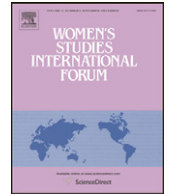


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The labor force participation of Arab women in the United States



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SYNOPSIS

The primary objective of this study is to extend conventional explanations of female labor force participation to examine the case of Arab women in the United States. With above-average levels of education, Arab women provide a good opportunity to empirically analyze conventional explanations for women's economic activity. Using data from 2008 to 2012 American Community Survey, we test the applicability of these explanations for Arab women by assessing the impact of human capital variables as well as family conditions and immigrant status in predicting labor force participation. Our analysis focuses on two questions: to what extent do existing theories explain differences in labor force participation within Arab women by nativity status, and to what degree do they explain differences from US-born White women? Our study found that Arab women rank the lowest in labor force participation relative to other women in the United States. With regard to the mechanisms responsible for this relationship, some of the findings that emerge from this study are consistent with the conventional explanations while some provide insight into the importance of family conditions and foreign-born status for Arab women's labor force participation.

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Introduction

The United States has experienced a dramatic influx of immigrants in the late twentieth century. As a result, the number of foreign born has steadily increased, rising from 9.7 million in 1960 to 38.5 million according to the United States Census Bureau estimation in 2014; that is, today, 13.3% of the total population—one in every eight people in the United States—is foreign born (U. S. Census Bureau, 2014). This current situation is basically the result of the Immigration Act of 1965, which abolished 1920-era country of origin quotas favoring European immigrants, and thus resulted in an unprecedented diversification of the American society over the subsequent years. These new immigrants have introduced all kinds of diversity to the American society. They are ethnically and racially more diverse than earlier streams of immigrants; they come from a variety of continents and countries, such as Asia, Africa, Middle East, Latin America; they speak more varied languages, and many bring with them religions that are either new or little known in America. These historical comparisons bring up questions of whether these new immigrants are going

to assimilate into the American society at the same pace and in the ways that characterized the earlier waves of immigrants.

Linked closely to the question of assimilation is labor force participation of immigrants as a sign of their economic and social adaptation into society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In this regard, scholars have particularly drawn attention to women's labor force participation as a sign of immigrants' economic and social integration (Kahn & Whittington, 1996; Schoeni, 1998). Women's labor force participation is a marker of immigrant achievement as it suggests access to economic power, which is linked to gender equality at the societal level (England, Garcia-Beaulieu, & Ross, 2004).

One of the most consistent findings of women's labor force participation is that there are important differences in women's employment outcomes both across and within ethnic populations in the United States. Leading explanations for the variations in women's labor force participation especially highlight differences in women's educational attainment and their immigrant status (e.g. nativity, citizenship status, English language proficiency) (Schoeni, 1998). Yet, research suggests that the case of Arab American women may pose challenges to

these conventional theories of labor force participation. Almost half (44.9%) of working age Arab American women hold bachelor's degrees or higher, 91% are American citizens, 58% are native born and 78% report speaking English very well, all of which suggest advantageous conditions for their labor force participation. However, their labor force participation rates (51%) are below the totals of most other groups of women in the US (U. S. Census Bureau, 2013). The fact that Arab women in the US have high educational attainment yet limited labor market participation raises questions about the factors influencing their employment outcomes.

Despite the long history of Arab immigration in the United States since the beginning of nineteenth century and the fact that Arab immigrants today constitute a growing and increasingly important segment of American society, scholars have paid little attention to the economic activity of this population in regard to their adaptation to this country. Moreover, some argue that the current politicization of this group following the tragic 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon along with increased visibility and disadvantage suggest challenges for their integration into society.

This study aims to fill this gap in literature by extending the female labor force participation theories to examine the case of Arab women in the US to empirically test whether there is an “education-employment paradox” (Read & Oselin, 2008) or not. Using data from the 2008 to 2012 American Community Survey, we specifically explore the roles of human capital characteristics (i.e. education, household income), family conditions (i.e. marital status, presence of preschool children at home) and immigrant status (i.e. nativity status, English proficiency, length of stay in the United States and citizenship status) in predicting Arab women's labor force participation.

In order to contextualize the case of Arab American women in regard to their integration to this country, in what follows, we first proceed with a discussion of Arab immigration in the United States. Second, we provide a review of prior research on women's labor force participation and present five hypotheses for this study.

Who are Arab Americans?

Arab Americans provide an ideal population to address the questions of immigrant employment as they are a group with a long history of immigration into the United States. Today, there are an estimated three and a half million people of Arab descent¹ living in the United States according to the latest American Community Survey (ACS), roughly equal the size of the Native American population. They trace their ancestries to eighteen countries from Tunisia to Yemen; roughly two-thirds are descendants of Christian Arabs who emigrated from Syria prior to World War I, and the remaining one-third is Muslim (Read, 2004a).

Arab Americans emigrated from the Middle East to the US in two distinct waves beginning at the end of nineteenth century. The first wave of immigration began around 1880 and continued through 1920. A majority of these immigrants were Christian and seeking economic opportunities in the new land (Naff, 1994). Due to their long history as immigrants, this first group has experienced substantial assimilation (Holsinger, 2009).

The second wave of immigration began after World War II, and continuously increased particularly after the 1965 Immigration Act, which abolished national-origin quotas that had previously hindered immigration. Unlike the first group, immigrants in this second group consisted of students and professionals as well as refugees and exiles due to the political turmoil in the Middle East such as the 1967 Arab and Israeli wars and Lebanese civil war in 1975 (Bozorgmehr et al., 1996). Compared to the Christian immigrants of the first group, the new immigrants are mainly Muslim, better educated and skilled professionals. They are also more diverse than previous waves; immigrants from Syria and Lebanon are no longer the dominant group (Kulczycki & Lobo, 2002).

Due in part to past assimilation as well as to the human capital brought by recent arrivals, Arab Americans today enjoy high levels of socioeconomic status (Suleiman, 1999; Read, 2004a). According to the 2000 Census, they have higher levels of educational attainment than the national average (41% versus 24% have at least a bachelor's degree), income (\$52,000 versus \$50,000 median family income) and occupational status (42% versus 34% are in professional and managerial jobs). Studies also reveal that Arab Americans have a relatively high level of citizenship and English fluency compared to other recent immigrant groups (Read, 2004a). While in terms of social and economic characteristics, Arab Americans are comparable to White majority and Asian American population, some outcomes portray them as a disadvantaged group. Compared to Whites, for instance, they have higher unemployment rates and lower levels of homeownership (Holsinger, 2009). This might be due to recent immigration, which has dramatically increased the heterogeneity of this population. Research suggests that while Iraqis, Moroccans and Jordanians suffer from poverty levels close to African Americans, those who arrived a century earlier enjoy similar outcomes as those of Whites.

Others argue that the paradoxical qualities of Arab Americans have to do with “racial hierarchy” in the United States. From the start of Arab migration to America, citizenship in the United States was reserved for only those who were ‘White’. While the courts were decisive about the race of most groups, their rulings in regard to Arabs were inconsistent. Whereas in some cases, they were accepted as White due to the “scientific evidence” (e.g. anthropologists labeled Syrians as Caucasian) in the three cases brought by Syrians in 1909–1910, in others, they were pronounced as nonwhite based on “common knowledge” (Haney-Lopez, 2006). Although Syrians were finally considered ‘White’ officially, and won their struggle for naturalization, the racial status of Arabs in the United States is far from stable today. Despite their comparable socioeconomic characteristics to the White majority, negative media portrayals, pervasive stereotypes as well as increasing visibility and discrimination suggest that they are ‘not quite White’ (Samhan, 1999) or only ‘provisionally’ White (Gualtieri, 2004). Thus, the Arab case suggests challenges to the conventional theories, which assume that human capital impacts employment patterns and make assimilation more likely. In this paper, I test the applicability of this perspective for Arab American women by examining the relationship between various sorts of human capital characteristics, family conditions, immigrant status and the labor force participation.

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