



# Going alone: The lived experience of female Arab-Muslim nursing students living and studying in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

Since 2004, international student enrollment in the United States has increased. Middle Eastern students studying in the United States have been part of the increase. In 2008-2009 there were 29 140 Middle Eastern students, representing an 18% increase from the previous academic year. Despite these increases, there is limited research examining the experience of Arab-Muslim international students or international nursing students studying in the United States. Phenomenological inquiry was used to describe the experience of 12 female Omani nurses living in the United States while studying for their baccalaureate degrees in nursing. The women described the experience of going alone and being away from the support and presence of their large, extended families; this influenced their international student experience. They also described their religious, cultural, and educational adaptation. The experience of living and studying nursing in the United States was transformational as they became self-reliant, learned their capabilities, and adapted to cultural and educational expectations.

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International student enrollment has steadily increased since 2004 and currently there are over 18 264 000 international students studying in the US higher education programs;<sup>1</sup> this includes students from Muslim nations.<sup>2</sup> The number of Middle Eastern students studying in the United States has increased by 11% in 2006-2007, 25% in 2007-2008, and in 2008-2009 there were 29 140 Middle Eastern students, representing an 18% increase.<sup>1</sup> Despite these increases, there is limited research examining the experiences of international students studying in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, there are even fewer studies that examine Arab-Muslim or international nursing students. Carty<sup>4</sup> and colleagues examined indicators of academic success of Saudi Arabian nursing students, but their sample was primarily male and they examined predictors of academic success and did not examine the students' experiences in the United States. The aim of this study was to describe the experiences of female international students from Oman who came to the United States to study nursing. Women's experiences are examined because there are cultural differences

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that may influence Arab-Muslim women in unique ways, such as traditionally defined female roles in their home country, segregation of men and women, and Muslim female dress.

## Literature Review

Arab women's experience in the United States must be placed within the context of Arabian culture. Unlike the American individualistic perspective, Arab countries are collectivistic societies<sup>5</sup> in which family affiliation, religious beliefs, conformity, and loyalty to institutions and authority are important attributes.<sup>6</sup> For Arab international students, their families' influence is paramount<sup>7</sup> and guided by patriarchal structure in which the male head of the household speaks publically for the family members.<sup>8</sup>

The Omani family is the primary social unit, with women's roles and responsibility to the family well-defined<sup>9</sup> as wife, mother, and homemaker.<sup>10</sup> Omani women who work outside the home or seek education do so for the good of the family<sup>9</sup> and national duty.<sup>11</sup> The Omani family includes extended family members who support one another socially, economically, and emotionally.<sup>12</sup> The male is responsible for finances, decision-making, and protection of the family's reputation.<sup>13</sup> Traditional Arab-Muslim women are not accustomed to making independent decisions and managing their finances;<sup>10,14</sup> they seek counsel from the men in their families, and either fathers or husbands will speak for them publicly.<sup>14</sup> With modernization and mobility, the important familial social connections become more difficult to access for an Omani individual who has moved away from the family.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, when Omani women are abroad, they find themselves making choices on their own or delaying choices until they contact their families.<sup>14</sup>

By today's US standards, families from Arab countries are large and include extended kin. Strong family bonds and a collectivistic society hinder a woman creating a separate identity from her parents and family members.<sup>10</sup> International students who were reared in large, extended families had feelings of being alone without the presence of their family members, and being away from their families' constant presence required the students to adjust.<sup>15</sup>

A traditional Arabian cultural value is family honor. Family honor is determined by generosity of its members, individual honesty, male gallantry, and female sexual purity.<sup>16</sup> Women who do not dress modestly around men or who have sex outside of marriage bring shame on their families.<sup>17</sup> Segregation of the sexes at social events and women being accompanied by chaperones in public is common practice in Arab countries.<sup>18</sup> To maintain sexual purity and family

honor, Omani tradition limits women's social contacts to family members and female friends.

A head scarf known as a hijab is worn by many Muslim women to maintain privacy and modesty in public. Female Muslim students in Australia believed that wearing the hijab may have been the source of prejudice both on and off campus.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, women who wear the hijab believed that the professors<sup>20</sup> and classmates<sup>21</sup> were hesitant to speak because they assumed that the Muslim women wearing the hijab did not speak English. Berry<sup>22</sup> found that individuals who had distinguishing physical features, such as skin color and clothing, were more likely than others to experience prejudice and discrimination. Despite the challenges, Muslim women have reported that maintaining their faith enabled them to overcome obstacles of discrimination and stress related to their international experience.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, international students who maintained their religious practices reported greater adaptation than those who did not.<sup>23</sup>

Practicing Muslims participate in ritual prayer at 5 specific times throughout the day. Prayer is conducted in a single gender space and involves kneeling, sitting, and standing. To prepare for prayer, Muslims perform ablution (ritual bathing) to create a state of purity.<sup>24,25</sup> Prayer is an important part of Muslim life and is used in times of stress.<sup>26</sup> Muslim students have found it difficult to negotiate prescribed prayer schedules with class times<sup>20</sup> and find an appropriate place to pray at the specified prayer time.<sup>21</sup> They have also noted personal discomfort living in a Western culture because of frequent use of alcohol among college students and non-modest dress of women, such as clothing that exposes shoulders, legs, cleavage, and abdomens.<sup>19,21</sup>

Most international students from Muslim countries are not accustomed to the pluralistic, secular, American society. They often find themselves confronted with religious or cultural differences or prejudices that they have never experienced in their native country.<sup>20, 27</sup> Muslim students have reported that religious bias occurred in the classroom and seemed to be the result of classmates' and professors' ignorance of Islam that was based on negative media reporting.<sup>21</sup>

International Cypriot students studying in Australia, England, Greece, Zimbabwe, and the United States found that the people in their host nation did not seem to pay as much attention to those around them compared to the people in Cyprus.<sup>28</sup> While studying abroad, the Cypriot students were aware of more non-traditional opportunities for women and fewer traditional societal expectations of women than in Cyprus. This provided the Cypriot students with a sense of personal freedom that they had not experienced in their native collectivistic, traditional culture. Additionally, in their small communities at home, community members observed and

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