheritance, age of marriage, divorce rights, and Islamic dress-codes have often been discussed as discriminatory against women. However, these Muslim women have their own definitions of feminism and what is discriminatory to them often varies from Eurocentric notions. Moreover, Shia women living in the United States, as “norm entrepreneurs,” have their own interpretations and practices that also shine a new light on Islamic gender norms and give new meanings to gender justice. The responses to these open-ended questions will be interwoven into the rest of this chapter and help support my argument that an alternative progressive path for Islamic gender norms is forming within these Shia communities in the West that includes the best elements of both gender equality and gender complementarity.

Common Themes Found In Responses

Throughout this case study, I have reviewed the responses of 35 women and found many areas of convergence and divergence. Sometimes the interviewee surprised me and responded in the total opposite way that I would expect. In other cases, they answered similarly. For example, out of the 35 women interviewed only 2 were aware of CEDAW. Even one who was a women studies major in college, was not aware of this international treaty (Participant 35, personal

communication, May 26, 2017). This surprised me and allowed me to wonder how a campaign such as CEDAW could be successful, if people are unaware of its existence? Yet, in our interactions, I found that the spirit of the Convention, to reduce discrimination against women, was present in their responses to my questions.

While analyzing, interpreting, and self-reflecting, on their responses, as mentioned previously, I found six themes that I will be discussing below. These included: gender justice, culture vs. religion, importance of education, unique role in U.S., critique of liberal feminism, and the relativity of discrimination. Some of these themes overlapped, however it is important to keep them in separate categories to distinguish them. The following paragraphs will go through each theme and the prominent interviewee responses which I am including, to make sure their exact words are reflected in this study.

Justice

The most common phrase across interviews was “Islam is about justice, not equality.” This makes one think that equality is not justice. That is exactly the main argument that many interviewees at this mosque agreed upon. Specifically, they believed that gender equality was a minimum and that Islam provides more rights for women and therefore, they have a higher status. Historically, when Islam came to the Arabian Peninsula it was revolutionary and progressive in the pursuit of justice for all. At a time when newborn girls were being buried alive, men had hundreds of concubines, women could not own property, and the laws of Islam forbid these acts and recognized the dignity and status of women in society. Furthermore, women were distinguished as important individuals that are responsible for their own actions, separate from their spouses (Participant 5, personal communication, March 24, 2017).

As explained in previous chapters Islam advocates for gender complementarity and balance in the roles each gender plays in Islamic society. As participant 21 explains:

“when it comes to acquiring (the) highest levels of spirituality and closeness to God Almighty and forming the best examples for humanity in terms of character and morality, Islam has not assigned any distinctions to man and women. They enjoy equality. However, in their capabilities to carry out day to day functions in a family and socio political scenarios, they have different rights and responsibilities according to their physical and emotional make up”(Personal communication, April 14, 2017).

Therefore, in regards to their religious duties, under God’s eyes, male and females are equal. However, their roles in society are based on their sex, the way they were naturally created. Furthermore, as participant five explained in detail her views on feminism as being carried too far, forcing men and women to be exactly equal, when this is impossible as she declares:

“I am different than a man and I carry important things, and have unique talents that can be utilized. We carry different things to the table of life. I carry something special as a woman and he carries something special as a man. It would be the same things if we brought exactly the same qualities to the table. This does not make me any less of a human being. I think feminism is trying to make me equal to a male, I am never going to be equal to a male, I think differently, because if we all looked at a problem the same way, we would never solve anything. There is a female way of looking at things and a male way. We might solve things differently because of our other attributes” (Personal communication, March 24, 2017).

This belief in the uniqueness of gender roles and what individual qualities each person brings to the table, makes for a great argument in regards to gender justice. It is not just about equality but using each genders best qualities to solving everyday life problems. The idea is that if each person is to act in an exact similar way, then why did God make two sexes? Instead, as participant three says, “they are distinctly different but deserve equitable respect and rights” according to Islam (Personal communication, March 17, 2017).

In reference to comparing Islam and Western liberal feminism, many of the women interviewed explained that they felt they had more rights than liberal feminism (identified as those espousing gender equality) provides. Participant 10 explains “before women were slaves

and Islam gave freedom to women. Islam gives more rights to women than just equality. The women don't have to do anything" (Personal communication, March 31, 2017). In more specific details participant five explains "Islam gives us rights as humans and they give us different rights for males and females. It does not make us one less than the other. I have a right to work, hold a profession, have an education, in fact in Islam, they strongly encourage that women have more education than the husband because they are teaching the youth" (Personal communication, March 24, 2017). Additionally, if Muslim women work outside of the home, her money is her own. Her husband has no rights to it and cannot ask what she does with her money, unless she is doing "un-Islamic" things with it. Her husband has to provide all the financial needs of the household in the manner that the woman is accustomed to. That is in the manner that her father raised her in. If she was raised upper middle class with a maid, then her husband is obligated to provide this same life style. If she is not married, her father or eldest male in the family (if father is dead) is "responsible" to provide for her. If they have a child, and the woman decides to breastfeed her child, she has the right to ask him for financial compensation. Her role as a mother is so important that it is treated as a worthy job. She is not even obligated to do any "house work" as that is also considered an occupation and she is not responsible for it. Another person can be paid to do this (Participant 5, personal communication, March 24, 2017).

The most important position that a women plays in Islam is as a mother, as the Prophet Muhammad is quoted in saying, "Paradise is under the feet of the mother." This high position shows that you cannot enter Heaven without the approval of your mother and her important position should be respected (Participant 18, personal communication, April 14, 2017). Many women interviewed critiqued liberal feminism as ignoring the importance of motherhood. As participant four emphasized: "to me feminism is being a central part of the family, raising

children, contributing to the household, women are, we are like the foundation of the home, we make the home” (Personal communication, March 17, 2017). Moreover, she explains: “the woman nurtures the family and the husband, she is submissive to the husband, but the husband also respects her, listens to her and they make decisions together. My view of liberal feminism is that the women have to dominate everything. They look at everything, they break it apart, they analyze everything: we are not equal here, we are not equal there” (Participant 4, personal communication, March 17, 2017). As a convert to Islam, participant four’s description of the “nurturing” role of women in Muslim society is important, as she has also been an outsider looking in.

Woman and Man Cannot Be Equal

Equality and justice for all does not have to mean that women need to be like men. Men should not be a standard, each are unique and justice is the key term not equality. As participant seven explained “I don’t think that everything has to be exactly the same. We are biologically different. Equal rights however in society and economically are important and I follow that. I don’t think we can be absolutely like a man” (Personal communication, March 24, 2017). Can men and women ever really be equal? Isn’t it about being treated equally? If so, Islamically, this equality is granted, “when it comes to acquiring highest levels of spirituality and closeness to God Almighty and forming the best examples for humanity in terms of character and morality, Islam has not assigned any distinctions to man and women. They enjoy equality” (Participant 21, personal communication, April 14, 2017). However, is everyone exactly the same? In Islam, “everyone has certain rights, they are different though, according to social standing, and position in the family as well as gender. One could argue that they are even unfair, if we use the “equal or

fair means identical” template” (Participant 28, personal communication, May 5, 2017). Is equal always fair? Is it fair that in Islam a boy can end up being responsible for his entire family and later extended family? The weight of this duty is automatically expected of boys who then turn into men and then head of households. On the other hand, girls are expected to be taken care of and to grow up to be nurturing mothers. With such gender complimentary roles, equality is not a goal in some traditional Islamic societies, yet respect, fairness, and justice within each role is important. Furthermore, their complimentary gender roles are embraced, as participant 12 explains,

“always equality is not justice. Justice can be celebrating the differences. How two persons are different from each other and help them. For example you have a 2 year old and a 2 month old. Aren’t they different? You can’t treat them exactly the same. In Islam they say there is a difference between men and women and this does not mean it is a bad thing, it accepts that they are not equal. It does not mean you treat one worse than the other, treat them in the way that they are different. Sometimes you have to treat women even better” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017).

Consequently with this thinking, many women interviewed believed that Islamically, they had more than gender equality. So why should they lower their standard to equality? Yet, equal access could be closer to what these women advocate for but within a complementarity context.

Historical Background of Islamic Gender Norms

It is believed that Islam is always fighting for justice and throughout time the causes have changed. As participant seven reminded me about the progressiveness of the faith, “Islam is a religion of time that you live,” I thought of the history of social justice espoused by followers of the religion (personal communication, March 24, 2017). If at the time of the inception of Islam 1300 years ago, women were saved by the progressive rights introduced by the religion, and today these are outdated, then it is the duty of Muslims to update them. One should,

“compare where the Arab peninsula was pre prophet and then what prophet did, it was night and day, 1000 wives to limiting them to 4. When you put it in context of that time. Even in Europe it was totally night and day. It gave women (the) right to own property which gave them autonomy from a man. Whether they would be married off or not. Right to educate themselves. Right to keep their money if they worked. If they chose to breastfeed their child, they could ask to get paid for that. Never impose upon them the duties of house cleaning, could even get paid for that. So it gave them something that was so revolutionary in the Arab and world culture at the time, it is a huge deal when you put it in perspective” (Participant 13, personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Therefore, studying the setting of the beginning of Islamic thought and the status of women in perspective, one can better understand how far the religion has improved the lives of women. As participant 26 explains:

“Islam is the first religion to actually give women a voice. Islam has also promoted education and teaching for women and encouraged women to take on leadership roles. Islam has ultimately added value to women, where prior to Islam they were in a society where daughters were buried alive. Islam has allowed wives to have rights over her husband, and not just be available for his pleasure. Islam has added value to the duties a woman does in a household, as a mother, as someone who keeps the home. Islam has allowed women to have a share of inheritance which was never before awarded” (Personal communication, April 28, 2017).

As participants explained, Islam was a revolutionary religion of its time and continues to be for many who seek justice.

Yet, the role that each individual plays in Islamic society is important and has an impact on the wellbeing of the *Ummah*. Now culturally this can vary, but Islamically, this is valid. Still, it is not about equality but complementarity or balance of roles and positions in Islamic society.

As participant 14 further describes the positionality of genders in the *Ummah*:

“Equality with men in the eyes of God; a higher status in society. Women are encouraged to become educated and productive members of society; yet they are still respected and held to high esteem for fulfilling natural roles such as mother and wife even though Western society looks down on women who are dedicated to fulfilling these kinds of roles sometimes. Islam also affords women property rights, rights of money and wealth, and rights as mothers (such as guaranteed custody of the children until 2 years old and the right to ask for monetary compensation for breastfeeding). The fact that Islam also places the responsibility of providing for the wellbeing of children (child support) squarely on

the father without any responsibility being on the mother is also indirectly a women's right" (Personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Women are to be taken care of financially as they give the emotional and nurturing support in return. This may seem very traditional roles to some, however, this is dependent on the socio-economic status of the family in general. At the most basic level, this is the Islamic rule, men are responsible for the wellbeing and financial support of his family. As participant 21 explains: "woman because of her nourishing and soft nature has been assigned the job of caretaker of family; whereas man as the bread winner; handles outside chores and responsible to safe guard the family simply because he is stronger and due to other characteristic that a man has been wired with." (Personal communication, April 14, 2017). Now in today's neoliberal world, just because men are expected to be breadwinners, does not mean they can be. What happens when they lose their jobs? What happens if a woman is making more money than her husband? How does their relational dynamic change? Oftentimes, in the immigrant experience, finding a job can be difficult. For example, a women may be able to pick up English quickly and get a job, whereas her husband might struggle. If she becomes the breadwinner, how does this change their roles in their household? As Islamically, the search for justice is constant, these new challenges are questions for the *Mujtahids* to decipher through *ijtihad* and for local *Imams* and *Sheikhs*, and guest scholars, at the mosques to explain and answer.

Hence, as participant 21 elaborates, "Islam is the religion of nature and has assigned rights and roles to men and women according to their nature and capabilities," this does not mean that practical everyday situations and environments do not shake this foundation (Personal communication, April 14, 2017). Especially, for Shia's living in the United States, post 9/11, and now during the Trump era. As times change, Shia Muslims also assimilate. As justice is the key component of the religion, Muslims just don't consider women's rights and discrimination

against women as a singular cause, they can see it as within a long list of injustices that need to be resolved. Therefore, fighting for justice and respect for all is key!

Culture vs. Religion Is Obscured

Nevertheless, “Islam is often completely overridden by cultural interpretations. Very often it is impossible to qualify the difference” (Participant 28, personal communication, May 5, 2017). Shia Muslims in America have the opportunity, resources, and understanding to distinguish between true Islamic thought and cultural practices and norms. Many women interviewed believed that there is a major problem with discrimination against women, and attributed this to cultural norms and not Islamic standards. They often referred to “true Islam” or what the *Quran* and *Ahlul-Bayt* (family and descendants of the Prophet) have taught, that do not allow for any discrimination or injustice towards women. However, they pinpoint patriarchal bias, corrupt rulers, and pre-Islamic cultural practices to have attributed to discrimination and oppression of Muslim women. As participant 22 explained:

“There is so much old culture that seeps into our religious teachings that it is hard to find an unbiased interpretation of women’s rights and roles in society. Also ironically it is pretty much exclusively interpreted by men. We have a wide variety of examples of women who financially supported their husbands, rode into battle, gave speeches, and taught others in our Islamic history. But in modern day there are some religious figures who would interpret religion that women are prohibited from doing these things. It is unfortunate” (Personal communication, April 21, 2017).

Furthermore, as participant 27 elaborates,

“Islam has always upheld women in high esteem and has shown in history how they have been politically active as well as been the right hand of their husbands and fathers, supporting them financially and with their strength. Islam gives them the right to inherit which was never ever given to women until the 20th century in other cultures. Every woman in the history of Shia Islam has served an amazing role and both the daughter and the granddaughter of the prophet spoke to the male leaders of the time with full confidence and intellect” (Personal communication, May 5, 2017).

Having historical knowledge of key female Muslim leaders, empowers Muslim women to have references in their “basket” of norms to look up to (Hjarpe, 1997; Roald, 2003). With such role models as the wife of the prophet, Khadeja, who was a business woman and who was much older than him and asked him for his hand in marriage; his daughter, Fatimah, who was a leader on her own; and the granddaughter, Sukaina who spoke out after a battle that killed her brother, Hussain (grandson of the Prophet), and most male members of the family; one wonders why these stories of these key women are not always used to lift the status of present day women (Participant 2, personal communication, March 17, 2017).

Instead, “women’s rights have been interpreted by men according to their cultural needs not by Islamic teachings” (Participant 29, personal communication, May 12, 2017). Therefore, “since religious interpretations are mainly done by men, they don’t always favor women, and (I) think this is a cultural issue and not religious. A woman that is empowered is a threat to man, so why not make it so that the woman can be “less” (Participant 32, personal communication, May 19, 2017)? Consequently, in such societies the system is rigged to favor men over women, “the way Islam is propagated by most scholars, both Sunni and Shia, does not promote gender equality and their ultimate aim, whether they realize or not, is simply to keep men in a more privileged position than women” (Participant 19, personal communication, April 14, 2017). This is why the “public has this general impression that Muslim women are oppressed” (Participant 20, personal communication, April 14, 2017).

Consequently, being part of a multicultural Islamic center with various cultures represented, has allowed individuals to self-reflect on their family upbringing and to educate themselves by asking questions after sermons, reviewing books at the mosque library, searching on the internet and participating in lectures. Overall, just being part of this community allows

members to engage with other Shia Muslims and create a dialogue of progressive Islamic thought in this unique situation of living in the United States. They constantly question their cultural norms and search eagerly for answers to such questions as: should my daughter wear *hijab* to school? At what age? Living in the United States, under Trump, is this safe? If she does not feel safe, does she have to observe *hijab*? What does that *hijab* need to look like? Burka or scarf? What is Islamically recommended?

Members feel comfortable at this mosque to ask such questions. As another new Muslim explains: “I feel at home at this mosque because the congregation is diverse, and I have met converts there like myself. I see more equality at this mosque than at others that target one kind of population because it all ties back to culture. If we want to see equality in Islam, Muslims need to stop associating culture with their faith” (Participant 30, personal communication, May 19, 2017). For example, as an Iraqi immigrant explains her first experiences in this community:

“When I saw the first time, is this America? In Najif, I did not even speak with my male cousins, no looking at eyes. No interaction with men. Everything was divided based on gender...no small talk with men. Because when you go talk to someone, sometimes this crosses the line. So came here and saw women talking to guys, (I thought) why is she wearing *hijab* like this?... Now when I go with my friends here, (I dig) deep into their life, I know they are nice people. (They are like) don’t judge me, I speak with Allah in my own way. If I do something wrong, don’t judge me” (Participant 9, personal communication, March 24, 2017).

The culture shock this member is describing here shows the limited interactions she had back in Iraq with even male members of her family as opposed to what she now was seeing at the mosque with everyone interacting together comfortably. As she was at first shocked by seeing women wear *hijab* in different ways at the mosque, she slowly realized, it is okay. It was not up to her to judge. It was just different from the cultural norms that she had practiced back home. Another member explained her experiences at two local mosques:

“from what I’ve seen in the 2 communities I’ve grown up in. Women have assumed leadership roles in these communities. This mosque has led this having a Muslim woman president of the institution, whereas (another local mosque) is still dominated by men, but has a separate female chairlady for the ‘women’s side’ of things. Regardless though, women are respected in their roles and have organized and executed many worthy events” (Participant 26, personal communication, April 28, 2017).

The fact that women are actively involved in these American mosques, are examples for other women and the younger generation that they are empowered to participate at the highest levels, if they so choose.

At this mosque, issues related to women and gender are becoming increasingly part of the sermons and youth education. As the mosque values its female members, they have brought in scholars to specifically address women’s issues. As participant 12 explains:

“2 years ago there was a workshop here at this mosque about women’s issues. They brought an *Imam* who talked about women and men’s rights in Islam and what their duties are to each other. Women had less duties. But men had more to do. Lots of things are culture and not religious. It does not matter what religion you are. Most people do not know the difference between what is cultural and what religion is, they just learn from their parents and don’t ask questions” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017).

Subsequently, at each Friday sermon that I attended, women were often the first ones to ask questions from the *Imam*. In fact many of the youth were the ones with the critical questions. If they did not get the answers they were looking for, they would often ask again and speak confidently.

Meanwhile, many of the Iranian women specifically, were also involved in women’s circles outside of the regular mosque events, as an opportunity to mingle and ask other women personal religious questions. They meet at each other’s homes once a week, would read a chapter of the *Quran*, and then discuss and interpret and ask questions. Following, these Islamic studies, they would eat and socialize and enjoy their time. The women explained that these were social gatherings outside of the mosque, but they felt more comfortable around other Iranian women

and asking their questions in a more casual setting (Participant 24, personal communication, April 21, 2017). This eagerness to study the *Quran* on their own, and find answers for their questions, is a major step towards gaining more power over their religion and educating themselves.

I attended one of these women's circles where we openly discussed some gender norms that were not related to religion, but instead culture and environment. For example, sometimes it is the social environment and security concerns that allow girls to be treated differently than boys, as participant 12 explained:

“my mom and dayee (maternal uncle) were not exactly treated the same. Like it was unsafe from a certain time for women to be in the streets. So if they were not in school, then they had to come home. But the boys could go hang out in the streets. This was not my grandfather doing this, it was the culture of the society that forced him to treat his daughter like this. If they saw my mom in the streets at night, they would think something bad about her. Not the religion, but the culture” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017).

This woman was acknowledging that a woman or girl going out late at night was not forbidden by the religion, but frowned upon by the cultural norms and the dangerous environment. In addition, socially, this refers to the innuendo that “bad” women (prostitutes) were out late at night. Girls and women from good families would not allow such a thing, to protect their reputation. Culturally, for Iranians and many other Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures, a girl's reputation is everything. It predisposes her for the family she will marry into and also has an impact on her siblings and their prospects. However, this changes when living in America where reputation is not held as a high priority and work and life can go on till late hours in the evening. Some families can accept this and some cannot. My own family had a 9pm curfew for me to be home in order to “keep me safe.” There was no religious justification for this, but they felt like it was not right for a girl to be out that late.

But gender norms are changing and these Shia women, as “norm entrepreneurs” and active agents, are at the forefront of transforming them. As participant 11 explains: “it has to be our behavior to changing. In the old days things were different. Old days women were not working, so however he wanted to treat her (he could), now the woman is working so (she) won’t allow a man to treat her in that way” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017). Moreover, as another participant expresses her thoughts: “I believe each generation have different cultural values and gender norms are strongly influenced by cultural values” (Participant 35, personal communication, May 26, 2017). As new generations of Shia Muslims are born within this community in the United States, they are forming new identities. They are being educated in the West and also being exposed to Islamic teachings by attending this mosque. Their questions are changing as their environment and new issues emerge and their “basket” of norms is expanding (Hjarpe, 1997; Roald, 2003). In search for answers, they are finding that some cultural practices and social guidelines such as early marriage, proper *hijab*, interactions between the sexes, etc. have nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with customs of their countries of origin.

Once more, this mosque has a multicultural population and the leadership are living examples of change occurring in regards to traditional gender norms. This mosque is a unique setting as participant 13 describes,

“There are women on the board, so women’s issues are discussed...our mosque discusses women and tries to do a good job, but even though you still fighting this back home mentality where women are second class citizens. This is completely cultural. Most people don’t know the difference between what is culture and what is Islam. I think it’s because of my unique background that I know what is the difference” (Personal communication, April 7, 2017).

By unique background the interviewee is referring to being born and raised in America and having an Iranian born father and an American born White mother who converted. She walks

between both cultures and the religion and can analyze and critically disassociate religion and culture. Others with similar backgrounds to participant 13 also concur. When asked about liberal and Islamic gender norms and their compatibility, another subject explained “Islam is actually more liberal than this. In the future maybe they can be more compatible. Maybe people follow the culture more than religion. Culture is more patriarchal. They want to see Islam fit into their culture, not their culture change due to Islam” (Participant 7, personal communication, March 24, 2017). By educating themselves, these Muslim women are learning more and more about their Islamic rights and distinguishing them from cultural norms. This implies that “true” Islam is different than what is traditionally practiced. However, there is hope for progressive change that would reestablish women’s status in Muslim societies and remove patriarchal biases that are un-Islamic.

Education is Key

It is important to note here that those who have immigrated here are usually from upper classes who were able to afford the tickets and were either skilled workers, came here for continuing higher education, or as refugees. Of the 35 women interviewed, 3 have High School diplomas, 14 have bachelor’s degrees, 9 have Master’s, and 9 have Doctorates (See Appendix for Chart). Their careers include: Law, Real Estate, Nursing, Pharmacy, Medical Practitioners, Veterinarian, Graphic Designer, Engineers, Teachers and also 7 were home makers (See Appendix for Chart). Their ages ranged from 25 to 68 (See Appendix for Chart). Their experience with American culture, their own indigenous cultures, secular education, and their Islamic knowledge, allows them to define what appropriate gender norms are for themselves in the society they live and participate in. Consequently, they are able to actively research, analyze, and emulate true Islam, beyond culture, and transform traditional gender norms.

Muslim Women in this community have the opportunity to educate themselves and this can empower them to demand that their rights are practiced. As participant 13 eloquently says “it is up to us women to educate ourselves so that we don’t get bossed around and ruled by men who have weak interpretations” (Personal Communication, April 7, 2017). If one does not know what their rights are, how would they know they are being discriminated against? In pursuit of justice for all, the first thing to do is to educate oneself. As participant 11 explains: “in the West, there are more freedoms for women and we can research and educate ourselves more. Because for example at the mosque we learn things every week and around our friends, we teach each other” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017). In the comfortable environment of this mosque and the women’s circles and gatherings, these women are exhibiting agency, and are conducting their own research project to find truth, within the religion. They are actively looking through the *Quran* and *Hadiths*, and the written descriptions of the lives of the *Ahlul-Bayt* (family and descendants of the Prophet), for rules and precedents that can relate to their lives today.

Yet, as participant 11 further explains, many are not aware that “women have more rights than men in Islam. Unfortunately, women don’t know their rights... the women in Islam they have more rights than a Christian women. But they don’t go for it. Over in the Middle East they don’t necessarily know...with more education, this is changing” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017). Back in the Middle East, religion is sometimes taken for granted and customary and cultural practices are passed along generation after generation, without questioning the roots of these practices. Thus, “the problem is women don’t educate themselves in Islam to see what is truth and what is not truth and to know their rights. That they should not be oppressed. It is up to women” (Participant 11, personal communication, March 31, 2017).

When interviewing this participant, it occurred to me that many of those who are born Muslim and live in Muslim countries, practice the religion as their parents do (or don't), and don't really ask questions or even want to. They often cannot distinguish between what is culture and what is religion. As a result, when moving to the United States, many have an identity crisis which allows them to question gender norms and question the initial bias in interpretations of the religious texts. As participant 11 elaborates, learning multiple languages helps in learning more about the religion on her own: "every time I read the *Quran*, I learn more. I know more now than I did 20 year ago. The Farsi translation is bad. Since I know Arabic, I can see that the translation is different, or the meaning is different" (Participant 11, Personal communication, March 31, 2017). Words are powerful and therefore so are interpretations. As these "norm entrepreneurs" are educating themselves and reading and translating the *Quran* and other Islamic literature, they are able to analyze and find meaning and answers to relate to their religious questions and unique situations, themselves.

As mentioned in previous chapters, the Shia jurisprudence, *fiqh*, has been considered more liberal than Sunni Islamic thought. The roots of such extremist groups such as the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS are all stemming from Sunni *Wahabism* which identifies with a literal translation of the *Quran*. While Shia jurisprudence focuses on the time of the Prophet but also acknowledges the lives of his descendants and the situation today. When times change, *fiqh* also needs to be updated. The process of *ijtihad*, allows for updating Islamic laws and amending them. As summarized in chapter 4, *Sharia* as divine is often considered to be Islamic law and unchangeable. However, *fiqh* meaning understanding, leads to jurisprudence and allows for the various Islamic legal schools of thought (*Hanafi* -Sunni, *Maliki*-Sunni, *Shafii*-Sunni, *Hanabali*-Sunni, *Jaafari*-Shia). These schools of thought differ in their interpretations of Islamic laws and

allow for space for *ijtihad* and innovation and progressive change. Therefore, if there are injustices towards Muslim women today, then it is the duty of Islamic jurists to resolve this. As participant 13 describes:

“Shia *fiqh* is much better. It is more liberal. A woman can be *Mujtahid* but not *Marja* or *Ayatollah*. That is because there are so many people coming to your door and that is difficult for a women. *Ulama* that are males should not be biased. If they are then they are in big trouble. If someone did this then it was a mistake. Not on purpose and if they did, then they will be punished. For every issue, there are multiple solutions. Different *Mujtahids* and their opinions. Shia have always been persecuted because of their liberal thoughts” (Personal communication, April 7, 2017).

There is a plurality of religious thought in Shia Islam, and this allows for various opinions and interpretations to be validated. However, some male scholars can be biased as participant 14 points out:

“I believe Islam is very pro-women but unfortunately some so-called scholars sometimes misinterpret Islamic laws regarding women through their cultural anti-women lens and promote ideas that are very anti-women yet they claim they are “Islamic”. This happens frequently and for people who are not educated enough in true Islamic philosophy they can be easily fooled into thinking Islam is actually anti-women” (Personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Through education, women are empowering themselves and hearing them discuss male bias is a glimpse into that empowerment. These active Shia women are getting to the bottom of what is “true” Islam and they are very critical of those that misinterpret the religion for their favor:

“it is shameful that many religious scholars have misrepresented Islam’s view on women. It is impossible that God would have created two genders to live side by side and support each other with one made “better” than the other. Islam embraces the differences between men and women and says “yes, they are different, and nothing is wrong with that”. It addresses even issues such as the fact that women deserve to have sexual satisfaction in their relationships. Unfortunately, we have interpretations which are completely un-Islamic by some groups that promote horrors like female genital mutilation which are completely against what the religion teaches” (Participant 22, personal communication, April 21, 2017).

As more and more women in this community and others are educating themselves secularly, and religiously through Islamic texts, they are demanding more rights and

distinguishing between what is cultural and what are true tenants of the religion. As participant 31 summarizes the relationship between politics and religion and the oppression of Muslim women:

“definitely men changed history by changing laws and making things easier for their control. Religion has always been the obstacle for certain leaders. They changed women’s rights they changed Islamic laws in order to fulfill their goals. I think women who follow the Book and teaching of the Prophet through his family writings will be much stronger to stand in the face of changes and control by governments and leaders” (Personal communication, May 19, 2017).

Acknowledgement of the male interpretation bias and the power dynamic in Muslim countries and communities, is a key step in demanding change in gender norms. The fact that these “norm entrepreneurs” are able to pinpoint the main issues, can attest to the fact that they are empowered, and this will incite positive changes onto the next generation.

Islamic Marriage Contract

One example that knowledge and progressive change is influencing the next generation is through the practice of marriage contracts. As prenuptial agreements are considered taboo in Western countries, the idea of a marriage contract is far from a norm. However, formal marriage contracts are a common occurrence in the Muslim world, and particularly with the educated middle and upper classes. In fact, as participant 14 describes, “a women asks a man to be her husband in the Islamic marriage ceremony and has a right to outline a prenuptial agreement before marriage (and this) is also a clear example of women’s high status in Islam” (Personal communication, April 7, 2017). The marriage contract is widely discussed amongst upper class families as the key component also includes a dowry. Some things considered while drawing up a marriage contract include that:

“a women does not have to work in the house. She can even get a maid. She can get money from (her) husband for having to work in the house. This is beyond the allowance for the home. Also paid for breastfeeding. Also whatever level the women came from, the man has to provide for that. For example if she had a maid growing up, then she needs to have a maid after” (Participant 12, personal communication, March 31, 2017).

These are just a few items that are already well known in Islamic literature, but that are secured when included in a marriage contract. Many encourage including the right to ask for divorce, right to higher education, right to work outside of the home, trip to *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), etc.

At this particular mosque and within the women’s circles, when one is discussing a young couples impending nuptials, the issue of a formal written marriage contract is often brought up. This includes having an *Imam* and a lawyer draw up a contract to protect the rights of both parties of the marriage. Marriage contracts are often deliberated and it is even okay to discuss what was in someone else’s contract as a point of reference. For example, one couple included the right for the wife to ask for divorce at any time, the right for her to pursue higher education and a career, the number of children she wanted to have, number of wives the husband is allowed or not allowed to have, etc. (Participant 11, personal communication, March 31, 2017). The contract is reviewed by both families and openly discussed. This way, before the wedding occurs, both families, and the individuals marrying, know the expectations of the marriage.

However, for those that don’t have a prenuptial contract, as participant 14 explains: “there are also certain situations where women can ask for a divorce even if they did not exercise their right to do so in a prenuptial agreement” (Personal communication, April 7, 2017). These include if the husband is physically abusing her, has a drug or alcohol addiction, has taken another wife without her approval, and/ or is not providing for the household. This marriage

contract can act as a safety net for a woman and her dowry can be a resource for her at any time she demands it. She is not responsible for any financial obligation to her family or to her own household. So if her husband is not providing for the family, she has every right to ask for a divorce. Yet the problem that prohibits divorce is often the thought of reputations and cultural norms that look down upon divorce. An outside arbitrator is often first consulted, to try and save the marriage (Participant, 11, personal communication, March 31, 2017). However, in desperate situations such as abuse, there are mechanisms to help women gain their divorce, but culturally, this is all relative to the location, economic status, family support and such. As American Muslims, living in a non-Islamic country, these women are able to choose what doctrines and interpretations of Islamic laws to follow or not in their personal transactions. They also have the support of the American civil legal system in filing and processing their divorce.

Now since those who are more educated and possibly of the upper classes have knowledge about what to put in their marriage contract to protect them, this can be an area of improvement in regards to social justice for the masses. The more educated a girl or women is, the more empowered she will be to know exactly what to include. The importance of women's education, is a common ground that CEDAW can share with the Shia *Ummah*. This mosque serves as an Islamic educational center, and as a place to ask these questions in regards to the marriage contract, amongst other questions, and to protect, and secure, the rights of these Shia women and the next generation.

Muslim Women's Role in the U.S.

When asked: how would you describe the role of women in Muslim societies in the U.S., a respondent answered "empowered" (Participant 32, personal communication, May 19, 2017).

Although others danced around this word and used terms such as “free,” “powerful,” “happy,” “independent,” “valued,” and terms in Arabic and Farsi, this participant specifically said she felt that women in this community were empowered. As another interviewee explained:

“we have a choice. Choice of working professionally, having children. Don’t have to just stay home and raise children. We are a vital part of society here. We express our opinions, we are not just submissive, and don’t talk, we have opinions, good opinions, educated opinions. They are valued opinions, depends on the society and community. Can get culture mixed up, different congregations can be different. In our congregation women are valued. Because whenever the *sheikh* is talking, he is always asking do the sisters have anything to add, do you want to discuss anything, they do value us, and a lot of times they ask the women first and the men have to wait” (Participant 4, personal communication, March 17, 2017).

This sense of respect and being valued is key to the role that women play in this community. The women also feel that here in the West, their actions represent all Muslims. As participant 11 explains: “we have a duty in the West and more so than in the Middle East because as *hijabis* we are representatives. We have to show ourselves. We are a good people. We are representatives. It is easier to be a Muslim in America. Because it is new for here and in the Middle East no one cares or listens” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017). There is this idea of back in their countries of origin, religion and culture is mixed up and religion is taken for granted.

Yet, living in the United States, these women are committed to being part of the greater American community. Of the 35 women interviewed, some had lived their whole lives in America (up to 68 years), while others had lived here between 3 and 35 years. While assimilating, they are also introducing their religion and practices to America as another participant explains: “many women are active here and in this society. The more you live in a country, the more of their culture you will understand and become more active. First there is a language barrier. We need to do something to break the stereotypes in this country. Need to be extra nice and give back to our communities” (Participant 12, personal communication, March

31, 2017). Islamically, the justification is also there for allowing Muslims to assimilate to new environments as participant 14 explains “the laws of the country in which a Muslim lives sometimes supersede Islamic laws and Islam allows this since it promotes its followers to be law abiding citizens of the country in which they live” (Personal communication, April 4, 2017). This rule allows Muslims to self-reflect and reevaluate their cultural and religious practices when confronted with new problems and issues in new countries such as the United States. As another interviewee simply explains, “we live in a more liberal time than my parents and grandparents where women are encouraged to advance themselves” (Participant 16, personal communication, April 7, 2017) and through this enlightened view, women in this community are empowered.

The next generation of Shia women in this community are growing up and entering the workforce and society in general with more opportunities than their parents and grandparents. Some women are changing the traditional gender norms and flipping them. As participant 26 explains:

“I’ve gone to school, I’ve worked since I was 16, and I moved out of the house and got my own place before marriage, which is not something a girl usually does. She usually is in her parents’ home until she gets married and goes to her husband’s home. Parents are usually supposed to live with their son, or the eldest son’s family, but now I have my parents living in my house. They still have the mentality that because I’m a girl, I should be home by a certain time, there are certain things I shouldn’t do, etc., but even being successful with my own house at age 35, I have to fight my parents regarding such issues” (Personal communication, April 28, 2017).

This woman is an example of the next generation of Shia women who are breaking boundaries and using their education to empower themselves and at the same time taking on new responsibilities such as taking care of their parents, extended family, and their children on their own. This is happening time and time again these days and is often causing the “second-shift” coined by Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung, describing women entering the workforce and then being mainly responsible for taking care of the children and the household as another job

that is often overlooked as work (2003).

This “second shift” is also known as the household gender gap. The expectations are that women will always be responsible for the household duties and taking care of kids. If they work outside of the home then, this is additional to their most important job of homemaker. As another participant explains some families have maintained traditional gender practices in the U.S.:

“There is greater gender parity in Muslim societies in the U.S. than in Muslim-majority countries. But even in communities in the U.S. there are significant disparities, although the disparities exist more because of social pressure rather than embodied in the legal structure as in many Muslim-majority countries where women deal with both. Muslim women in the U.S. are often (socially) pressured to get married young, have children young, not to have high achieving careers, be stay at home wives, be subservient to their husbands, and be responsible for all household duties” (Participant 19, personal communication, April 14, 2017).

Yet, the participant who mentioned this above is highly educated and is a lawyer herself and was describing what she saw in her immediate and distant family. The pressures she is describing can push Shia women in this community to get married young, however, most of the women interviewed seemed to be juggling both high achieving careers and children at the same time, gracefully. Instead of considering taking care of their family as a “second-shift” or burden, they see it as their Islamic duty and a balancing act. As participant 21 describes:

“In a lot of households, women have to work either to help in household income or to keep to social norms of feminism. However this has added burden on them giving them two jobs one outside and the other as caretaker of family. There is nothing wrong with woman working as long as she is fulfilling her primary responsibility as a mother; fulfilling her family’s physical and moral and emotional needs and these needs are not being fulfilled by some day cares” (Personal communication, April 14, 2017).

As shown previously, living in the U.S. changes how some immigrants in this community now see things and question certain things compared to the cultures back in their home countries. With the right to choose how they want to live, many have combined elements of both liberal and Islamic gender norms into their lives. As participant 20 explains, “I think that because I grew

up in the U.S I've practiced gender norms differently than my parents who grew up in Pakistan. I think that being exposed to the American culture opens up a whole new perspective" (Personal communication, April 14, 2017).

This new perspective allows them to analyze their own religion and cultures and search for a truth that helps them in their everyday experiences living in the United States and practicing Islam. As explained in chapter 4, these Shia women now have a wider "basket" of norms to pick and choose from (Hjarpe, 1997; Roald, 2003). As these "norm entrepreneurs" are self-reflecting on their traditional Islamic gender roles and their socio-economic status in the United States, the options that make up their "basket" are expanding, and they are searching for more egalitarian practices within Islam. They are breaking away from both normative hegemonic boundaries and neither following solely gender complementarity nor gender equality. One woman summed up the ideal role of Shia women in America quite eloquently:

"I believe women are the natural nurturers and so their role is to nurture society. This includes raising its young, but also caring for others, creating a network and a healthy social community, creating and carrying on traditions, as well as functioning in the workforce if they choose using their God-given talents. Islam does not limit a woman's ability to work and contribute to society in ways outside her family and I believe any woman who chooses to do so should be supported, and I believe Islam supports paid maternity leave, support for breastfeeding, and appropriate postpartum support, and the availability of part-time work to allow any women who chooses to return to the workforce after having children to be able to do so and achieve the work-life balance they desire" (Participant 22, personal communication, April 21, 2017).

When considering the above, we can see that even in the U.S. there is still a lot to achieve to gain gender justice. Universal paid maternal leave, access to quality child care, and equal pay, are still yet to be determined. These Muslim women see these as major issues as well, and are also critiquing the Western liberal system. Therefore, it is important to create a constructive dialogue amongst liberal feminists, CEDAW, and Muslim societies to learn from one another, and determine the "best practices" which can elevate the status of all women!

Critique of Liberal Feminism

When Shia women were asked if they see differences between liberal and Islamic feminism, their responses surprised me. Some were not fond of the word feminism or even Islamic feminism. Women's rights was sometimes considered a confusing statement, as Islam is said to provide justice and rights for all. Furthermore, Islamic feminism was sometimes considered to be synonymous with Islam in general. Yet, as introduced in previous chapters, Islamic feminism promotes reinterpreting Islamic texts in pursuit of gender justice and identifying the male bias within Muslim societies. Many of the women seemed annoyed with the notion of gender equality and considered it as being unachievable and thought of liberal feminism as about sexuality and not justice. The women interviewed reminded me that "women are actually higher status in *Quran*, so why be equal" (Participant 25, personal communication, April 28, 2017)? Subsequently as participant 27 explained:

"Men and women are two totally different species so they are not equal except in piety. One is not better than the other.... thing to note is that the West talks about equality of women by bringing them to the work force and the military. The only reason they did this was to fill the gap due to missing males. There is no equality in the West. They won't even let mothers stay at home more than six weeks and won't even pay them whilst they raise their children" (Personal communication, May 5, 2017).

One can say it's complicated with Shia women and liberal feminism. These Shia women in America are in a timely position to evaluate liberal feminism and Western notions of gender equality and determine its value to them.

As participant 14 expresses "the only major difference would be that liberal feminism thinks that women are "freer" when they are less modest in their dress and overtly sexual in their behavior. Islam sees a woman who guards against being sexually objectified as someone who has more freedom since they are not being used basically by our male dominated society" (Personal communication, April 7, 2017). For these reasons, Muslim women wear *hijab* which:

“is deemed social responsibility. Men notice more about women’s physical features that what meets our eye...equality pretty much goes out the door here...they do have a tendency to pay attention to our bodily features before they recognize the intelligence in our brains. Especially if we enhance the physical elements. Anything anyone can do to keep work atmosphere “workable” is better. I feel Muslim women should pay heed to the *ayaahs* (versus) of the *Quran* when dressing to go outdoors. It helps to keep the opposite gender focused at work. Women lib supporters should wear long pants and ties and loose coats and not knee high skirts and tight blazers with low cut blouses. Let them dress like the men if they believe they are equal in all regards. I feel a modest dress code is really important for all women not just Muslim women” (Participant 28, personal communication, May 5, 2017).

In this way, Muslim women are averting the “male gaze” and this “prevents men or others from objectifying a woman and in a way is a right because it lets women determine who looks at us” (Participant, 30; Mulvey, 1975). *Hijab* is a way that Muslim women desexualize themselves, it represents the religion and the chastity of the woman. When asked about what proper dress is for Muslim women, another participant explains “something to respect herself. I am not a candy everybody can lick me. I need to respect myself to gain respect” (Participant 11, personal communication, March 31, 2017).

On another note, the role of the mother in Islamic society as explained previously is very important. However, in today’s economy, and represented in the women that were interviewed, most of them also work part time or full time outside of the home. They play a constant balancing act. They consider other layers of issues that liberal feminists often ignore, as participant 22 explains:

“the way to strengthen the moral fiber of society is to support women in their role of motherhood and raising a family, which seems to have been tossed to the wayside in liberal feminism. I believe that women if they choose to become mothers can contribute greatly to society by raising individuals with good character - and unless they are given the support and recognition they deserve for this extremely difficult task then it is near impossible to be successful and it may leave feelings of regret, emptiness, or un-fulfillment. Society has to truly respect and value the role of mothers and not treat it as an inconvenience to productivity. We don’t just need equal pay, we need true women’s rights to become anything we choose including mothers and not lose our jobs in the process. There should be an emphasis on keeping families together so there are fewer

single mothers who are forced to work and leave their children in the care of others or be on welfare. And there should be more emphasis on extended family relationships and other relationships to provide support for women” (Personal communication, April 21, 2017).

This woman is pinpointing key issues that women in America confront on a daily basis. These Muslim women are “woke” and can sympathize with their Afro-American, Latina-American, American-Indian, American Immigrant, etc. sisters and their life struggles. For example, they are giving back to the community they live in as in one instance, for *Eid ul Fitr* (holiday celebrating the end of the fasting month of Ramadan), I watched as they sent around a card for people to sign and give donations to a local women’s shelter. These kinds of interactions with vulnerable members of American society, are within the teachings of Islam, and shine a good light for a change in how their community neighbors see them. Overall, these Shia women in this community want it all. They understand what women need and they evaluate liberal feminism and what Islam provides for them and they choose to demand the best of both frames of thought and this is creating a third way and alternative path for more progressive Islamic gender norms.

Discrimination is Relative

If ending discrimination towards women around the world is the goal of CEDAW and liberal feminists would like to promote gender equality as the standard, then one should question what equality means to different people. The meaning of equality is even relative! For these Shia women it is less than what they believe Islam provides them. They espouse to gender justice and many of those interviewed believe in the balance of roles between males and females in society or gender complementarity. They also believe in a more gender egalitarian interpretation of the Islamic texts. Thus, discrimination is different for different people on where they cross

intersections of gender, age, race, ethnicity, economic status, etc. For Muslims in this country, they also bare major discrimination against the practice of their religion.

No entity can force gender equality on people through CEDAW because this would be another layer of discrimination, against cultures and religions. Instead, international Human Rights organizations should work on educating and exchanging cultural and religious values and norms, to better understand and exchange ideas, for best practices, in regards to empowering the next generation of women. Although as participant 26 explains, “CEDAW is bringing much attention and doing excellent work across the board to eliminate discrimination of all types, what they perceive as discrimination is not necessarily discrimination in Islam. Once more, equal rights do not mean the same rights” (Personal communication, April 28, 2017). While another individual added: “I think (CEDAW) is just the tip of the iceberg. Although it provides a base to preventing discrimination there needs to be many more hands-on practices by countries and local governments” (Participant 33, personal communication, May 26, 2017).

Accordingly, there were some areas such as *hijab* (veiling) and Islamic inheritance that have often been thought of by liberal feminists as being discriminatory practices towards Muslim women. Yet the responses can verify that there are nuances to these gender norms. Each woman, family, culture, and setting, can influence the way a woman chooses to wear or not wear *hijab* or the way that inheritance is evaluated and decided upon.

Hijab

Muslim women in America stand out and especially those who wear *hijab*. At a time when anti-Muslim sentiments are at its peak, Muslim women risk their safety every day while practicing their religion. Yet when asked about this, participant 16 responded:

“It is a Muslim woman's responsibility in the U.S. to be the voice as well as the image of a good Muslim. As it is known, the Muslim woman is the flag bearer of the religion. It is her who people see and associate good or bad with the religion and that is why it is most important for a Muslim woman to keep up her image in society as a good, smart, educated person of the religion as well as members of society (Personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Hijab has already been touched upon earlier, as women described the choice of how they wear their *hijab*. Wearing *hijab* makes Muslim women a visible representative of the religion and they take this responsibility on with pride. *Hijab* also allows them to be seen for their minds and not sexualized. In a time when sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace is often brought up in the media, Muslim women who wear *hijab* have a layer of protection which can distinguish them in their work environments. Yet that also means it is difficult for some American Muslim women to get ahead in their careers while wearing *hijab*, as they are judged first by their dress, and then by their accomplishments (Participant 6, personal communication, March 24, 2017).

As such, some of the women interviewed revealed to me that outside of the mosque, they choose not to wear *hijab* and instead talked about dressing modestly. As participant 14 explains the ideal society she would like to see:

“A perfect Islamic society would have women and men working together to promote the idea of gender neutrality in public spaces- meaning gender should not be something that gives anyone an advantage or disadvantage. Therefore, if women are to dress modestly according to the society in which they are residing this can act as a deterrent for men in that society not to objectify them based on their looks or physique. This would promote a greater social cooperation and promote productivity in women as they will not be hindered by constantly working towards sexually pleasing men by their physical appearance. I believe in women covering the parts of their natural bodies that tend to attract the attention of men; and men stop themselves from seeking out and looking at those parts of the women's body. Society would flourish with productivity and cooperation. A women's modest dress is one piece of this puzzle and in order for it to work correctly, men have to do their part to work towards this goal of moving past their more basic desires to enjoy a female's body and instead see women as equal, contributing members of society” (Personal communication, April 7, 2017).

Liberal feminists may think that Muslim women are oppressed, and forced into wearing *hijab*, and yet the majority of the Muslim women interviewed here feel empowered wearing *hijab*, and taking on the role of representing their religious community every time they step out of their house. In the Trump era, it can be said that they are even risking their safety by doing this, yet these women continue to literally wear their religion on their heads with courage.

Miras (Inheritance)

Another point of contention in regards to discrimination is *miras*, or inheritance in Islam, in which the males get $\frac{1}{2}$ more than females. In Islamic society, as explained previously, men are considered to be responsible for the welfare of the woman. This is why they are awarded more inheritance. As a result, “a son inherits more because he is responsible for providing more for his family as opposed to a daughter who is not responsible to provide for anyone” (Participant 16, personal communication, April 7, 2017). As participant three explained further: “because men have a responsibility to the women in the family, women’s money is only theirs, they don’t need to spend it on any household items. Men are also responsible for giving *Mehr* (dowry) and so this balances out inheritance” (Personal communication, March 17, 2017).

As such, Islamically everything is about gender complementarity and balance in the pursuit of justice. Since economic times are changing, it is now understood by most, that boys and men getting more inheritance, is not always fair in today’s society. As a result, this practice is slowly being adjusted on a case by case basis. As participant 11 feels strongly that society has changed, and for economic reasons that Islamic inheritance laws also should change: “old days when women did not work, they would give men more than lady because he was the provider. But now because women also work then it should be equal. But it depends on the family and if

the lady is working. Even taking care of the house, the man should have to pay her” (Personal communication, March 31, 2017).

If *Sharia* states that females will get ½ of males, and this is outdated, then it is up to the *Mujtahids* to use *ijtihad* and come up with new norms in regards to inheritance to reflect the dynamics of today’s Muslim *Ummah*. Today, many Muslims have written wills that itemize their assets and divides them amongst their immediate family. In fact as participant 5 explains: “we should have Islamic wills so that the default mechanisms do not have to be applied” (Personal communication, March 24, 2017). The default mechanism she is referring to is that if there is no verifiable will, then what is stated in the *Sharia* will be applied. Yet, the knowledge about Islamic wills are becoming a new norm and changing to reflect more gender egalitarian laws.

Having the knowledge to navigate Islamic literature and advocate for ones rights is a newer area for Muslim women. Islamic feminists and Muslim women in this community as “norm entrepreneurs” are pioneering this change in gender norms. Marriage contracts and Islamic wills are examples of documents that are helping women secure their rights legally and move forward towards more egalitarian Islamic laws. However, more Islamic education needs to be promoted so that Muslim women know their rights and can defend themselves and prevent against any discrimination they deem is occurring. Collaboration through organizations like MUSAWAH and CEDAW are necessary to build a more sustainable legal standard for gender justice throughout the world.

Conclusion

As a step towards understanding the roles and status of the women in this community, I have interviewed 35 women and learned from their lived experiences. Amongst all the responses to my interview questions, the above quotes stood out as a snapshot of the lives of the Shia women involved in this mosque. Overall, the women in this community are not monolithic. Each had their own individual opinions that were not always shared by others. What was shared was a sense of pride in raising their daughters and sons to respect and support one another. As women and girls in this community are encouraged to educate themselves to the highest levels, they are also gaining knowledge of their Islamic rights to be able to demand them and not be manipulated by patriarchal structures.

Additionally, the women of this community adamantly wanted it to be known that Muslim women were not oppressed but engaged and empowered and respected. As participant 20 explains: “from my understanding liberal feminism is all about men and women being equal in all aspects. I think that Islamic feminism provides rights for women, but it appreciates that women and men do play different roles in society and within the family structure” (Personal communication, April 14, 2017). Most women in this community worked outside of the home but also had children and extended families to take care of. Emphasizing the role of taking care of the family as a priority, but also maintaining a career, and engaging with their local community, these women are gracefully balancing the best of both Islamic and liberal gender norms and creating a third way towards more progressive Islamic gender norms.

These women display agency in their everyday activities including wearing *hijab*, being active employees outside of the home, raising their American born children, educating themselves, maintaining leadership and teaching roles at the mosque, and choosing to stand up

for their rights. They are creating a new identity of Shia women who are adopting the best of Islam and liberal gender norms and building a strong community here in America. As participant 23 sums up: I'm no advocate of living life apologetically, or trying to appease anyone or conform to any norms. However, when Muslim women take an active role in their society, they open doors to others to gain knowledge about Islam and dispel stereotypes. For many people that I meet while working, I was their first encounter with a Muslim" (Personal communication, April 21, 2017). Finally, each woman's active participation in this community, and interactions beyond, will slowly help reduce the prevalence of Islamophobia, and the stereotypes of being "oppressed," or "passive," and instead, pave the way for the next generation of American Muslims. The final chapter will further analyze the findings of this study and conclude with recommendations for future research.

Chapter 6:

What Can Be Learned?

“We are a multicultural community, so we are not bound by the cultural habits of Arabs, Iranians, Lebanese, Egyptians, etc. So the men in our mosque are used to our women standing up and asking a question. We have lots of converts at this mosque and they do not have any problem standing up and asking a question. We have many women from other countries that have lived here for many, many, years and they also have no problem standing up and asking questions and getting answers and challenging the speakers and they won’t let go, until they get their answers. No one is ashamed of this, the men are not. New people that come in from other countries are not used to this. They sooner or later get used to it because this is it” (Participant 5, personal communication, March 24, 2017).

Introduction

The overarching purpose of this research project was to extend the IR literature on the dynamics of norms and shine a light on how Shia women in the context of a local mosque in the United States, interact with the discourses of competing gender norms and the international human rights regime. I have discussed that with the frame of “saving” Muslim women, liberal feminists of the second wave and CEDAW have ignored the diversity of the practices of gender norms within the *Ummah*. At one level, liberal feminists and CEDAW do not account for the significant position of religion, in the everyday lives of some women; at another level, they only see and judge women in the MENA and Muslim communities through the lens of religion. By not considering the diversity in interpretations of Islam, they are missing the agency in which Islamic feminists and Shia women use to reinterpret the *Quran* and *Hadiths* to challenge cultural patriarchy. While the institutions of culture and religion are often considered synonymous, distinguishing between them is key to challenging patriarchal practices. Throughout this dissertation project, I have argued that Islam is not a homogenous religion, and in fact, like other

dominant religions, has various interpretations that are evolving continuously within the *Ummah*. As more progressive Islamic gender norms and human rights discourses emerge, this in turn can strengthen CEDAW by incorporating more Muslim support and ultimately reducing discrimination and injustice towards women around the world.

What was found in this study is that as a collective identity, many of the women interviewed held different views and that there were competing gender norms discussed and promoted in this Mosque. The majority of the 35 women interviewed were critical of both hegemonic structural powers (Western liberal thought and traditional Islamic thought) as the only paths to gender justice. Interpreting how they see themselves situated between these hegemonic narratives is insight to understanding the web of power structures and oppression in the world system. Every day, living in the West, as these Shia women encounter new situations, they refer to their “basket” of norms, and construct new standards of appropriate norms, based on their evolving interests and actively questioning, evaluating, reflecting, and reinterpreting traditional Islamic gender norms to fit their needs. By socially constructing progressive Islamic gender norms and teaching the next generation of Muslim Americans, they are adding another layer of interpretation to the discourses of Islamic thought, and uniquely from the perspective of Shia Women living and practicing in the West. Their resilience and dedication to the religion, motivates them to not just survive by assimilating, but to set an example and advocate for justice for their fellow Muslim and non-Muslim neighbors and friends.

The themes described in chapter 5: gender justice, culture vs. religion, importance of education, unique role in U.S., critique of liberal feminism, and the relativity of discrimination, all were interpreted and outlined based on a critical constructivist and post-colonial feminist analysis of the context of these Shia women in America. The idea that these women identify with

gender justice rather than gender equality relates to their belief that Islam is a religion that fights for justice. If there is injustice towards women, then they explained that this has to do with culture and not religion, as ethnic and traditional patriarchal interpretations of Islam have structurally oppressed the social status of women in Muslim countries and communities. They also identified that through education, Muslim women can empower themselves and distinguish between what is cultural and what is “true” Islam and demand their rights. Furthermore, through their unique and insecure position in the United States, they are representative of all Muslims while economically and socially participating in American society. Similar to Islamic feminists, they are critical of liberal feminism and their promotion of gender equality. They consider “true” Islam as giving them a higher position in society and also value their roles as mothers and nurturers. And finally, these Shia women believe that discrimination is relative and that there are layers of discrimination that all women endure.

Returning to the Objectives of this Study

Returning to the four main objectives of this study as described in chapter one, the next sections will further summarize the main points of the findings of the data component of this project, discuss problems that emerged, and make recommendations for future research. Although, there were multiple norms practiced at this mosque, there were clear themes that emerged in the data that gives us a snapshot of how these women are navigating between various competing gender norms. The 35 women interviewed may be considered a small sample size, yet their sentiments, opinions, lived experiences, and active participation in this community, and American society in general, should be heard. As a minority group within Islam, the Shia

Ummah is a growing population, and their practice of *ijtihad* and modern day interpretations of the faith, are fundamental to understanding the plurality and progressive path of the religion.

Objective 1: To Better Understand The Roles And Status Of Shia Women In Muslim Communities In The U.S.

There is a lack of studies about Shia communities in the West and even less about Shia women in the West. Most studies look at women in Iran or other communities in the Middle East (Sameh, 2010; Razavi, 2006; Kar, 2008; Shahidian, 1998; Tahmasebi-Birgani, 2010; Vakil, 2011). As more and more Muslims are immigrating to the West, it is important to study how they assimilate, incorporate, and/or challenge Western cultures. As Islamophobes fear the growing populations of Muslims in America, and misinform the public that *Sharia* Laws are spreading, it is necessary to conduct such studies to try and educate people about the Muslim *Ummah* and the various nuances of Islamic practices. Since Shia are considered to be a more liberal trend within Islam, the lives of Shia women and their interactions with liberal feminist thought, has made for a unique and timely case study.

Many of the women interviewed were active at the mosque, women circles, as well as, within American society, as career women. As mentioned before, here are the career breakdowns of the women interviewed: 5 were in Nursing, 5 were Medical Practitioners, 3 were Doctoral Students/Adjuncts, 2 were Pharmacists, 2 were Government Analysts, 2 were lawyers, 2 were elementary Teachers, 1 was an Engineer, 1 was a Veterinarian, 1 was an Esthetician, 1 was a Graphic Designer, 1 was in Housekeeping, 1 was a Real Estate Agent, and 1 was an ABA Provider. Additionally, 7 of the women interviewed were home makers. The majority of those that were home makers were the ones organizing the women's circles. Those volunteering at the mosque leadership, educational center, watching the children, or managing the food, however,

were mainly women who also were working outside the home as well. All these busy women considered it very important to be active in their religious community, either within the women's circles, or the regular Friday congregations at the mosque. Out of the 35 women interviewed, 17 of the women attend the mosque every Friday, 2 women attended twice a week (board members), 9 attend 2 or 3 times a month, and the rest participated mainly in the women's circles, unless it was an important Islamic holiday.

Those who worked outside the home, had children, and were active at the mosque seemed to be playing a constant balancing act. With various responsibilities, they did not actually disclose being burdened, but instead, wanting to fulfill their family duties, raising Muslim children, and at the same time, also maintaining their careers. As one participant explained, she gave up moving ahead in her career because she needed the flex-time in order to be there for her two children. It was not about her career only anymore, it was more important to make sure that she had the extra quality time raising her children. As participant 13 describes:

“having a family and not giving up on (your) career and doing things, the two can be done, but has to be consciously. If people expect to do one without any restrictions, there is going to be sacrifices. For example, I gave up management positions because I want to be able to work from home and be with my kids. I also had to give up time with the kids, because I do have to be at the office in the early mornings. It is a balance. The women can balance both, I hope that is the future of Islamic feminism” (Personal communication, April 7, 2017).

She is not claiming a “second-shift” here, instead she is prioritizing her children and family, while also considering her career and making the best decision she can. This balancing act allows her to engage with her engineering colleagues on a daily basis and then come home early to be involved with her children's activities. Having a close-by extended family, also has helped her and her husband (who also works from home part of the time, to watch the kids) succeed in managing their work/life responsibilities.

However, it is important to note, that not every job in America has the privilege of flex time, and people sometimes have more than one job, or the nature of their jobs do not allow them to leave early and be with their children or to take care of their parents and extended families. As another women explains: “I stayed home and raised my kids and did this for 10 years, I managed to live with my husband’s money and I believe this should be for every woman. Some women may not be able to do this because they are not financially secure. But if they could, it would be best. I don’t feel like I gave up anything, I enjoyed every moment of it and have no regret” (Participant 18, personal communication, April 14, 2017). Again, these are ideal cases, in which women were financially able to and wanted to prioritize their family, instead of career. Having the financial choice, as well as, the personal choice, are options for Muslim women, as it is the husband’s obligation and Islamic duty to financially support the household. Working from home also allows some women more flexibility as another participant disclosed that she babysits for extra money, or another women said she sews and cooks for additional income, while others buy and sell products online (Participant 9, personal communication, March 24, 2017; Participant 2, personal communication March 17, 2017; Participant 31, personal communication, May 19, 2017). It can be said that these women are versatile and are handling various responsibilities at the same time.

Out of the 35 women interviewed, 10 had no children, either by choice, or they were not married yet. Thus raising Muslim children was not the only priority discussed, as one women explained: “women in the U.S. need to show themselves in politics, athletics, etc. and need to be active on fighting for women’s rights. They have a big responsibility to show their role in this society” (Participant 3, personal communication, March 17, 2017). As a result, these women are

“woke” and they know that their unique position as Shia Muslim women living in America gives them opportunities to push boundaries.

Being active within the mosque and women’s circles and also having a career outside of the home allows for interactions with non-Muslims. Just going out of the house, working, traveling, volunteering, shopping, picking up kids at school, mingling with neighbors, going to college, etc. all includes communications and exchanges with non-Muslims. As representatives, these Shia women, many of whom wear *hijab*, visually stand out in American society. There is no way of hiding their religion when wearing *hijab* and in the Trump-era, these women can often be targets of Islamophobic hatred. Therefore, just observing *hijab*, is an active and dangerous move in demonstrating their religion in American society. As a participant simply describes *hijab*: “I think it reminds me and others of who I am, it is the truth upfront” (Participant 31, personal communication, May 19, 2017).

Overall, these women are active members of not just this Shia community, but in America, in general. As American Muslims, they are constructing new identities and balancing various gender norms including those leaning towards more liberal gender equality and those leaning towards more Islamic gender complementarity. In fact, at times they are changing hats throughout the day as they work outside the home in a gender equality setting and compete with their male peers for higher positions in their field, and then come home and co-parent with their husbands, and take care of their family in a gender complementarity setting.

Nonetheless, the women interviewed believe they are active members of their community and they are breaking stereotypes and at the same time investigating male biased cultural practices that have infiltrated their religious beliefs. As participant nine describes: “Islam says that women have a respected position in society, but some men think wrong, they think they can

do whatever they want with the women. They say do this and do that, I am the one responsible for you, when I say don't do this don't do that. This is wrong. The right thing to do is to support her" (Personal communication, March 24, 2017). By reading and researching and discussing Islamic texts, asking questions from the *Imams* and other Islamic scholars at the mosque, attending the sermons, sending their children to the Islamic educational center, participating in the women's circles, and learning from one another, these Shia women are determining what gender norms are based on patriarchal cultural practices and what Islamic texts actually say. They are finding that Islam itself, based on the *Quran*, the *Hadiths*, stories of the Prophet and his family, all have elements that are closer to the spirit of gender equality and providing more egalitarian laws. Since Islam is perceived to have always been a champion of justice, if gender norms in Islamic societies are outdated and discriminatory, then in the pursuit of justice, it is the duty of Muslim intellectuals, local *Imams*, *Mujtahids*, and other clergy, to reconstruct the norms. This is a process that will need to also include the support of Muslim men, the brothers, fathers, grandfathers, sons, uncles, and cousins of these women, who should stand up and advocate for progressive change. At this mosque, this is happening and can be observed every week.

Objective 2: To Interview 35 Shia Women and Ask About Their Lived Experiences Of Being Exposed To Both Liberal And Islamic Gender Norms

Initially the goal was to interview 50 Shia women, however, when attending the mosque and explaining my research project, I found that many were suspicious of how my study could be used. Especially considering today's political climate and being Muslim in America. Nevertheless, having a total population of 65 Shia women attending this mosque, I have successfully interviewed 35, approximately half of the population. Since my interviews were predominately in English with common Arabic and Farsi words only sometimes brought up in

the interviews, this limited me from those who did not speak English. However, my 35 volunteers were willing and excited about participating in this study and provided me with valuable insight. Beyond the focus on the hegemonic binaries of liberal vs. traditional Islamic gender norms, through their responses to my questions, they showed me that their identities cannot be boxed in categories. In other words, the way they choose to practice gender norms cannot be compartmentalized. The process of picking and choosing what norms to follow from their “basket” and when, is an ever changing and transforming process based on the situation that they are in as a community, as an individual, as a mother, as a career woman, as a neighbor, as a citizen, as an immigrant, as a daughter, etc. Beyond the intersectionalities of race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, and many other real intersections of life, these women are active agents in choosing how they approach each new problem. They are not passive and they absolutely do not need to be “saved.” In fact, there is a lot that liberal feminists can learn from this community of women as the women interviewed gave some critiques summarized below.

First, liberal feminists of the second wave and officials of CEDAW can learn that diversity should be valued. The women at this particular mosque in Florida come from multicultural backgrounds including Iranian, Pakistani, Lebanese, Moroccan, Iraqi, African American, Columbian American, and Caucasian American. Many of them have married into families that are not of the same ethnic background as themselves. Therefore, their children and marriages are mixed, as I have seen the following: Moroccan/Pakistan, Caucasian/Iranian, Columbian/Pakistani, American-Iranian/Pakistani; and have also seen Sunni/Shia marriages and progeny. These new identities that are forming are based on a constant negotiation of cultural norms and force questions such as what is rooted in religion and what is cultural? The women interviewed were clear about their search for truth within the religion. Their lived experience

includes surrounding themselves with various people which allows them to research, study, and learn from one another. This mosque serves as a central place to observe this.

Secondly, it can be learned that religion is important to many people around the world. The secular West needs to understand this in order to build a stronger dialogue with Muslim communities. Instead of judging the Muslim *Ummah* and considering all Muslim women as oppressed and passive and needing to be “saved,” they can listen, ask, collaborate with indigenous women’s rights organizations, and such entities as MUSAWAH, and find shared interests. If this bridge is made, then liberal feminists and the human rights regimes, including CEDAW, can find common points of interest that reflect the religious values of these communities and promote gender egalitarian laws that will be more sustainable. If the goal is to end discrimination against women around the world, then secular and non-secular communities need to work together to fight injustice against women.

Third, relating to discrimination and the paragraph above, discrimination is relative. Western liberal feminists and CEDAW need to be cautious that they are not creating new layers of discrimination as they decide how women should be treated. Although, their intentions may be honest, there is an echo of Eurocentrism in the Articles of the Convention. In their determination to create a global standard of gender equality, they have chosen to ignore the average Muslim women and their beliefs. Although MUSAWAH is creating a dialogue amongst Muslim communities and CEDAW, this is only a beginning, and should be considered as a two way street. Muslim women and Islamic feminists can also help strengthen the Convention by valuing the role of motherhood, crediting the balance in the gender roles in Muslim societies, desexualizing society, and joining the fight for justice for all. As CEDAW sets out to eliminate gender discrimination, Muslim women and Islamic feminists as “norm entrepreneurs” are also

out there educating their communities and governments about “true” Islam, minus the patriarchal cultural interpretations. This “true” Islam is much closer to the spirit of CEDAW than what is culturally practiced in Muslim majority countries today.

Fourth, liberal feminists and CEDAW can join Muslim women and Islamic feminists in educating the next generation of global citizens. While the UN millennium development goals promotes universal equal access to education for girls, the *Quran* also promotes this (Participant 5, personal communication, March 24, 2017). Those that restrict or forbid girl’s education, such as the Taliban, are basing this on cultural norms, and limited resources, and this has allowed them to discriminate against women and girls and create an oppressive state. Associating the Taliban as Muslims and thinking that all Muslims are like such terrorist groups, is like assuming all Christians are part of the KKK. Extremism is present in every culture and religion. However, it is important to do research and consider the vast diversity amongst people, and even within those with similar cultures and religions. As Muslims are at the forefront of fighting against terrorism in the Middle East, they are also the first victims of such heinous acts of violence. Through collaboration with moderate Muslims and by promoting education and distributing resources to desperate locations, the UN and the West, can gain allies within the Muslim *Ummah*.

Fifth, it is necessary to value what each person brings to the table of life (Participant 5, personal communication, March 24, 2017). Males and females have different attributes and characteristics and talents that they each utilize. Judging women on a male standard is not fair or logical. If Muslim women want to be treated and respected as a nurturing woman, mother, caregiver, then, she should be able to choose to be. CEDAW’s promotion of gender equality norms should consider that this standard is not applicable in every culture and religion.

Especially since gender is a social construct, the practices of gender norms change based on the social context. Consequently, the term gender equality may not be the adequate term to use, and instead gender justice or gender egalitarian norms should be the goal. The point should be that both men and women are treated fairly and justly. When people around the world are still struggling to get food on the table, women's rights and rights in general are less of a prioritized discourse. However, it is important for governments, NGOs, religious communities, and individuals to all work together to reduce the inequalities between people in general.

The women in this community were very aware of all the inequalities in the world and felt that Islam's mission has always been to push for justice. The spirit of CEDAW and what liberal feminists would like to see is also justice. Their methods may be different, yet their end goal is the same. As a result of globalization, and the exchanges of ideas and norms, and the migration of Muslims to the West, best practices towards gender justice, can be learned, and applied.

Objective 3: To Observe Gender Norms and How They Are Practiced and Socialized At A Shia Mosque

The geography of this mosque has been described in detail in the previous chapter. However, it should be noted that I have visited many mosques throughout my life, within Florida and in other states including, Texas, Virginia, and Michigan, as well as various places in the Middle East. I have visited both Sunni and Shia mosques and have been part of Muslim Student Organizations and leadership at the University of Florida as well as the University of South Florida. Hence, when I say there is something unique happening at this particular mosque, I am comparing it with all my previous experiences with Muslim institutions. At some mosques that I have visited in my lifetime, women were secluded in a small room with their children and

watched the *Imam* on a TV screen, in other instances they were upstairs and far away from the speaker, or they were in a separate building, in a portable, and sometimes they were not even present at the mosque. On the other hand, this mosque has split the building exactly in half, one side for men and one side for women. Yet, there are shared spaces where both interact and help take care of the mosque and participate in the organization and functioning of the activities. Walking into the kitchen, you can see men washing dishes and women making tea, working together, they prepare the Friday dinners to be shared by everyone. When it is time to clean up, you see both men and women sweeping, mopping the floors, and cleaning the bathrooms. One does not serve the other, but in this mosque, they share these duties.

Due to the security threat to mosques these days, there is a gate and passcode to get to the parking area. There are cameras along the various angles of the outside of the mosque. For those that are new, there is a camera to look into and talk through, to be let through the gate. Usually anyone that can get to the phone first will press the key to let people in. This has been a new adjustment for this mosque, however, they found it necessary as verbally threatening messages have been left and the police have had to visit on occasions to investigate possible hate crimes. To protect their congregation, the executive board decided to invite a Muslim law enforcement officer and lawyers, to train members of the mosque and educate them on their rights as Americans. Both men and women of the mosque have been trained in self-defense and some even come to the mosque armed, in order to protect the members, in case of an active shooter. This is another example of how this mosque is so much more than a place of worship. It is truly an educational center for both men and women.

Objective 4: To better understand the competition between liberal gender equality norms and Islamic gender complimentary norms and their power structures.

As chapter two demonstrated there has been a lack in literature concerning how international human rights norms have been challenged. By opening a door to study religious institutions such as the Shia *Ummah*, this dissertation project has added to the literature on norms by using critical constructivism and postcolonial feminism, to uncover the structural relationships between the local and global, and the power dynamics, in the social construction and promotion of progressive Islamic gender norms. Consequently, the Shia mosque studied here has previously been described as a “dialogical site” where constant critical dialogue on gender norms can be observed while new meanings are exchanged (Osanloo, 2009) amongst practicing Muslims, clergy, and intellectuals that are exposed to various competing frameworks including liberal and traditional Islamic gender norms. By focusing on the power relations between agents and structures, critical constructivism has provided a guide to interpreting the process of how these Shia women are debating, manipulating, challenging, and negotiating between gender equality and gender complementarity norms. As such, norm diffusion can be conceptualized as a multilayered and multi-actor process in order to better understand how norms are translated, transformed, and practiced across individual communities and across time.

Western powers (CEDAW, second wave liberal feminists, Europe, North America) have stereotypically depicted Muslim women as passive victims instead of agents who are actively engaged in efforts to reshape their identities and their societies. Increasingly, since 9/11, Muslim Americans are under a microscope with a call to “save” the “oppressed” Muslim women from Muslim men (Abu-Lughod, 2013). To challenge these notions, this research project has analyzed how Shia American women articulate and perceive their status, rights, and identities to show the

diverse and varied realities of these women. My findings indicate that these women are actually simultaneously fighting two hegemonic structural powers (Western liberal thought and traditional Islamic thought) that frame how they should practice their gender roles. However, moving beyond the competing gender norms discussed thoroughly in previous chapters, American Shia Muslim women and Islamic feminists, as “norm entrepreneurs” are creating an alternative path or third way in which they are actively picking and choosing what aspects of liberal gender equality norms and what aspects of Islamic gender complementarity norms to follow, and how.

Problems Approached in This Research

There were many things to consider when conducting this research. First and foremost, this is a very timely case study. The political climate and ideas such as “fake news,” makes it easy for anyone to discriminate and instigate hate. Muslims in America are constantly being verbally and sometimes physically abused by growing xenophobic tendencies in the West. Furthermore, Muslim women who wear *hijab* are walking around with targets on their heads. It is no wonder that some women were scared to talk to me and were worried that their name would be published and find its way to a Muslim registry.

However, I did assure these women that their identities would remain anonymous. I wanted to make sure that the participants could trust me, so I explained to them that I understood the security concerns, as a Muslim myself, and would never do something intentionally to jeopardize them. At first, I thought of using pseudo names for each participant. Then as the number of participants grew, this task became difficult and I ended up using numbers instead. As I attended the mosque each week, and interacted with different members of the community,

slowly more and more people trusted me, and would volunteer their time. Yet, the number of participants that volunteered were half of the total population of women who attend this mosque. As mentioned before, this was also due to language barriers, but also has to do with their suspicion of my project.

In addition, the 1 hour time commitment was a lot to ask on a Friday evening. While all the activities were occurring at the mosque, I would need to interview the women away from all the noise. Sometimes, I was able to use the room for the resident *Imam*, the dining area, the prayer room (after hours), or meet outside in the parking area. Week after week, I did my best to find a quiet place where my interviewees would be comfortable talking to me. Since the mosque was running its events at the same time, I was often interrupted by people asking what was going on, children running in, the speakers getting louder, dinner time, the call to prayer, and so many other interruptions. In future research, I would recommend meeting people at the mosque and setting a separate time to visit them at an agreed upon location. This can help with reducing the interferences, but, it can also be a slower process in gaining participants. In my case, I had a limited time of 3-4 months and was traveling each weekend to get to the location of the mosque, and wanted to get as many interviews done per Friday evening as possible.

The time commitment from each participant was also very long. Although the average was an hour, some participants had a lot to say and the interview could go on for an hour and a half. The demographic questions and then the 19 open-ended questions may have been too much for some. Reducing the number of questions could help with reducing the time commitment. Nevertheless, I feel that the nature of my questions gave me the responses necessary to answer my research questions and better understand the perspectives of my subjects. In future research, I would recommend requesting email addresses from the members of mosque and sending out

surveys for people to conduct on their own time. The responses will not be as interactive, yet they could add another layer of insight and possibly reach more people.

Having limited resources also was a hurdle for this study. Since I did not apply for graduate fellowships and funding, I had a financial challenge in this study. Thankfully, since I worked full-time, I was able to do my best to navigate this issue. For future studies, I would recommend applying for funding and possibly hiring a research assistant as well as a translator to help reach more subjects. As the principal investigator with no other assistants, it was a big challenge to manage this research project. As a result, traveling, conducting the interviews, analyzing the findings, organizing the themes, and writing my interpretations of the data, has taken 10 months. Overall, this self-reflecting journey may have taken a long time, however, I have learned so much from these women and truly have appreciated the experience.

Recommendation for Future Research

As I reflect back on my work, I can see future research projects that can build and extend this study. Since, I wanted to remain focused on women's experiences, for this dissertation project, I decided to only interview women. My limited time and resources only allowed me to interview 35 Shia women and I would have liked to interview many more. One way of doing this would be to have interviewed women from multiple mosques. Since there are nine Shia mosques in Florida, this could have been possible. However, this would have taken much longer and the travel and accommodations would have been difficult. A way to reduce this challenge would have been to interview both men and women at this mosque. For future studies, I would recommend going back to this mosque and interviewing the men, the clergy, and also if possible, some teenagers (with their parent's consent). A generational study could also be fruitful in

determining changes in gender norms and habits. While some mothers and daughters were interviewed, the numbers were limited.

Another avenue of research can be comparing American Shia and Sunni women. This would result in many more participants and expand this study of gender norms and religious interpretations. Also comparing the geography of both Sunni and Shia mosques and their connections with the Middle East for resources, can help further unravel the global networks of the Muslim *Ummah*. Additionally, a more convenient way of gathering more participants would have been to study Sunni and Shia students at our University. The access to the students, and the multiple Muslim student organizations, would have allowed for easy recruitment. Since Shia are a minority within Islam, extending this study to include Sunni populations could only bring more participants and a wider frame of reference.

Finally, my own personal favorite would be to look at multiple Shia communities in various states in the U.S. and have a more comprehensive study of the women attending these mosques, serving in leadership positions, volunteering, attending women's circles, educating themselves, and teaching the next generation. As Shia mosques are considered to be more "women friendly," it is important to try and observe and understand how gender norms are practiced at these mosque and if they can be modeled in other mosques (Sayeed, al-Adawiya, & Bagby, 2013). Again, since Shia are a minority group of Muslims, there are less studies on this community. More studies about Muslim women and constructive dialogue with CEDAW and liberal feminists can enhance the progress towards justice for women around the world.

In today's increasingly interconnected world, with the constant flow of information, many competing norms have emerged in the international system which introduce alternative options to life, values, or ways of thinking and practicing (Muller 2004; Muller & Wunderlich, 2014).

Among the most debated have been gender norms arising from the tension between Western liberal thought (that promotes gender equality) and Islamic thought (that promotes gender complementarity). As a result of globalization, there are more hybrids of cultures, exchanges of ideas, social justice partnerships, and collaborations across the globe which challenge the notion of norms as being static and unchangeable. This dissertation project has demonstrated that within this Shia mosque, Muslim women are actively developing alternative progressive Islamic gender norms that are within the spirit of CEDAW, but focused on gender justice rather than gender equality.

This dissertation project asked the following questions: how practicing Shia women are navigating between competing liberal gender equality and traditional Islamic gender complementarity norms in regards to women's rights and status in society? How they are self-identifying themselves and consciously picking and choosing what gender norms to follow and practice and teach the next generation? Finally, as "norm entrepreneurs," how these Shia women are creating an alternative path which is neither purely liberal nor Islamic? After observing and discussing key areas about Islamic gender norms and liberal gender equality norms with my participants, I have inferred that there is no category yet to describe what is happening here. The socialization and negotiation process that Shia women described, inadvertently in their responses to my questions, indicate that these women are actually simultaneously fighting two hegemonic powers: Western liberal thought and traditional Islamic thought; that frame how they should practice their gender roles. By educating themselves and asking challenging questions from their Muslim clergy, they are finding truth within their religion. They are analyzing Islamic literature for themselves and distinguishing between what is cultural, based on the male biased views, and what is authentic Islam, based on the *Quran*, *Hadiths*, and the stories of how the Prophet and his

family lived. Meanwhile, *Mujtahids* practice *ijtihad* and produce *fiqh* to update and answer their questions based on the problems they confront today, and this allows for nuances in the practice of Islamic norms and gender norms, in particular.

Every time these Shia women attend this mosque or the women's circles, they are taking a step towards empowering themselves with Islamic knowledge. Having a multicultural mosque allows women from various backgrounds to sit at the same table and discuss, debate, argue, teach one another, and establish new gender norms that reflect their lived experiences as Muslim Americans. Through educating themselves and the next generation, they are becoming more aware of their Islamic rights and demanding them. As more and more Muslims become visible in America, it is hoped that the fear of them will subside. For now, just like all other women, Shia women just want the choice to be able to pick how they want to live. They have this in common with their liberal sisters.

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Appendix 1:

Articles of CEDAW

PART I

Article I

For the purposes of the present Convention, the term "discrimination against women" shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.

Article 2

States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end, undertake:

- (a) To embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation if not yet incorporated therein and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle;
- (b) To adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women;
- (c) To establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination;
- (d) To refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation;
- (e) To take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise;
- (f) To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women;
- (g) To repeal all national penal provisions which constitute discrimination against women.

Article 3

States Parties shall take in all fields, in particular in the political, social, economic and cultural fields, all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men.

Article 4

1. Adoption by States Parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination as defined in the present Convention, but shall in no way entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate standards; these measures shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved.

2. Adoption by States Parties of special measures, including those measures contained in the present Convention, aimed at protecting maternity shall not be considered discriminatory.

Article 5

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures:

(a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women;

(b) To ensure that family education includes a proper understanding of maternity as a social function and the recognition of the common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children, it being understood that the interest of the children is the primordial consideration in all cases.

Article 6

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.

PART II

Article 7

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- (c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

Article 8

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations.

Article 9

1. States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality. They shall ensure in particular that neither marriage to an alien nor change of nationality by the husband during marriage shall automatically change the nationality of the wife, render her stateless or force upon her the nationality of the husband.

2. States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children.

PART III

Article 10

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education and in particular to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:

- (a) The same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories in rural as well as in urban areas; this equality shall be ensured in pre-school, general, technical, professional and higher technical education, as well as in all types of vocational training;
- (b) Access to the same curricula, the same examinations, teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality;
- (c) The elimination of any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education by encouraging coeducation and other types of education which will help to achieve this aim and, in particular, by the revision of textbooks and school programmes and the adaptation of teaching methods;
- (d) The same opportunities to benefit from scholarships and other study grants;
- (e) The same opportunities for access to programmes of continuing education, including adult and functional literacy programmes, particularly those aimed at reducing, at the earliest possible time, any gap in education existing between men and women;
- (f) The reduction of female student drop-out rates and the organization of programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely;
- (g) The same Opportunities to participate actively in sports and physical education;
- (h) Access to specific educational information to help to ensure the health and well-being of families, including information and advice on family planning.

Article 11

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular:

- (a) The right to work as an inalienable right of all human beings;
- (b) The right to the same employment opportunities, including the application of the same criteria for selection in matters of employment;
- (c) The right to free choice of profession and employment, the right to promotion, job security and all benefits and conditions of service and the right to receive vocational training and retraining, including apprenticeships, advanced vocational training and recurrent training;
- (d) The right to equal remuneration, including benefits, and to equal treatment in respect of work of equal value, as well as equality of treatment in the evaluation of the quality of work;
- (e) The right to social security, particularly in cases of retirement, unemployment, sickness, invalidity and old age and other incapacity to work, as well as the right to paid leave;
- (f) The right to protection of health and to safety in working conditions, including the safeguarding of the function of reproduction.

2. In order to prevent discrimination against women on the grounds of marriage or maternity and to ensure their effective right to work, States Parties shall take appropriate measures:

- (a) To prohibit, subject to the imposition of sanctions, dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy or of maternity leave and discrimination in dismissals on the basis of marital status;
- (b) To introduce maternity leave with pay or with comparable social benefits without loss of former employment, seniority or social allowances;

- (c) To encourage the provision of the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of child-care facilities;
- (d) To provide special protection to women during pregnancy in types of work proved to be harmful to them.

3. Protective legislation relating to matters covered in this article shall be reviewed periodically in the light of scientific and technological knowledge and shall be revised, repealed or extended as necessary.

Article 12

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those related to family planning.
2. Notwithstanding the provisions of paragraph I of this article, States Parties shall ensure to women appropriate services in connection with pregnancy, confinement and the post-natal period, granting free services where necessary, as well as adequate nutrition during pregnancy and lactation.

Article 13

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in other areas of economic and social life in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular:

- (a) The right to family benefits;
- (b) The right to bank loans, mortgages and other forms of financial credit;
- (c) The right to participate in recreational activities, sports and all aspects of cultural life.

Article 14

1. States Parties shall take into account the particular problems faced by rural women and the significant roles which rural women play in the economic survival of their families, including their work in the non-monetized sectors of the economy, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the application of the provisions of the present Convention to women in rural areas.
2. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in rural areas in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development and, in particular, shall ensure to such women the right:
 - (a) To participate in the elaboration and implementation of development planning at all levels;

- (b) To have access to adequate health care facilities, including information, counselling and services in family planning;
- (c) To benefit directly from social security programmes;
- (d) To obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency;
- (e) To organize self-help groups and co-operatives in order to obtain equal access to economic opportunities through employment or self employment;
- (f) To participate in all community activities;
- (g) To have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes;
- (h) To enjoy adequate living conditions, particularly in relation to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply, transport and communications.

PART IV

Article 15

1. States Parties shall accord to women equality with men before the law.
2. States Parties shall accord to women, in civil matters, a legal capacity identical to that of men and the same opportunities to exercise that capacity. In particular, they shall give women equal rights to conclude contracts and to administer property and shall treat them equally in all stages of procedure in courts and tribunals.
3. States Parties agree that all contracts and all other private instruments of any kind with a legal effect which is directed at restricting the legal capacity of women shall be deemed null and void.
4. States Parties shall accord to men and women the same rights with regard to the law relating to the movement of persons and the freedom to choose their residence and domicile.

Article 16

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:
 - (a) The same right to enter into marriage;
 - (b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent;
 - (c) The same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution;
 - (d) The same rights and responsibilities as parents, irrespective of their marital status, in matters relating to their children; in all cases the interests of the children shall be paramount;

- (e) The same rights to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights;
- (f) The same rights and responsibilities with regard to guardianship, wardship, trusteeship and adoption of children, or similar institutions where these concepts exist in national legislation; in all cases the interests of the children shall be paramount;
- (g) The same personal rights as husband and wife, including the right to choose a family name, a profession and an occupation;
- (h) The same rights for both spouses in respect of the ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment and disposition of property, whether free of charge or for a valuable consideration.

2. The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.

PART V

Article 17

1. For the purpose of considering the progress made in the implementation of the present Convention, there shall be established a [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women](#) (hereinafter referred to as the Committee) consisting, at the time of entry into force of the Convention, of eighteen and, after ratification of or accession to the Convention by the thirty-fifth State Party, of twenty-three experts of high moral standing and competence in the field covered by the Convention. The experts shall be elected by States Parties from among their nationals and shall serve in their personal capacity, consideration being given to equitable geographical distribution and to the representation of the different forms of civilization as well as the principal legal systems.
2. The members of the Committee shall be elected by secret ballot from a list of persons nominated by States Parties. Each State Party may nominate one person from among its own nationals.
3. The initial election shall be held six months after the date of the entry into force of the present Convention. At least three months before the date of each election the Secretary-General of the United Nations shall address a letter to the States Parties inviting them to submit their nominations within two months. The Secretary-General shall prepare a list in alphabetical order of all persons thus nominated, indicating the States Parties which have nominated them, and shall submit it to the States Parties.
4. Elections of the members of the Committee shall be held at a meeting of States Parties convened by the Secretary-General at United Nations Headquarters. At that meeting, for which two thirds of the States Parties shall constitute a quorum, the persons elected to the Committee

shall be those nominees who obtain the largest number of votes and an absolute majority of the votes of the representatives of States Parties present and voting.

5. The members of the Committee shall be elected for a term of four years. However, the terms of nine of the members elected at the first election shall expire at the end of two years; immediately after the first election the names of these nine members shall be chosen by lot by the Chairman of the Committee.

6. The election of the five additional members of the Committee shall be held in accordance with the provisions of paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 of this article, following the thirty-fifth ratification or accession. The terms of two of the additional members elected on this occasion shall expire at the end of two years, the names of these two members having been chosen by lot by the Chairman of the Committee.

7. For the filling of casual vacancies, the State Party whose expert has ceased to function as a member of the Committee shall appoint another expert from among its nationals, subject to the approval of the Committee.

8. The members of the Committee shall, with the approval of the General Assembly, receive emoluments from United Nations resources on such terms and conditions as the Assembly may decide, having regard to the importance of the Committee's responsibilities.

9. The Secretary-General of the United Nations shall provide the necessary staff and facilities for the effective performance of the functions of the Committee under the present Convention.

Article 18

1. States Parties undertake to submit to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, for consideration by the Committee, a report on the legislative, judicial, administrative or other measures which they have adopted to give effect to the provisions of the present Convention and on the progress made in this respect:

- (a) Within one year after the entry into force for the State concerned;
- (b) Thereafter at least every four years and further whenever the Committee so requests.

2. Reports may indicate factors and difficulties affecting the degree of fulfilment of obligations under the present Convention.

Article 19

1. The Committee shall adopt its own rules of procedure.
2. The Committee shall elect its officers for a term of two years.

Article 20

1. The Committee shall normally meet for a period of not more than two weeks annually in order to consider the reports submitted in accordance with article 18 of the present Convention.
2. The meetings of the Committee shall normally be held at United Nations Headquarters or at any other convenient place as determined by the Committee. ([amendment](#), [status of ratification](#))

Article 21

1. The Committee shall, through the Economic and Social Council, report annually to the General Assembly of the United Nations on its activities and may make suggestions and general recommendations based on the examination of reports and information received from the States Parties. Such suggestions and general recommendations shall be included in the report of the Committee together with comments, if any, from States Parties.
2. The Secretary-General of the United Nations shall transmit the reports of the Committee to the Commission on the Status of Women for its information.

Article 22

The specialized agencies shall be entitled to be represented at the consideration of the implementation of such provisions of the present Convention as fall within the scope of their activities. The Committee may invite the specialized agencies to submit reports on the implementation of the Convention in areas falling within the scope of their activities.

PART VI

Article 23

Nothing in the present Convention shall affect any provisions that are more conducive to the achievement of equality between men and women which may be contained:

- (a) In the legislation of a State Party; or
- (b) In any other international convention, treaty or agreement in force for that State.

Article 24

States Parties undertake to adopt all necessary measures at the national level aimed at achieving the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Convention.

Article 25

1. The present Convention shall be open for signature by all States.
2. The Secretary-General of the United Nations is designated as the depositary of the present Convention.
3. The present Convention is subject to ratification. Instruments of ratification shall be deposited with the Secretary-General of the United Nations.
4. The present Convention shall be open to accession by all States. Accession shall be effected by the deposit of an instrument of accession with the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Article 26

1. A request for the revision of the present Convention may be made at any time by any State Party by means of a notification in writing addressed to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.
2. The General Assembly of the United Nations shall decide upon the steps, if any, to be taken in respect of such a request.

Article 27

1. The present Convention shall enter into force on the thirtieth day after the date of deposit with the Secretary-General of the United Nations of the twentieth instrument of ratification or accession.
2. For each State ratifying the present Convention or acceding to it after the deposit of the twentieth instrument of ratification or accession, the Convention shall enter into force on the thirtieth day after the date of the deposit of its own instrument of ratification or accession.

Article 28

1. The Secretary-General of the United Nations shall receive and circulate to all States the text of reservations made by States at the time of ratification or accession.
2. A reservation incompatible with the object and purpose of the present Convention shall not be permitted.

3. Reservations may be withdrawn at any time by notification to this effect addressed to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, who shall then inform all States thereof. Such notification shall take effect on the date on which it is received.

Article 29

1. Any dispute between two or more States Parties concerning the interpretation or application of the present Convention which is not settled by negotiation shall, at the request of one of them, be submitted to arbitration. If within six months from the date of the request for arbitration the parties are unable to agree on the organization of the arbitration, any one of those parties may refer the dispute to the International Court of Justice by request in conformity with the Statute of the Court.

2. Each State Party may at the time of signature or ratification of the present Convention or accession thereto declare that it does not consider itself bound by paragraph I of this article. The other States Parties shall not be bound by that paragraph with respect to any State Party which has made such a reservation.

3. Any State Party which has made a reservation in accordance with paragraph 2 of this article may at any time withdraw that reservation by notification to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Article 30

The present Convention, the Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish texts of which are equally authentic, shall be deposited with the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF the undersigned, duly authorized, have signed the present Convention

Appendix 2:

Letter of Support from Mosque

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

University of South Florida Institutional Review Board
3702 Spectrum Blvd., Suite 165
Tampa, Florida 33612

02/10/2017

To: University of South Florida Institutional Review Board:

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I am writing to grant permission for Raheleh Dayerizadeh, a Doctoral Candidate for the University of South Florida, to conduct her dissertation research on "Gender Norms in Shia Communities in the United States." Based on the review of her proposed research, I understand that Raheleh Dayerizadeh will recruit 50 female members of our congregation and conduct interviews at the [REDACTED] over the next three months. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We are happy to participate in this study and help contribute to her research. I can be reached at [REDACTED] if further information is needed.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Appendix 3:

Research Consent Form



Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk and Authorization to Collect

Pro # Pro00029450

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below. We are asking you to take part in a research study called: Gender norms in Shia Communities in the United States.

The person who is in charge of this research study is Raheleh Dayerizadeh. This person is called the Principal Investigator. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Steven Roach, her faculty advisor.

The research will be conducted at a mosque in Florida.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this dissertation project is to find out how practicing Shia Muslim women who are active in religious institutions in the United States are negotiating between competing liberal and Islamic gender norms in regards to women's rights and status in society.

Why are you being asked to take part?

I am asking you to take part in this research study because you are a female Shia women living in the U.S. between the age of 18 and 75 and we would like to better understand your perspectives on liberal and Islamic gender norms.

Study Procedures:

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

Complete a short demographic questionnaire and then will be asked twenty open-ended interview questions, which will last approximately 1 hour over a period of one day. The interview will be audiotaped by the researcher and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The interview will be conducted at the Islamic Educational Center of Florida or at a mutually agreeable setting to the participant and the researcher.

Total Number of Participants

35 individuals will take part in this study at a mosque in Florida.

Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

Benefits

The potential benefits of participating in this research study include: the opportunity to express your lived experiences as Shia women and your perceptions, and beliefs in regards to gender norms.

Risks or Discomfort

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study. However, there is a potential breach of confidentiality; as there is identifiable information that will be provided when signing the consent forms, however, all measurements will be taken to safely secure this information, under password protected computer and the audio recordings will be locked in a desk in my office for 5 years. I will keep all the records private and confidential and will use numbers instead of your names in the research study to protect your privacy.

Compensation

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Costs

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:

- The Principal Investigator and study Chair/coordinator
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study, and individuals who provide oversight to ensure that we are doing the study in the right way.
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name and instead use numbers to ensure further privacy and confidentiality of participant study materials and audio tapes. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are. Therefore, the information collected during this study will remain private and confidential. Only the researcher, Raheleh Dayerizadeh and her faculty Advisor, Dr. Roach, University of South Florida, School of Interdisciplinary Global Studies, Tampa, FL will have immediate access to this study's data and information.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, please email me at rdayeriz@usf.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

Date

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Appendix 4:
National Origin/Birthplace

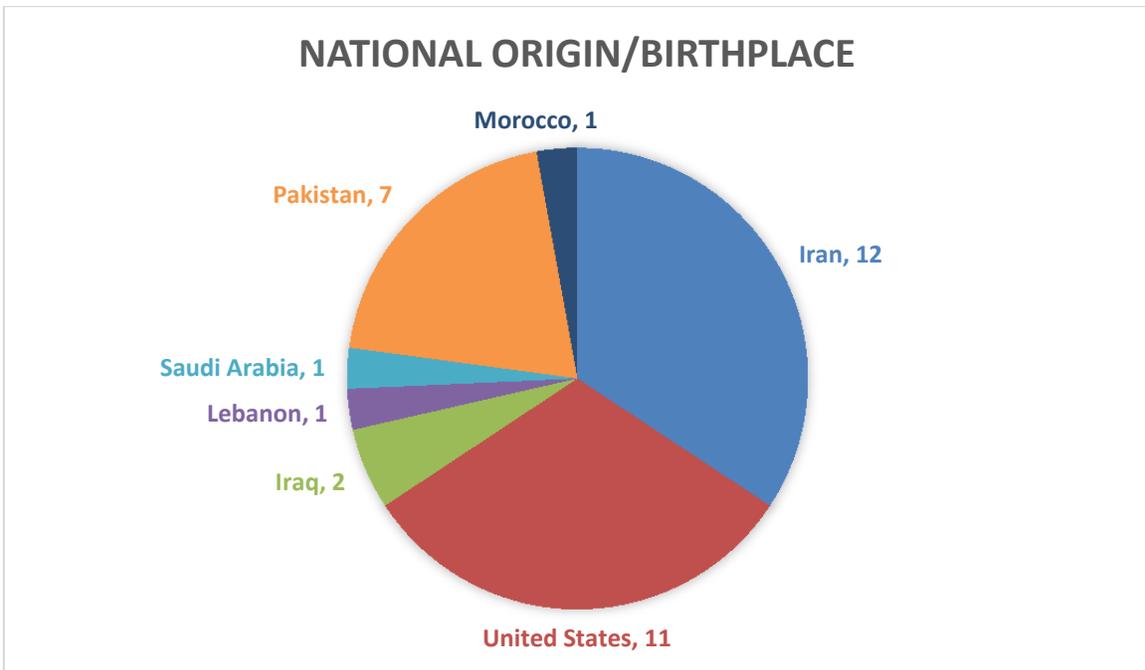


Figure 1. National Origin/Birthplace. Demographic Data of 35 Shia women in local mosque in the U.S.

Appendix 5:

Education

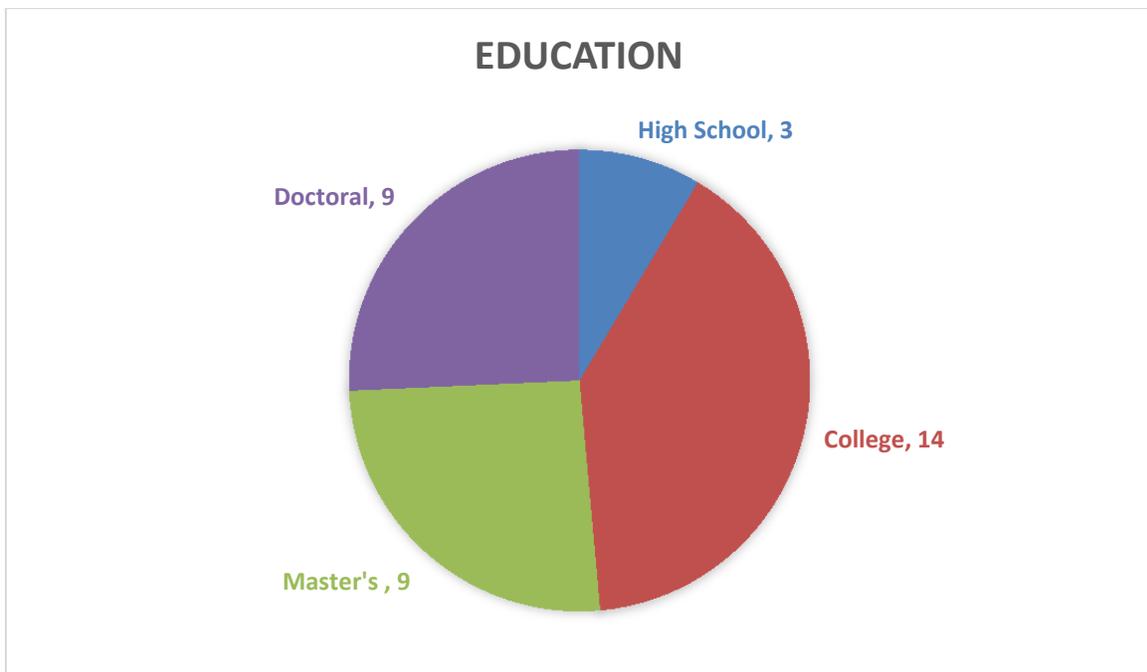


Figure 2. Education. Demographic Data of 35 Shia women in local mosque in the U.S.

Appendix 6:

Occupation

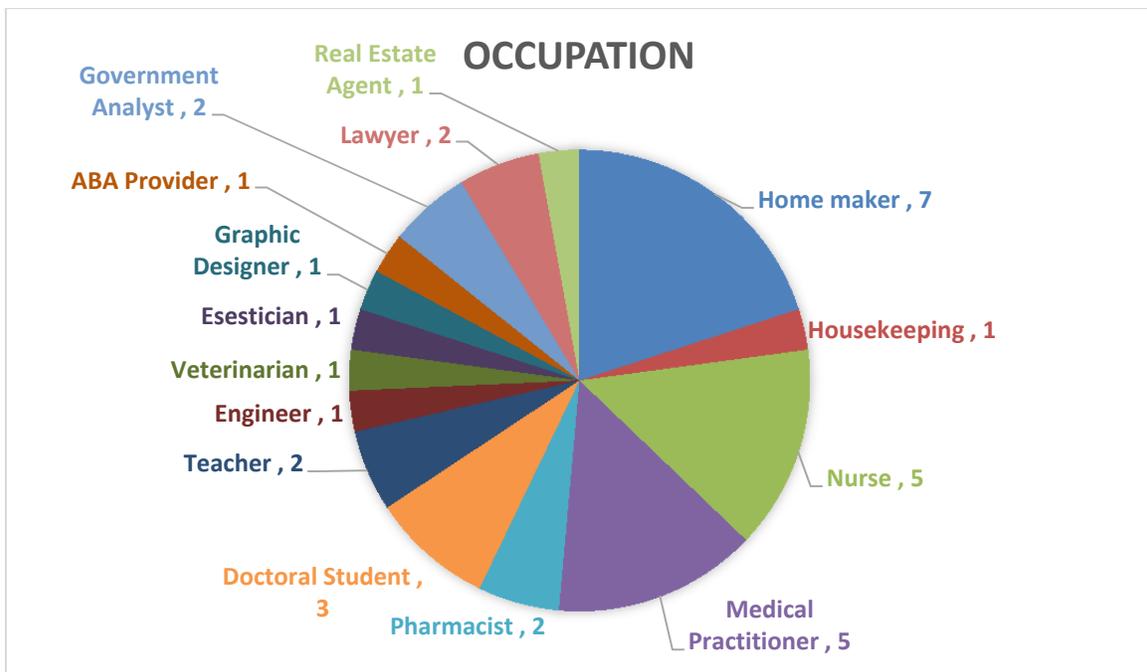


Figure 3. Occupation. Demographic Data of 35 Shia women in local mosque in the U.S.

Appendix 7:
Age of Participants

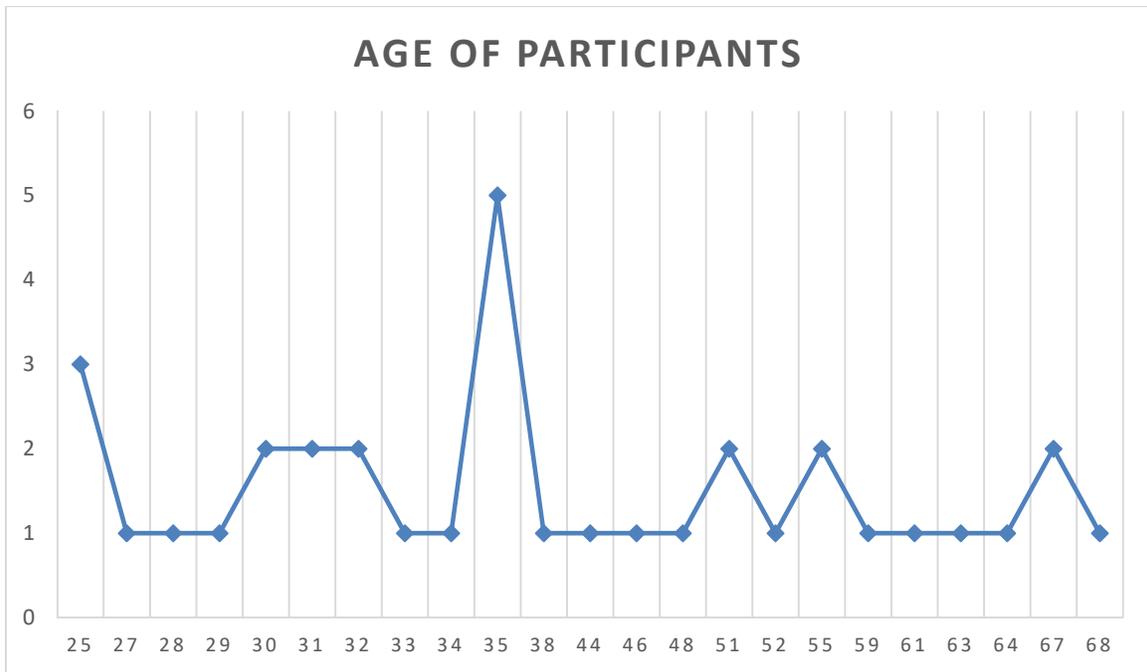


Figure 4. Age of Participants. Demographic Data of 35 Shia women in local mosque in the U.S.