"Our problem is two problems: That you're a woman and that you're educated": Gendering and racializing Bedouin women experience at Israeli universities

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

While the relevant literature customarily links higher education with *development* and *progress*, this paper reveals the racial-gender conflicts that the first educated Muslim Bedouin women experienced at Israeli universities and recommends several practices to be carried out on campus and in the community, involving in-group and out-group members alike.

The study sheds light on the experiences of Muslim women who acquire higher education at Western universities, suggesting that these experiences are gendered and racialized. The Israeli university is perceived as an alien racial space, with discriminating ethnic and gender values that marginalize Bedouin women as educated women on campus, as educated women at home, as a poor racialized minority and as Arab Bedouin women.

1. Introduction

Every day that I came to the university was a battle unto itself. People came to the shig [the men's gathering place] and said, "Your daughter is going to the university, and your daughter is running around, and your daughter is wearing this, and your daughter and your daughter... " [Samah,[1] a Bedouin woman]

Most of the literature on gender and higher education links academic learning with *renewal*, *development* and *progress* (see Horkheimer and Theodor, 1969), identifying it as a tool that enables socioeconomic mobility and participation in a democratic society. Furthermore, it assists women in altering their social landscape and intensifying their awareness of inequalities (Howell, 1999; Kondo, 2000; Mac, 1996; Rezai-Rashti, 2011). In contrast to the literature, this study exposes the pain involved in Muslim Bedouin women's decisions to leave home and acquire higher education at Israeli universities. The Israeli context is unique because Jewish and Arab spaces are geographically and nationally separated, as Israeli universities are located in major Jewish cities. Thus, any departure from the Arab village to acquire education at

Israeli university campuses not only constitutes an Arab student's first exposure to highly alien Israeli norms but also an encounter with discriminatory Israeli politics and separation from Arab culture[2] (see Erdreich, 2006; Abu-Rabia-Queder and Weiner-Levy, 2008; Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2008).

On the whole, research concerning educated Palestinian women, especially Bedouin women, has related to their exposure to Israeli university campuses as a catalyst for positive change in their lives, especially their consequent empowerment, enabling them to become agents for change in their communities (Halevi, 2009; Pessate-Schubert, 2004; Weiner-Levy, 2006). Very few studies have considered the cultural and political conflicts engendered by the encounter at the Israeli university campus; those that have done so mostly described establishment-based obstacles, such as the psychometric (university entrance) examination – the chief barrier to acceptance for Arab applicants[3] who have difficulty with Hebrew (the dominant language) and English (the academic language), that are second and third languages for Palestinians in Israel, as well as the required academic studies from which Palestinian women are excluded (see Abu-Bader and Gottlieb, 2009; Al-Haj, 2003; Erdreich et al., 2005). To date, the academic experience of Muslim-Bedouin women students from the south of Israel who enter Israeli universities for the first time has not been examined from an racial-gender perspective.

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[1] All names are anonymous to protect the women's identities.
[2] This does not mean that Arab women do not meet Jewish women, but among the first generation of Bedouin women who acquired higher education, the university constitutes the first formal venue for intensive encounter with Jewish society.

[3] Because of the cultural bias of this examination, average scores for Arab students are about 100 points lower – out of a total of 800 – than those of Jewish Israelis (see Al-Haj, 2003).

This paper will reveal the initial conflict that resulted from the crossing of racial-ethnic and gender boundaries that educated Bedouin women faced as the first educated women in their communities to acquire academic degrees (during the 1970s and 1980s) and as part of a racialized indigenous minority that suffers discrimination. During their studies, they experienced internal conflicts concerning their identity and existence as women, as Arabs, as Bedouins and as women with a unique status – the first educated women in their communities. This study suggests that such experiences are both gendered and racialized.

2. Gendering and racializing higher education among Muslim women: existing literature

Both ethnicity and gender are defined by social scientists as "systems of classification (social construction of gender and ethnicity) that are reproduced within relations of power and social organization" (Barot et al., 1999: 10). In this regard, higher educational institutions as systems of power serve as a platform to reveal how ethnic and gender relations among disadvantaged minority groups are reproduced. Racism as an ideology of "innate superiority that brought about discrimination, exclusion and marginalization" (Barot et al., 1999: 4), is another important factor in determining the experience of ethnic minority groups in higher education such as Muslim women (see Modood, 2004).

The literature indicates that minority Muslim women's experiences at institutions of higher learning are racialized and gendered (Modood and Shiner, 1994) and that their decision to acquire academic education takes both motivational and obstructive factors into account. Thus, ethnic minority women, on the whole, are subject to a dual disadvantage when applying to universities – as women within a patriarchal society and as members of an ethnic – racialized minority (Taylor, 1993: 433).

The obstructive factors considered include two sets of values: Cultural and institutional/structural. According to the literature, cultural factors render the higher education experience of Muslim women different from that of Muslim men. Muslim women are subject to a different set of social and cultural expectations. Like other minority women, Muslim women must conform to a more constricting set of expectations than their male counterparts regarding presence in mixed and Western public space. Muslim women students (including Bedouins in Israel) are constantly apprehensive about being "ruined" by exposure to the permissive values of Western society. Such apprehension constitutes one reason for the relatively low percentage of Muslim women at Western campuses. For example, a study of young women from southern Asia found that parents did not encourage their daughters to attend universities at which there were no students from a similar ethnic background or at which the sociocultural climate conflicted with the traditional set of values on which the young women were raised (Singh, 1990). Consequently, Muslim women are subject to patriarchal pressure that is not applied to men and therefore has no effect on the latter's acceptance at, accessibility to and integration within academic institutions.

Culture, religion and patriarchal constraints play instrumental roles in restricting Muslim women's educational progress, as Archer (2002) notes: "... the issue of Muslim young people's... choices is located within the production and reproduction of gendered inequalities that are inextricably linked to gendered and racialized Muslim identities" (cited in Ahmad, 2001: 15).

For non-Muslim women as well, decisions concerning whether or when to study may be affected by gender functions demanded at home, such as care of elderly parents or sick adults in the family. This, of course, affects not only the date of inception of studies but also the fields of study selected.

Insofar as structural-institutional factors are concerned, the literature indicates that the relevant schools and colleges lacked resources to prepare minority students for university or make them aware of educational opportunities. Most minority students come from poor and underprivileged areas and were not encouraged by their local schools. They also sensed a lack of support on the part of certain university lecturers who were insensitive to the impact of socioeconomic circumstances on their higher education experiences (Ahmad, 2001). Examples cited included lecturers who would not take the time to explain the reasons for poor assignment grades (Tyrer and Ahmad, 2006). These obstructive factors are widespread, even at Western campuses, affecting the learning experience of Muslim women students, who find themselves negotiating among multiple identities and positions as students, as women and as Muslims. Their university life experiences were gendered and racialized by these diverse positions and identities, as well as by the ways in which university structured their access to spaces, networks and opportunities (Ahmad, 2001).

Studies attest to discrimination against Muslim minorities at Western campuses, that is sensed most strongly by Muslim women in traditional garb, especially those with headscarves (Cole and Shafiqa, 2003; Peek, 2003). This discrimination, that structures their experience of university life, is captured by the term *Islamophobia*, that includes verbal violence and various kinds of harassment, such as racist questions and a particularly hostile atmosphere after 9/11. In Ahmad's study, Muslim women reported apprehension about coming to early morning or late evening lessons, fearing harassment because of their religious garb, that singles them out as Muslims at once. Consequently, they mostly attest to an alienated attitude towards them because of the way they dress, rooted in racist religious stereotypes of Muslim women and especially their dress code. These structural factors are also expressed in the absence of sites for Islamic prayer at universities and failure to account for Ramadan (the absence of a flexible schedule that would allow Muslim students to leave class and break their fast or to leave early and prepare the fast-breaking meal at home). Another problem Muslim students face is the need to find Halal (ritually fit for Muslims) food (Shiner and Modood, 2002).

Along with these obstructive factors, the literature also points to a series of motivational factors that impel Muslim women students to acquire higher education. Ahmad's study (2001) of Muslim communities in the United Kingdom exposes a new aspect of the status of women's education among Muslim communities in the West. Despite obstacles, it was found that parents encourage their daughters to attend institutions of higher learning and to succeed both academically and economically: "Through a process of 'active competition' operating within family and social networks, a daughter's education can bring 'prestigious capital' as well as an indicator of status and social mobility" (Ahmad, 2001: 12).

Educated daughters designate Muslim families in the West as "modern," thereby eliminating the common stigma that Westerners ascribe to Muslim families, perceiving them as patriarchal clans that limit their daughters' freedom of movement and education. Furthermore, Muslim communities suffer an uncertain economic status as an ethnic minority that is discriminated against in the job sector and is virtually detached from the support of communities or extended families in their countries of origin. Hence families encourage their daughters to go out and acquire higher education. This is the only way that these families can guarantee their own financial independence and the financial security of their daughters, who will find suitable jobs and improve their chances of finding "good husbands" (Ahmad, 2001).

Among Arab American Muslim women (Gazal-Read and Oselin, 2008: 296), women's higher education is perceived as a resource that ensures proper socialization of children, family solidarity and