



“The Courage to Express Myself”: Muslim women’s narrative of self-empowerment and personal development through university studies



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to understand the process of self-empowerment that religious and non-religious Muslim women living in Israel experienced during their university studies. The principal results indicate a narrative of self-empowerment which develops through three stages: (a) awareness of gender regulation; (b) moral resistance; and (c) self-empowerment through university studies. Major study findings reveal that women do indeed undergo a deeply personal process of self-empowerment, which then encourages a growing awareness to their own inner strengths and ability to draw on such power in other aspects of life.

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1. Literature review

Empowerment is defined as an interactive process between people, their cultural contexts, and their environments (Rappaport, 1987). Empowerment has also been defined as a process that can increase the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. This study discusses the process by which university studies can become a springboard for women to empower themselves (Cornwall et al., 2007; Little and Green, 2009), and thus turn self-empowerment into an inherent strength or potential state of being.

Self-empowerment is an interactive process that can occur during university studies, wholly motivated by the students themselves, allowing them to act as “self-agents” (p. 19) who mediate, negotiate, and represent their lives, both individually and in association with others. As self-agents they live according to their aspirations, values, beliefs, and their commitment to a culture or lifestyle in the way that is most appropriate to them (White, 2000). An illustration of these issues is demonstrated, in this study focuses on the self-empowerment process of female Muslim students. The study’s aims are to understand the significance that

religious and non-religious Muslim women attribute to their university studies and to explore the processes they undergo during their studies, and how they relate to empowerment.

The first reason to focus on the story of Muslim women is due to the fact that in Israeli universities, the percentage of Muslim women attaining their degrees has risen steadily from 39.5% in 1990 to 68.6% in 2011 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2010, 2011). This increase may be indicative of the growing importance of education in general, and the importance of university studies in particular, and the encouragement Muslim women receive to acquire knowledge, expertise, and social affiliations, all of which form the foundation for personal development and empowerment.

The second reason to focus on Muslim women stems from the unique process they experience before and throughout their studies: the choice to study in universities where the prevalent language is Hebrew, and the need to pass entrance exams to be admitted to prestigious faculties, testifies to the enormous emotional upheavals they experience even before beginning to study. However, such characteristics exemplify the very essence of an empowerment process, a process that is inspiring and profound, and presents an example that clearly demonstrates both theory and practice of self-empowerment; these two reasons lead to the uniqueness of this study.

This study is distinctive in that it presents findings regarding the existence and development of a self-empowerment process stemming from the acquisition of knowledge and education. Although there already exists a broad philosophical foundation,

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establishing that knowledge translates into power (Foucault, 1982), and an understanding that education may contribute to self-empowerment (Delors, 2001; Freire, 1970, 1985; Christopher et al., 2001; Leach et al., 2001; Lelwica, 1999), this particular piece of research illustrates the dynamics that occur in practice within the empowerment process: it starts with awareness of gender regulation, evolves as resistance is met, and is completed with self-empowerment and self-development through university studies (Gilat, 2006; Gilat and Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2009a,b).

Based upon the theoretical approaches mentioned above, a review of the literature has been assembled, using three key concepts that illuminate the process of self-empowerment through higher-education studies that women undergo: gender regulation, resistance, and personal empowerment. Gender regulation illustrates how women become aware of repression and attacks upon their rights. Resistance demonstrates the strategies that they employ to oppose repression, expressed as their choice to study at the higher education level. Personal empowerment reveals what they do in order to achieve knowledge by which they can achieve control over their lives.

1.1. Gender regulation

Gender regulation involves the dictation of an individual's behavior by ideologies, social norms, and institutional practices that designate particular behaviors as appropriate or inappropriate in terms of an individual's gender (Zuckerman, 1997). These definitions are so assimilated and internalized that people make decisions and set goals oblivious to the influence of gender regulation (Hall, 1992, 1996). Gender regulation constitutes part of the social organization that creates order in the fundamental activities of daily life, contributing a central factor to the regulation of roles and the distribution of personal, professional, organizational, communal, and political resources (Breton, 1994; Fellabaum, 2011). One example of the influence of gender regulation applies to the general division of roles within families, and specifically to role division within Israeli families.

Israeli society defines itself as family-oriented, governing the appointment of authority and roles within a family, establishing the superiority of men over women, and women's dependence upon men. Women are defined, first and foremost, as wives and mothers, whose primary duty is to bear children and attend to the home and family members (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002). The centrality of the institution of family is established and maintained religiously and nationally for both the Jews and the Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel. However, one can distinguish between the gender regulation dynamic in Israeli families of non-religious women and of religious women.

The gender regulation dynamic within the family of non-religious women is almost imperceptible due to the insignificance of religion and traditional family values for them. The status of men in such families is equivalent to or even lower (in some cases) to that of the women. Each person has the right to choose their own partner; they tend to marry at a relatively late age; to give birth to a small number of children, and to contribute to the growing divorce rate (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002). This group is characterized by a low dynamic of gender regulation (Gilat, 2006).

Conversely, the gender regulation dynamic within the families of religious women in Israel is evident in its high regard for religion and the prominence of family values in the personal lives of individual family members and the family as a whole. The family structure is patriarchal, with the father as its dominant figure. The family group dictates what lifestyle is appropriate for each family member, imposing sanctions against those who stray from the accepted path. In such families, the marriage age is young, the choice of partner is determined largely by families, the number of

children is high, and the divorce rate is low. This group is characterized by a high dynamic of gender regulation (Kulik and Rayyan, 2005; Meler, 2013; Offera and Sabahb, 2011). Similar conditions are also reflected in the lives of many Muslim women in Israel.

Gender regulation of women, and particularly Muslim women, is maintained through the patriarchal family structure. A typical Muslim family has a hierarchal system based on differential status by age and gender. A woman is expected to obey her husband's wishes and support him and his family strictly within the confines of the home, and is only permitted to enter the public sphere in modest dress. Among the most religiously devout Muslims, women fully cover their heads and bodies to preserve their honor and that of their families (Abu-Baker and Azaiza, 2010; Kulik and Rayyan, 2005; Offera and Sabahb, 2011).

Studies conducted in Israel have examined the variety of points of view between women of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds by recording their views on traditional women's roles. For example, religious Jewish and Muslim women are expected to adopt the traditional gender roles of mother and wife, thus preserving the established social order. Non-religious Jewish and Muslim women tend to disengage somewhat from these roles, and display a stronger inclination toward equality and feminist attitudes (Herzog, 2004; Herzog and Bader-Araf, 2000; Moore, 2004; Shapira et al., 2010, 2011). Whatever the varying points of view, these studies suggest that gender regulation is so imprinted on the collective consciousness, that although women make decisions, set goals, and plan their accomplishments, patriarchal regulation is often evident even in modern societies (Hall, 1992). Only when the forces of gender regulation are identified is it possible to develop a critical awareness that can lead to resistance, manifesting in women's refusal to automatically accept pre-set gender determinations in their lives.

1.2. Resistance to gender regulation

Resistance, which forms a significant link in the process of women's empowerment, has been described as an internal positive power that enables women to act, consciously or not, against oppressive gender, social, and cultural regulations in response to their social marginalization and suppression (Miheulich and Storrs, 2003). This internal positive power acts as a factor that maintains active opposition and determines its strength (Minson, 1986) or fuels women's active opposition and determines its influence.

This perception of power can be seen as a positive influence employed in popular uprisings, revolutions and struggles against authority. It can be assumed that the main purpose of these activities was not to attack a governing institution or elite group or class, but to express opposition to their technique or pattern of control; these are characterized as local struggles, because they represent cases where people criticize living conditions by employing an internal power expressed as resistance (Foucault, 1982).

Furthermore, power as a positive influence can be conceptualized as "moral resistance" (Turiel, 2003, p. 126), in order to describe the forces that emerge when people recognize the influences that oppress and impose injustice upon them, leading them to develop a sense of moral obligation to stand up for themselves and their rights, and to search for solutions and develop methods to resist injustice. It can be seen in numerous actions that people take to resist the forces that negatively influence their lives, such as abandoning adherence to norms, actively protesting the classification and regimentation of their lives, and insisting on self-actualization, authenticity, and integrity.

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