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South Asian Muslim American Girl Power: Structures and Symbols of Control and Self-Expression

Marcia Hermansen¹ and Mahruq F. Khan²

Abstract

South Asian Muslim American (SAMA) girls studied ethnographically in Chicago and more broadly in the United States negotiate these three components (South Asian, Muslim, and American) of identity across the spheres of home, Islamic institutions, and the public “American” realm. Drawing on interviews and fieldwork at an Islamic school and within South Asian families and mosques, the authors illustrate how nascent “girl” power is evidenced in these contexts drawing on media representations, academic sources, and data drawn from participant observation. Sources of SAMA girls’ expressions of confidence and power are selective use of identity markers, increased mastery of Islamic knowledge, and various subtle acts of resistance to norms imposed upon them within home and family interactions, Islamic spaces, and the American public sphere.

Keywords: Muslim girls, South Asian, United States,

The female body has represented a locus of identity symbolism across cultures and traditions while the sources and degrees of control over women’s bodies have waxed and waned with tensions engendered by modernity and social change. While this phenomenon may be observed throughout the world, its manifestations have been particularly striking in Muslim societies and their respective diasporas. For example, in the early 20th century modernizers such as Atatürk (d. 1938) and Reza Shah Pahlavi (d. 1944) banned traditional forms of conservative Muslim dress for females in their respective countries, Turkey and Iran. With the rise of Islamization projects on the part both of Muslim states and oppositional movements from the 1970s until the present, discourses and symbolism of the Muslim female and her body have become increasingly globalized. As a consequence we note the investment of Muslim or non-Muslim states around the world in either veiling or unveiling women³ and the challenges to laws proscribing women’s autonomy and expression through limiting voting, inheritance and family rights, full participation in local governing bodies, and participation in the paid employment sector. Furthermore, in a post-9/11 climate, mainstream American media outlets occasionally manipulated images of “oppressed” Muslim women, which not only served as a pretext for America’s “War on Terror” but also highlighted Americans’

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³ Jen'an Ghazal Read. “The Politics of Veiling in Comparative Perspective.” *Sociology of Religion* 68 (3, 2007): 231-6.

continued perception of the Muslim women as the “Other”. Concurrently, in contexts such as Western Europe and North America, sartorial choices of young Muslim girls and women test the limits of multiculturalism while provoking ongoing debates over the role of the state in enforcing of secularism or judging seemingly problematic religious affiliations, namely Islam. At the same time, dress, behavior, and the physical space that Muslim women occupy may be policed both within and without their religious circles.

In this paper, we seek to examine the gendered processes that inform the lives of South Asian Muslim American (SAMA)⁴ girls from childhood through young adulthood. More specifically, we argue that SAMA girls are employing notions of individualism, self-expression, femininity and multiculturalism whether they confront or embrace traditional understandings of Islam in the American context. In shaping the argument we aim to review how the institutions of family, Islamic schools and educational settings as well as mosques, public schools and universities, and media representations serve as key locations within which SAMA girls reinforce or contest their gendered socialization. This paper will primarily consider the embodied American Muslim girl of South Asian ethnicity in a range of contexts and at various ages ranging from what is traditionally considered childhood, through adolescence and even in some cases young adulthood. Our observations are drawn from ongoing participation in the everyday life of the South Asian Muslim community of greater Chicago during the past decade. In addition we incorporate data obtained by sociologist Mahruq Khan during four months of fieldwork at an Islamic School in the area during 2003 and interview data gathered from 2006-7 during research for her doctoral dissertation.⁵ We are particularly interested in adding the element of “girl studies” theory to the discussions of Muslim female identity in diaspora by demonstrating how South Asian Muslim girls develop and exercise girl power or are increasingly represented and perceived as being powerful.⁶

The framing of South Asian Muslim American girl identities may be eclectic/situational and negotiated/chosen among available “South Asian”, “Muslim” and “American” elements. In some instances, these selections may seem “oppositional” or reactive in correcting or resisting aspects of the dominant American culture. The South Asian identity component for these Muslim girls is largely formed by interactions within the family and larger ethnic community. In this context SAMA girls’ dress may symbolize ethnicity, femininity, consumption, or sexuality/fertility (in the case of specific rituals). Some of these rituals allow religiosity to intersect with and perhaps even reinforce sexuality in unexpected ways for many pre-pubescent girls, exposing the contradiction between chastity and sexual allure. This intersection manifests later in girls lives as they join college Muslim Student Associations (MSAs), which provide a legitimate social outlet to meet other prospective marriage partners under certain constraints. In such settings, girls can essentially negotiate their independence and

⁴ SAMA is an acronym that the authors have coined for the purposes of this exposition.

⁵ Mahruq Khan. “Queer and Feminist Muslims in America: The Struggle to Reconstruct Religious Identity and Practice.” Ph. D. dissertation, Sociology, Loyola University Chicago, 2007.

⁶ On girl power see Sinikka Aapola, Marnina Gonick, and Anita Harris. Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Catherine Driscoll. Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. Anita Harris. All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity. New York: Routledge, 2006. Yasmin Jiwani, Candis Steenberg, and Claudia Mitchell. Girlhood: Redefining the Limits. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2006.

autonomy from their parents and assert their choice for a marriage partner of their choosing, thereby balancing the South Asian, Muslim, and American facets of their identities.

This sense of Muslim identity as being a crucial choice in the context of other possible choices is an important element of the experience of today's Muslim girls, whether in the West or in many urban areas of the broader Muslim world. In the American context, Nadine Naber describes how the choice of "Muslim first" over any other component of identity, and especially over ethnicity, arises among some American-born or -raised Muslim youth as a reaction to the demands of immigrant parents, US racial and identity politics, and US-led imperialism in Muslim majority countries.⁷

Similarly, writing about Muslim youth cultures in Scandinavia, Christine Jacobsen observes Muslim identity is increasingly constructed and represented as a choice made in the context of other possible choices. The values of personal autonomy and 'authenticity' are central to such representations and to the ethical reflections of young Muslim more generally. As Cesari shows with regard to the French context, religious individualization may lead both to the view that religious identity and practice is a strictly 'private' affair and to an 'orthodox' reinvestment in the Islamic tradition which links the individual to a global *umma* (community). The first tendency implies a 'relativization' of religion, the confinement of religious practices to particular (private) spaces, and a focus on basic religious (and universal values that may be considered 'secular'). The second tendency 'normativizes' Islam as a total way of life relevant to politics, law and science as well as to private spaces, and stresses the collective and cultic aspects of religion. Both these tendencies reflect a growing propensity among young Muslims in the west towards rationalizing religious prescriptions and proscriptions. Increased formal literacy among second generation Muslims in the West privileges a "literate" Islamic worldview and entails a general erosion of practices pertaining to a so-called 'popular' Islam.⁸

The call to a "pure" Islam as a transnational identity that unites Muslims also appeals to SAMA girls who are unlikely to achieve full cultural competence in the languages and customs of their parents' generation. Claiming that attitudes, especially those attitudes related to various customs and gender roles, are "cultural" rather than Islamic is one way for a Muslim youth to resist parental authority while remaining within the boundaries of approved behavior.

The component of Muslim identity, whether a primary or secondary choice, is often symbolized through clothing choices, whether hijab or other modest forms of dress. Practices of gender segregation usually surround the SAMA girl. Today these may be contested to a degree by her interacting independently in new environments such as the work place or the university. Islamic schools are perceived as inculcating religious belief and normative gender practices through the sensitive adolescent years. Specifically marked "'Islamic" spaces such as MSAs or mosques allow the enactment of gendered interactions and practices in a symbolic way or hyper-inflected way that Marcia Hermansen has characterized as "playing" Muslim or selectively "performing" Muslim

⁷ Nadine Naber. "Muslim First-Arab Second." *Muslim World* 95 (4, 2005): 479.

⁸Christine Jacobsen. "Religiosity of Young Muslims in Norway: the Quest for Authenticity." *European Muslims and the Secular State* Jocelyne Cesari and Sean McLaughlin (eds.) London: Ashgate, 2005, 155.

identity.⁹ In America, many South Asian Muslim girls actively participate in activities that affirm the importance of “Islamic knowledge” as powerful and superior. This pursuit of Islamic knowledge could be seen as contributing to identity maintenance at a challenging time during the life cycle while it also reflects a global trend of Muslim females appropriating authority through the embrace of religious learning and practice.¹⁰

American identity predominates in SAMA girls’ dress choices most of the time, although selections tend toward the practical and understated. Spending and elaborate attention to clothing is primarily reserved for South Asian rather than American fashions. Only the “Islamic” hijab (headscarf), for those who wear it, is an exception that overrides the American sartorial statement. In its common form of a simple black cotton triangle or folded square, it also negates or complicates “South Asian” elements of dress since South Asian clothing tends to be flowing and brightly colored. The South Asian sartorial aesthetic in general values a quality of “matching” color, style, or design and the globalized black “Islamic” hijab is increasingly being modified in this direction by being specifically chosen or made to match the rest of a woman’s outfit, thereby inscribing this South Asian aesthetic upon the global hijab. Ironically, both American dress and the standardized hijab can signify mobility and engagement with discourses and identities beyond the South Asian ethnic “ghetto”.

The power of SAMA girls who are perceived as “assertive” and “confident,” and the cultural ambivalence about these non-traditional traits in females, is illustrated by the common perception among elders in the South Asian community that such American-raised girls, due to their “independent” thinking, are better suited to marry Muslim co-ethnic males from the West rather than grooms from India or Pakistan.

The theory of a rise in “girl power,” in which young and adolescent females challenge and destabilize existing models for gender, represents one aspect of feminist theory and Girl Studies. In the case of South Asian Muslim girls living in America, one may also trace an emerging recognition that girls manifest various aspects of power including economic and cultural production. For instance, economic power may be observed in representations of the Muslim girl as an untapped source of spending potential as evident in the hype surrounding the launching of Muslim Girl magazine. The following quote, drawing heavily on the Magazine’s own marketing language, exemplifies this:

The magazine is an attempt to reach out to a racially and ethnically diverse audience that feels culturally isolated. Editors estimate that roughly 400,000 Muslim teenage girls live in the United States, part of the estimated 6 million to 8 million Muslims living in the country. The magazine's Toronto-based publisher, execuGo Media (some of the small editorial staff is in Chicago), believes much of its target market comes from affluent, well-educated families possessing untapped consumer spending power.

An April study commissioned by JWT, the nation's largest advertising agency, described Muslim Americans as one of "America's biggest hidden niche markets" with an aggregate disposable income of \$170 billion. "It is more true to say that Muslim

⁹ Marcia Hermansen. “Muslims in the Performative Mode: A Reflection on Muslim-Christian Dialogue.” Muslim World 94 (3, 2004): 387-396.

¹⁰ Saba Mahmood. Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. Sadaf Ahmad. “Identity Matters, Culture Wars: An Account of Al-Huda (re) defining identity and reconfiguring culture in Pakistan.” Culture and Religion 9 (1, 2008): 63-80.

Americans represent a number of niche markets distinguished by many factors, including ethnicity, culture and whether they are immigrants," said the study.¹¹

Another manifestation of nascent American Muslim girl power is the fascination of the mainstream media with alternative girlhood rituals and behaviors among Muslims. Descriptions of these activities display Muslim girls either contesting or engaging with established American cultural practices. Such representations tend to exemplify the polar opposite positions in American culture wars that cluster around the symbols of Muslim "difference" in that they either present Muslim youth, in this case girls, as being on a path of complete acculturation to American customs or conversely as being inassimilable and perpetually foreign. Examples include media stories about alternative all-girl proms for Muslim girls,¹² the formation of Muslim Girl Scout troupes,¹³ or the struggles of Muslim girls to participate in intercollegiate sports events while adapting uniform requirements to allow longer modest clothing or the wearing of head scarves.¹⁴ The head scarf itself becomes an emblem of resistance for the young Muslim female who chooses to wear it and a visible sign that she can stand up to racism and harassment, perhaps even more than her male counterparts. This subverts the prevailing impression that wearing the headscarf is a sign of submissiveness and capitulation to patriarchal norms.

A consistent underlying theme of these illustrations of Muslim "sameness" and "difference" is the interrogation of the extent of belonging¹⁵ or "cultural" citizenship¹⁶ on the part of South Asian and Arab American youth that is increasingly called into question and scrutinized post 9/11.

Paradigms for South Asian Muslim Girl Identity: Situational Bricolage or Binary Opposition

In terms of the discrete American racial categories on census forms, South Asians do not fit neatly into the Caucasian or the Asian and Pacific Islander boxes. Physically, SAMA individuals are often mistaken for Latinos or Hindu Indians. For this reason some SAMA women and girls may find the hijab a means for marking their identity as distinctive from other ethnic, as well as religious groups. Hijab-wearing SAMA females may still be mistaken for Arabs by many Americans less familiar with the internal

¹¹ Joe Garofoli. "Teen magazine addresses challenges of being Muslim girl in United States." San Francisco Chronicle, June 18, 2007. The magazine suspended publication in 2008 after several issues. This may suggest that the "Muslim Girl" demographic was too fragmented to sustain such a publication.

¹² Patricia Leigh Brown. "For the Muslim Prom Queen, There Are No Kings Allowed." New York Times, June 9, 2003. Associated Press. "Prom For Muslim Girls Without Cultural Compromises." Jun 3, 2007. <http://wcco.com/local/Muslim.teenagers.Prom.2.367924.html> accessed March 22, 2008.

¹³ Neil Macfarquhar. "To Muslim girls in U.S., Girl Scouts offer a chance to fit in." New York Times, November 28, 2007. To see how this becomes part of the "culture war", observe the response by Daniel Pipes. "Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts Promote Radical Islam." Weblog May 21, 2004. <http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/253> Accessed March 22, 2008.

¹⁴ CBC. "Winnipeg girl with headscarf banned from judo meet." November 19, 2007. Jeff Karoub. "More Muslim Girls Wearing Head Scarves on Basketball Court: Rules Allow it, but 'They Look at us Differently.'" Associated Press. Dec. 16, 2007. An article considering Muslim girls and sport is Tess Kay. "Daughters of Islam: Sisters in Sport." Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging. Cara Aitchison, Peter E. Hopkins, and Meipo Kwan (eds.) Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 125-140.

¹⁵ Katherine Ewing. Being and Belonging: Muslims in the United States since 9/11. Syracuse: Cornell University Press, 2008

¹⁶ Sunaina Marr Maira. Missing: Youth, Citizenship and Empire after 9/11. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009.

diversity among Muslim sub-cultures. Within the American Muslim community, South Asians are disproportionately influential due to their relative affluence and educational attainment, fluency in English, tendency to aspire to the values and privileges of American “Whiteness” and political engagement within the community and the broader society.¹⁷ The category of SAMA is further differentiated in ways we can only briefly suggest here by linguistic (Punjabi/Urdu/Gujarati), regional (Bihari/Pakistani/Hyderabad), Muslim “caste” (Syed, Baradari), sectarian (Barelvi, Ismaili, etc.), and class variables.¹⁸ SAMA girls share with other South Asians the designation “ABCD” (American-Born Confused Desi), but as evidence of girl power, some have appropriated the change of “C” standing for “Confused” to “C” for “Confident”. While the concept of “negotiating diasporic identity” that Claire Dwyer proposed in the case of Young British South Asian Muslim Women in the 1990s certainly holds for SAMA girls,¹⁹ their situation is generally different in terms of class position, assertiveness, visible Muslim identity, and autonomy.

The sociological literature on Muslim girls in the West, whether Europe or America, is growing. Observation of actual Muslim girl cultures as well as the literature produced by various Islamic groups leads to the conclusion that there are two major paradigms for the situation of contemporary Muslim girl identity. On the one hand, there is a sense of the emergence of an eclectic identity, framed in terms of code switching, multiple cultural competence and diasporic consciousness. Young European Muslims are increasingly demonstrating that there is no inherent contradiction or cognitive dissonance necessarily associated with having “street-cred” and hip-hop style, identifying with certain contemporary global orientations within Islam, being for example British and Muslim and Pakistani, and perhaps being at the same time in accord with and at odds with the views and values of one’s parents.²⁰

On the other hand, Muslim youth identity may be observed or projected in oppositional, binary, or totalizing terms. Such Muslim young people may negotiate and interpret their position with respect to being “good”, “real”, “practicing”, or “core” Muslims. In Islamic legal discourse and in the Muslim imagination, the world is asserted to be divided into “*haram*” (forbidden) and “*halal*” (permitted) categories and activities. The construction of these more bounded or oppositional identities is fostered by the attitudes of major Muslim organizations in the west that are influenced by broad Islamist movements such as Ikhwan al-Muslimin and Jamaat-i Islami, or in some cases by more radical ideologies.²¹ Being “different” from the mainstream society may be encouraged and emphasized in a number of ways, for example, through separate Islamic schools and

¹⁷ Karen Isaksen Leonard. “South Asian Leadership of American Muslims” in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad (ed.) *Sojourners to Citizens: Muslims in Western Diasporas* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 233-249 and “Young American Muslims: Multiple Identities.” *Muslim World*, (3, Oct. 2005): 473-477, as well as Aminah Mohammad-Arif. *Salaam America: South Asian Muslims in New York*. New York: Anthem Press, 2002.

¹⁸ Some of these distinctions are discussed in Aminah Muhammad Arif. *Salaam America*, passim.

¹⁹ Claire Dwyer. “Negotiating Diasporic Identities: Young British South Asian Women.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 23 (4, 2000): 475-486.

²⁰ S. Vertovec and A. Rogers. “Introduction.” *Muslim European Youth: Reproducing Ethnicity, Religion Culture*. S Vertovec and A. Rogers (eds.) Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998, 1.

²¹ For example, Schmidt describes a campus meeting that was influenced by the Hizb al-Tahrir for Muslim female students attending a Chicago University. Garbi Schmidt. *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004, 120-125.

distinctive forms of dress. In the United States, SAMA girls rarely wear “ethnic” clothing outside of family contexts since the identity of being a “FOB” (“Fresh Off the Boat”) is stigmatized, not only in mainstream American society but among the immigrant communities themselves. At the same time, young women in large numbers wear a transnational emblem of Muslim identity in the form of the headscarf (hijab) with modest dress such as jeans and a long shirt or jacket. The extensive literature on Muslim women choosing to veil discusses various aspects of this issue. It is clear that in many cases the veil’s connotations of responsibility, maturity and wholesomeness, in addition to its religious significance for the agent, provides the young Muslim woman with greater mobility since her parents are likely to trust her in attending public universities and after-school activities.²²

In each of these cases, whether identity is constructed through bricolage or defined as binary, the autonomy and possibility to choose of the individual is acknowledged. The identity of SAMA girls, however, is more complex and contested than binary or hybrid formulations would suggest. Aminah Mohammad Arif suggests the term “masala identity” to designate the eclectic nature of young South Asian Muslim identities in the United States.²³ While the image of a mix of spices (masala) conveys the eclectic dimension, these identities are also chosen and negotiated, and within this negotiation lies the nexus of girl power.

Early Life Stage Rituals and the Formation of SAMA Girl Identities

In the following sections of this article we examine how SAMA girls maintain, reorganize and contest their positions within various cultural and social contexts throughout each of their salient life stages.

The principle religious rituals of Muslim life from birth to adulthood are: *aqiqa* (hair trimming after birth); male circumcision; *bismillah*²⁴ (start of studying the Qur’an); the child’s first fast in Ramadan; and *khatm* or *ameen*²⁵ (completion of a first reading of the entire Qur’an). These markers are more or less standard from one South Asian community to another but may vary in significance and symbolism. Within the American Muslim context, as elsewhere, such rituals are gradually evolving in their form and meaning. In terms of Muslim girls’ experience and embodiment, the legal ritual tradition is gendered in many aspects. A traditional Islamic legal text, for example, will recommend sacrificing two goats on the occasion of a baby boy’s *aqiqa*, yet only one in the case of a baby girl. Such distinctions, in practice, seem to be fading over time. Nevertheless, *aqiqas* are accompanied by the adornment and presentation of the baby in the finest ethnic clothing. For female babies, this ritual may also be supplemented by the

²² Discussions of the multiple motivations for the hijab among American Muslim women include: Sajida Alvi, Homa Hoodfar and Sheila McDonough (eds.) *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates*. Toronto: Women’s Press, 2003 and Rhys H. Williams and Gira Varshi. “Hijab and the American Muslim Woman: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves.” *Sociology of Religion* 68 (3, 2007): 269-297. 282.

²³ Aminah Mohammad Arif. “A Masala Identity: Young South Asian Muslims in the US.” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 20 (1&2, 2000): 67-97.

²⁴ *Bismillah* means “in the name of God” in Arabic and is used as a formula for commencing meritorious actions. The phrase “Bismillah” begins all but one of the 114 chapters of the Qur’an.

²⁵ *Khatm* means to complete or finish. *Ameen* is the Arabic equivalent of “amen”.

adornment a light scarf to cover the newly shaven head, to mark the gender of the child and to suggest the attire of a traditional South Asian female.²⁶

South Asian Muslims usually perform the “*Bismillah*” or induction into the reading of the Qur’an during the pre-school or primary school years. Among South Asian Muslim immigrants to North America, it is common for parents to attire their children for this ritual in traditional dress strongly evocative of the wedding finery of brides and grooms, anticipating their maturation and inculcating adult gender roles and differentiation. Girls seem to receive as much, if not more, attention than boys at this time, and their performance of Qur’anic reading or recitation is often public. Later in life, however, females reciting out loud or speaking in mixed religious gatherings may be discouraged.

The SAMA girls’ *Bismillah* attire is elaborate and a foretaste of wedding finery, including elaborate fabrics, expensive and heavy jewelry, and at times make-up. It could be interpreted as an inculcation of the ideal role of the female as a fertile wife, according to Islamic teachings, as well as an initiation ritual into Islamic knowledge. In addition to the jewelry, clothing and makeup, often girls are asked to posture themselves on the “stage” of the party to emulate the demure South Asian bride, which genders an otherwise sex-neutral ritual.²⁷ In fact, SAMA girls are socialized towards the importance of early marriage and child bearing from childhood. Many of the rationales for modest dress codes, demure behavior such as lowered voices and delicate movements, adaptability to the demands of others, and a need to maintain segregation from unrelated males are associated with a girl’s marriage prospects and her family’s honor.

In actual SAMA weddings, two separate ceremonies are held, one hosted by the bride’s family (*Nikah*), and after consummation, one hosted by the groom’s side (*Walima*). It is interesting to note that SAMA grooms (and many male guests) are more likely to wear traditional South Asian dress at the *Nikah/Shadi* and Western clothing at the *Walima*, while the bride is dressed in South Asian wedding finery on both occasions. This symbolizes the burden placed on girls and women to “maintain” their culture, this is the case even in South Asian Muslim “homelands”. An additional observation is that the *Bismillah* ritual is “South Asian” Muslim rather than globally Muslim. Perhaps an additional reason for the emphasis on this ritual for both boys and girls in Muslim South Asia is that most South Asians will never learn to understand the Arabic language, and the ability to sound out the letters of the Qur’an and reciting its text is considered essential to being a practicing Muslim.²⁸

In the case of other childhood religious milestones for Muslim children such as the induction into prayer and fasting, the sense of assimilating to mature practice and community membership is a consistent theme, even when such events are not highly ritualized. Young boys, but not girls, are encouraged in their regular religious practice by being given leadership roles in sounding the call to prayer or on occasion leading family congregation prayers. This helps cement the perception that girls will assume a more passive and even subordinate status as compared to the boys, although modern apologetic

²⁶ These observations are based on photographs taken at Mahruq Khan’s *aqiqah*.

²⁷ These comments are based on observations by both authors of numerous Hyderabad Muslim American *Bismillahs* held in Chicago.

²⁸ As a young female milestone/initiation ritual the *Bismillah* might be compared and contrasted in significance to the Catholic first communion for girls.

interpretations of gender asymmetry in Islamic religious texts and ritual attempts to portray sex roles as “complementary”.²⁹ Although reciting out loud or speaking aloud in mixed religious gatherings is often discouraged in the case of females, an emergent trend in some South Asian Muslim American communities is greater encouragement of South Asian Muslim girls to memorize substantial portions of the Qur’an and to recite it publicly. Alternatively, at the inauguration of social gatherings boys may recite the Qur’an in Arabic and girls read the following English translation. Since most South Asian Muslims follow the Hanafi school of law, women leading other females in ritual prayer is highly discouraged (*makruh*), further limiting their options for public performance of Qur’an recitation.

Due to their minority status, Muslims living in the diaspora have become aware of the need to explain for youth the substance, in addition to the form, of religious ritual, since their meanings are often questioned by non-Muslims and cannot be taken for granted. Thus, in the United States, rather than the standard illustrated prayer guides that provide basic details of the ritual prayers (*salat*) and quotations from the Qur’an and hadith exhorting to it, books on ritual prayer or the Ramadan fast are produced as a genre of juvenile literature.³⁰ Some of these works explicitly address Muslim girls, for example, “hijab advocacy” literature.³¹

Home and Family

In addition to school and mosque settings, varying degrees of gender segregation are commonly practiced by most South Asian Muslim Americans within the home, a site where SAMA girls do challenge traditional gender roles and norms. As noted earlier, one of the most important markers of reinforcing orthodox gender norms is family structure³². Specific combinations of marital status and family size produce domestic structures that drive women's attitudes on feminist issues. Younger women, however, are expected to have more supportive attitudes toward feminism primarily because they are less likely to be invested in traditional life arrangements. They are more likely to have careers outside the home, more likely to be financially independent, have fewer children, and so forth. A mother's education and the type of degree she holds (technical vs. liberal arts, etc.) have also proven to be one of the clearest examples of a socialization variable³³. Because

²⁹ Jamal A. Badawi. “Gender Equity in Islam.” [http://www.jannah.org/sisters/genderequity.pdf] Debates among Western Muslims regarding “complementarity” are discussed by Anne Sofie Roald. “Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic Sources: Muslim Feminist Theology in Light of the Christian Tradition of Feminist Thought.” in K. Ask and M. Tjomsland (eds) Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations Oxford: Berg, 1998.

³⁰ For example, Suhaib Hamid Ghazi. Ramadan. New York: Holiday House, 1996.

³¹ Yasmin Ibrahim. I Can Wear my Hijab Anywhere. Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2004. On Islamization through children's literature in the Muslim diaspora is Torsten Janson. Your Cradle Is Green: The Islamic Foundation & the Call to Islam in Children's Literature. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003.

³² Kathleen Gerson. Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; Eric Plutzer. “Work Life, Family Life, and Women's Support of Feminism.” American Sociological Review 53 (4, 1988): 640-649.

³³ Tim F. Liao and Yang Cai. “Socialization, Life Situations, and Gender-Role Attitudes Regarding the Family Among White American Women.” Sociological Perspectives 38 (2, 1995): 241-261; Suzanne E. Tallichet and Fern K. Willits. “Gender-Role Attitude Change of Young Women: Influential Factors from a Panel Study.” Social Psychology Quarterly 49 (3, 1986): 219-227.

mothers provide the primary female model for most children, those mothers who have higher levels of education, and thus greater openness to feminist ideas, are more likely to pass on their gender-egalitarian ideals to their male and female children³⁴. As Plutzer³⁵ has noted, there is a critical divide between families that contain an employed woman and those that do not.

These practices begin in early childhood where unsupervised play by boys and girls is frowned on lest it lead to inappropriate touching or curiosity. Premarital sexual relations are considered completely forbidden by traditional Muslims, and religious communities fear that “too much” unsupervised interaction between young, unmarried adults will lead to sexual promiscuity. Furthermore, female virginity is valued by Muslims, as it is in many religious traditions, and is often a key topic of concern to fundamentalists or others who feel that the solidification of their religious identity, which partially rests on notions of virginity, is threatened by the larger societal context, where sexual engagements between men and women are not as strictly monitored.³⁶ The sexual chastity of women, and to a lesser degree men, forms the religious basis for segregation. Based on Khan’s dissertation research, respondents³⁷ view the culture of gender segregation as an “unwritten rule,” but most went on to describe distinct ways in which gender segregation is enforced in various settings.

Within the home, some young SAMA women³⁸ (along with fellow family members) discourage their children from playing with friends and relatives of the opposite gender or participating in school dances, especially as their children approach adolescence.

Statements from Khan’s interviewees illustrate such attitudes:

"I just told [my daughter's] third-grade teacher that because of our morals and values my daughter cannot dance with the opposite gender in order to instill the feeling of modesty in her. I'm going to start at a very early age. So, even in the third grade, I won't have her to dance with the opposite gender." – Fazilah³⁹

"Well, from an early age, my parents would say, 'It's okay to play with your female cousins but not so much with your male cousins, especially after the age of like ten, twelve, when you're hitting the age of puberty...' My father actually sat me down and said [in reference to a male cousin], 'OK, you know, you guys are growing up. He's got his friends, and you have your friends. You play with yours; let him play with his...'" – Mariam⁴⁰

SAMA parents, especially those born in the U.S., often consult with one another to determine the limits of social interactions between their children and non-Muslim

³⁴ Brian Powell and Lala Steelman. "Sexism and Fundamentalism Revisited: A Reanalysis of Peek and Brown." *Social Forces* 60 (4, 1982): 1154-1158.

³⁵ Eric Plutzer. "Work Life, Family Life, and Women’s Support of Feminism."

³⁶ Shahin Gerami. *Women and Fundamentalism-Islam and Christianity*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.

³⁷ The respondents consisted of approximately thirty American Muslim women across the United States from the ages of 18 to 55. The respondents were interviewed as part of Mahruq Khan’s thesis, “Queer and Feminist Muslims in America: The Struggle to Reconstruct Religious Identity and Practice.” Ph. D. dissertation, Sociology, Loyola University Chicago, 2007.

³⁸ Based on selected responses of SAMA women who were interviewed by Mahruq Khan for her Ph.D., “Queer and Feminist Muslims in America.”:

³⁹ A respondent from Mahruq Khan’s dissertation “Queer and Feminist Muslims in America.”

⁴⁰ Ibid.

classmates and friends of the opposite gender. Yet they are also concerned about being "too strict" with their children's social lives. While they limit their children's participation in mixed-gender gatherings, where they expect "flirting" or "picking up" to take place, parents propose "safe" (i.e. same gender) social alternatives for their children such as bowling, ice skating, and movie nights. Families also maintain the practice of segregating men and women, including boys and girls, at home or in informal social gatherings by drawing on religious maxims to support their stance: "When a man and woman are alone, the third person is the *shaytan* (Satan)"⁴¹ or, "In Islam, we [women] don't sit next to men. It's *haram* (forbidden)."

At the same time, specifically in the case of South Asian Muslim American girls, childhood and adolescent environments at home or in Islamic schools may represent spheres of control where conformity, modesty, and the suppression of individual expression may be imposed. Dress is an area where this control is particularly evident. Young SAMA girls (under the age of ten) are often dressed by their parents in alternating cultural patterns—at times in Western "frocks" or play suits and at others, especially for parties, in traditional South Asian outfits. This alternation can symbolize a hybrid element of SAMA girl identity that will resonate throughout our observations in this paper.

Despite the multiplicity of cultural expressions surrounding Islam, in all Muslim societies the family plays an important role during childhood, youth, and, in fact, throughout the person's entire life. Some cultural psychologists have spoken of the concept of a "familial" or corporate self in such cultures where the individual understands him or herself as part of a larger unit and usually makes major decisions in close consultation with parents, siblings and other family members. In general, this intense interaction with the family through celebrations, commemorations, and shared mourning constitutes a major element in the formation of Muslim identity. The extended family is a sphere of influence for youth, and the religious and spiritual practice of grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins is an important reference point and/or source of comparison.⁴² However, for SAMA girls growing up in America, a culture where separation from the family is usually seen as a necessary part of development, some social, identity, and even spiritual tensions may emerge around issues of family ties and autonomy. For instance, many SAMA girls regularly observe their non-Muslim counterparts as well as their male family members and friends exercising greater options to dress more freely, to stay out late(r) in the evening, and to socialize in mixed-gender gatherings without parental supervision. The drastically differing allocation of social outlets between SAMA girls and their counterparts leads to a growing consciousness of restrictions on their mobility. At times, this can result in isolated discussions or even ongoing cultural clashes between immigrant parents and their children. Depending on the family, their educational level and the extent to which they are immersed in American "mainstream" culture, SAMA girls often perceive faith community gatherings as "legitimate" social activities where they can assert greater autonomy from their parents. In other words, the religious

⁴¹ This statement is said to be derived from a saying (*hadith*) of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁴² Shabana Mir. "American Muslim Women College Students: Identity Strategies and Campus Climate". Unpublished doctoral research conducted in 2002-3 for a dissertation in Education, University of Indiana. Mir's revised work will be published as "Stretching the Ordinary: American Muslim Women on Campus." University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

boundaries of the mosque, MSA or the respective Muslim organization create a pre-established “safe” space where proper etiquette and conduct are assumed. This enables young SAMA girls to engage in opportunities for socializing, and in some cases, flirting, with other young men, thereby subverting the very boundaries to which they are expected to adhere.

Within the home, SAMA girls, like many other second-generation Americans,⁴³ confront traditional gender role expectations from their parents. While most of their families do encourage their daughters to do well in their studies, which is not uniformly the case in the home country, parents’ allocation of the division of labor for domestic chores and responsibilities (i.e. assisting with cooking and cleaning) still falls on the shoulders of SAMA girls and is very rarely imposed on their brothers. SAMA girls can claim their individualism by using their grades and overall commitment to their educational responsibilities as a challenge to unfair and differential treatment between themselves and their male siblings. Excelling in schoolwork often becomes a pretext for negotiating and reducing domestic responsibilities. Furthermore, as older SAMA girls succeed in college, graduate school and go on to obtain lucrative jobs, their example enables their younger peers to cement their educational commitments in the minds of their parents, thereby subverting many cultural expectations of domesticity.

Primary and Secondary Islamic Education in America

American Muslim communities are paying increasing attention to youth and adolescent socialization, as evidenced by practices such as establishing Islamic schools in which inculcating appropriate gender roles is an important element of the rationale for the project. In the Chicago area, where the fieldwork for this paper was conducted, at least six full-time Islamic schools have been established since 1993. Of these, four are primarily influenced by South Asian American Muslim communities.⁴⁴

Seen as a microcosm of American society, the public school and its culture represent norms and practices that seemingly contradict and undermine the very ideals that many SAMA girls’ parents uphold. Intra-student violence (e.g. gang activity, bullying, and hazing), openly dating, disrespecting teachers, poor disciplinary standards, drug and alcohol use among students, and peer pressure all comprise the reasons for

⁴³ The difficulty of specifying discrete numbers for generations of immigrants and their children “0”, 1, 1.5 etc. is discussed in the literature including Rubén Rambaut and Alejandro Portes. *The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley and New York: University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 2001.

⁴⁴ There are now six full-time Islamic schools in the greater Chicago area serving various communities. Interestingly, most were founded around 1990, marking the emergence of a second or in some cases a third generation of American Muslims. Universal and Aqsa (girls only) Schools (Bridgeview 1990) serve mainly Arab-Americans, while the Islamic Foundation (Villa Park 1988), Muslim Educational Center (primary) (Morton Grove 1990), College Preparatory School of America (Lombard 1991), and the Averroes Academy (primary) (Glenview 1999) have primarily South Asian student bodies, although teachers and pupils come from many ethnic backgrounds. The orientation of these schools is generally conservative rather than “traditionalist” and the curriculum conforms to state regulations and encourages positive civil engagement while allowing dialogue with other communities. Other centers offer Islamic Sunday schools, some level of primary classes, or day care programs. In addition, several Qur’an memorization academics provide full or part time instruction to youth (primarily male) and a full time “traditional” madrasa operates in Elgin. Marcia Hermansen. “Chicago.” *Encyclopedia of Islam in America*. Jocelyne Cesari (ed.). Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2007, 136-7.

which some SAMA students are pulled out of public schools. Moreover, parents of other SAMA students assert that fellow public-school attending girls face much insecurity, are encouraged toward unhealthy life paths and are confused about their religion and life in general.⁴⁵ The perceived lack of strict social policies in public schools creates a space for students to pursue ambitions, both private and public, that conflict with ideal “Islamic” traditions. Further symbolic life stage events in American culture, such as Prom night, may signal a danger to Islamic identity and moral norms and therefore engender a discourse of avoidance and buttressing religious and societal boundaries⁴⁶.

Some ways in which SAMA girls cope within public school environments are by striving for good behavior and academic success, “being” religiously observant as a counter-discipline (e.g. by publicly announcing they are fasting, teaching fellow students about Ramadan, wearing *hijab*, seeking exemptions from school dances, plays and swimming, and avoiding public school sex education programs). These strategies could be seen as using Islamic behaviors to resist conformity to dominant cultural norms.

Islamic Schools

The majority of Muslim students in the United States, perhaps 95%⁴⁷ attend public schools. This is due in part to their prevalence and minimal cost (as opposed to some \$7,000/child in private Islamic schools). Parents, especially those in urban settings, may prefer an Islamic school as being a “safer” physical environment removed from guns and drug cultures and as more likely to promote religious and cultural values and identity. Girls are disproportionately sent to Islamic schools for these reasons. In addition, many Muslim families view the Islamic school as a physical and symbolic space within which their daughters’ chastity and purity may be better protected. However, there are some parents and even some Islamic school teachers of SAMA students who fear that Islamic schools may lead to isolation of the girls in the broader society.

Co-author Mahruq Khan conducted participant observation fieldwork over four months in Spring 2003⁴⁸ at one such Islamic school in the Chicagoland area that constructs the gendered Islamic morality for its young female students primarily on the basic dress codes, behavior and social segregation from boys.⁴⁹ The research on these

⁴⁵ Jasmin Zine, “Safe Havens or Religious ‘ghettos’? Narratives of Islamic Schooling in Canada.” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 10 (1, 2007): 71-92 reviews this debate and the literature surrounding it.

⁴⁶ Samana Siddiqui. “The Prom: 8 Prom Tips for Parents.” <http://www.soundvision.com/Info/parenting/parent.promtips.asp> Viewed May 20, 2009, and “The Prom: Not Just One Night of Haram.” http://www.themodernreligion.com/teens/teen_promonenight.htm Viewed May 20, 2009. This also attracted journalistic attention, for example, Patricia Leigh Brown. “For the Muslim Prom Queen, There Are No Kings Allowed.” *New York Times*, June 9, 2003.

⁴⁷ Ihsan Bagby. “The Mosque in America: A National Portrait.” Washington: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2001. http://www.cair.com/Portals/0/pdf/The_Mosque_in_America_A_National_Portrait.pdf

⁴⁸ Khan conducted her research at Salaam Academy during the spring of 2003. She used participant observation by sitting in Islamic school classrooms over a period of four months and by observing SAMA girls outside the class, such as in the cafeteria, the pre-class assembly hall, gym, informal conversations in hallways and after-school social interactions. She also interviewed approximately twenty individuals working in various capacities at the school. While trends observed at the school cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the entire SAMA population, the school’s class and ethnic diversity provides some meaningful insights into this particular burgeoning SAMA community.

⁴⁹ Mahruq Khan. “A Half-Way Trip Back Home: Muslim Americans Negotiate Assimilation By Imparting Morality Through An Islamic Parochial School.” Master’s Thesis. Sociology, Loyola University Chicago, 2004.

girls is based on this Islamic school. Salaam Academy⁵⁰ is one of a growing number of Islamic schools in the Midwestern United States offering a full-time elementary and high school curriculum. It has a state certification and teaches a state-accredited curriculum, in addition to courses in Islamic Studies and Arabic. Established more than fifteen years ago, the school in 2003 enrolled approximately 630 students from preschool age through the twelfth grade. The numbers in 2009 are roughly similar. Nearly all the students are American-born, but about 5% are immigrants. The administrators of the school estimate that about 60-70% of the U.S.-born students are of Indian-Pakistani descent, about 30% are of Arab descent, and the remaining are African-American, European-American or East Asian-American.

Teachers at Salaam Academy confront the prospects that, in many ways, their school is sheltering students from negotiating their religious identities in the “real world.” American Muslim teachers recall having to defend their religious identities in diverse contexts as young students attending public schools. Although the SAMA girls at Salaam Academy are required to adhere to the Islamic dress code and follow standards of etiquette in the school, their teachers express doubts about the strength of the students’ beliefs and the durability of their practices because they are imposed by the school, not necessarily motivated by personal conviction, and because they are not subjected to the peer pressure that would exist in a more diverse school environment. The isolation of SAMA girls/students at Salaam Academy from non-Muslim peers has led to other social adjustment difficulties in their later lives, including difficulties negotiating social boundaries around drinking and intimate relationships when they leave the sheltered and controlled environment of the Islamic school to go to college. In order to respond to these concerns, Salaam Academy has broadened the range of inter-faith and inter-school activities for its students, such as extracurricular sports competitions and shared educational experiences with non-Muslim students from other schools.

Within the school confines, young SAMA girls (e.g. preschoolers and kindergarteners) are not required to wear the school uniform. For boys, the dress code consists of a blue long-sleeved collared shirt with dark blue pants. For the girls at the school, the dress code varies according to age. Until third grade, girls can wear an ankle-length pleated blue skirt or loose-fitting blue pants with a white long-sleeved shirt. From fourth grade onwards, girls are required to wear a hijab (headscarf), a long-sleeved white shirt, and either a plaid ankle-length skirt or a blue *jilbab* (ankle-length overcoat) during the school day. In addition, girls are not allowed to wear nail polish or makeup. If a girl is found entering a classroom with nail polish, the teacher will send her to the main office to have it removed completely before being allowed back into the classroom. Girls can wear rings on their fingers, but not earrings. Wearing large ostentatious jewelry is discouraged.

Outside the classroom, a few SAMA girls (and boys) attempt to covertly interact in the hallways—they engage in private conversations with boys and exchange notes, giggles and looks as they pass one another in the hallways, and approach them in order to

⁵⁰ The school’s faculty also reflected a mixture of immigrants and U.S.-born Muslims. It consisted of sixteen U.S.-born teachers: nine Indian-Pakistani Americans, three Caucasian-American converts, and four Caucasian-American non-Muslims. There were also ten immigrant teachers, of whom six were Arab immigrants and four are Indian-Pakistani. The Principal and the Islamic Studies Director were Indian-Pakistani immigrants as well, and the Vice-Principal was Arab.

stop their conversations—but are quickly separated by informal hallway monitors. Some girls go so far as to flirt in more overt ways, much to the ire of the administration.

Inside the classroom, SAMA girls are often in gender-segregated classes or are seated behind their male counterparts. If girls raise questions about mixed-gender socializing, dating, mating and sexual interests more generally, they are dealt with by teachers through private conversation outside of the classroom. Girls are taught that “appropriate” male-female interaction includes avoiding befriending members of the opposite sex, not engaging in direct eye contact with other boys even during in-class speeches, and always maintaining a professional distance with one another.

U.S.-born Muslim teachers at the Islamic school also note a double standard for enforcing the dress code. All teachers agree that teachers place more pressure on the girls to adhere to the code of wearing the hijab (headscarf) and the *jilbab* (loose overcoat). Hasan points out that, as a token of objectification, one may regard “Islamic dress” as a result of religious interpretation within the group and also as a response to outside expectations. The hijab thereby is regarded as imparting a special status to some of the American Muslim women who wear it.⁵¹ “To wear the hijab marks gender, religion, and community, and it marks specific interpretations of these concepts publicly as well as privately. It marks the individual's choice to become more than gender and be a specific model for the articulation of gender.”⁵² Hair symbolism implies that men and women at specific periods are using their own physical appearance—in the context of social norms—to send signals about their understanding of their role, their social position and changes in these.

Teachers further admit that they and the school's administration bring up the female students to have a “high moral character and integrity” whereas the boys “get away with so much.” One teacher describes this discrepancy in enforcement:

Well, girls are expected to be in hijab, *jilbab*, or the school uniform. We're really strict in that regard. But on a daily basis, there's such a discrepancy between how the females dress and the males dress. Guys at the school just don't wear their uniform. From middle school onwards, I see violations everyday, and nothing is done to assert that what they're doing is wrong. So, they have this attitude that they can get away with it. But we are so quick to point out if a girl is wearing nail polish. But if a guy's wearing the wrong shirt, he usually gets away with it. If a boy's wearing hair gel, I'll probably say something, and other teachers will as well, but I think it's overlooked a little bit more than if it was a female action. (Kelly)

Fazilah, who leads a youth group at the Islamic School, uses that setting as a space in which she helps establish gender-appropriate behavior and dress for the female students by emphasizing the importance of hijab and modest behavior. At one meeting, she taught her students: You have to cover up your body...no tummy showing, no legs showing; and hijab means modest behavior. It's not just about your dress, and it requires that you speak modestly, walk modestly, and just behave modestly.

Women, by mystifying girls' bodies, also contribute to the sexualization of Muslim girls, despite their desire to not objectify them. Muslim men and women heighten

⁵¹Asma Gul Hasan. *American Muslims*. New York: Continuum, 2000.

⁵²Maha Azzam. “Gender and the Politics of Religion in the Middle East.” *Feminism and Islam*, Mai Yamani (ed.) New York: New York University Press, 1996.

gender difference through the enforcement of women's dress within prayer halls, community events at the mosque, Sunday school classes, and religious conferences. Dress code enforcement utilizes everything from signs admonishing modesty and silence on mosque walls,⁵³ to fear tactics (e.g. telling girls that they will go to hell if they don't cover), to arguing that the male sexual desire for women (and girls) is the rationale behind the need for girls to be covered and segregated. Furthermore, Muslims can draw some girls' morality into question if they do not adhere to dress code expectations in these settings.

Despite all this, SAMA girls assert subtle ways of subverting the Islamic school's efforts to homogenize their appearance. While the school places some restrictions on the type and extent of jewelry that the girls can wear during school hours, some girls express their individuality by exceeding the maximum number of rings allowed. They compare and contrast their hand jewelry, since most other parts of their bodies, including their hair, arms and legs, are covered. It is not uncommon for many SAMA girls to wear nose rings. While this is a long-standing beauty practice for many women living in South Asia, SAMA girls use it to accentuate their facial features when no make-up can be worn, as nose rings have become quite stylish for many young American girls. In addition, girls carry purses and backpacks around from class to class. Some of the bags are decorated with buttons and patches with various brand names and social and political slogans and symbols, which enables the girls to differentiate themselves from one another and carve out their own external image within the context.

Many SAMA young women challenge their religious community members' assumptions, that women, who don the hijab, are more pious and devoted to their faith than those who do not. Some who previously wore hijab choose to resist external displays of piety by deciding to remove their own hijab. Some refuse to wear hijab while attending religious education classes or community events, as an act of defiance. Others struggle to tone down the importance that their mosques place on the wearing of hijab by not emphasizing gender distinctions through dress within their families.

Uzma, who wore hijab regularly in her youth, decided to stop wearing it due to her own perceptions that her faith community's value of women was based on whether or not they wore hijab. Here, she describes the struggle she faced before her decision to take it off:

I used to wear hijab when I was a kid for a long time. I just realized that people treat me differently when I wear hijab from when I don't... For them, I'm just a piece of cloth. If I put it [on], I'm a good person. If I take it off, I'm a bad person. I struggled with that very much. I didn't like the way people treated me when I took off my hijab. But I took it off deliberately because people measure me by this piece of cloth. But, I have many other things: I have a mind, I have a heart, and I have many things else, so I did this [removing hijab] deliberately.

Hameeda, too, wore hijab as an adolescent, a college student and after she graduated from college. Many years after graduating from college though, she removed her hijab because she rejected the gender "mold," established by her friends and members of her MSA. For Hameeda, hijab was a choice, yet she could not avoid the perceptions her community had of those who wore hijab and those who did not. Men and women in her community perceived those who wore hijab as women who had attained a high level

⁵³ For example, a sign in a mosque reading, "No Women beyond this point." Observed in Chicago, 2008.

of spirituality and piety and viewed those who did not as less devoted to their faith and more interested to Western materialism. This dichotomy did not resonate with Hameeda, and she decided to take off her hijab in an effort to resist the pressure to conform.

Though many SAMA parents attempt to impose varying social regulations on their unmarried daughters, regardless of age, technological advances such as personal mobile phones, text messaging, online chats, Twitter and Facebook enable young SAMA girls to communicate with each other and male peers in ways that their parents find difficult to monitor. As a result, SAMA boys and girls can conduct virtual relationships that would be regarded as problematic were they more visible to the community.

The College Experience for South Asian American Muslim Girls

Coming to college represents a significant moment in the lives of Muslim adolescents as it does for American youth in general. Many young Muslim women who had very limited freedom until the end of high school will live away from home for the first time and immediately experience a much greater degree of freedom, independence and responsibility. Even commuter students will experience some freedom from the monitoring and protective gaze of family and community.

This new-found college freedom may be creatively used in Muslim and ethnic enclaves such as the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and cultural student organizations (e. g. Pakistani or South Asian Student Associations). The greater use of freedom in these contexts—while it stretches conservative parental and/or community tolerance of youth practices—may yet be justified by religious and/or cultural norms. While Muslim girls may stretch and even breach community or parental norms, this will not necessarily mean that they will distance themselves from religious or spiritual concerns. For example, girls associated with Muslim Student Associations⁵⁴ are “working for Islam” and in such a context “brother-sister” interaction with male peers is tolerated, or even encouraged, by conservative parents more than if the context had been purely social. When they go to college, many SAMA girls—probably the majority of them—will also leave their mostly white and non-Muslim school friends behind and will for the first time encounter larger numbers of Muslims and co-ethnics.

It is important to note, however, that not all college/MSA encounters are the same for SAMA female college students. Many young SAMA women encounter divergent and often contradictory norms within their MSAs for mixed-gender social interactions. MSA leaders can emphasize and practice gender segregation in their organizational activities and meetings by encouraging men and women to sit and socialize on opposite sides of the room. For instance, during an MSA meeting, when a SAMA female student attempted to cross the gender line by socializing with a man on the opposite side of the room, one of the MSA board members undermined her religiosity by referring to this specific social interaction as “un-Islamic,” and telling her, “You shouldn't have done that,” and “There needs to be a clear segregation.” In Khan’s dissertation research,

⁵⁴ The discussion of college-aged SAMA girls is based on participant observation and informal conversations between both authors and SAMA students at mosques, Muslim community centers and organizations and public universities across the greater Chicagoland area from the mid-1990s to the present. Most respondents were SAMA girls and young women who were involved with the Muslim Students Association at their respective campuses.

another American-born girl recalls the way a fellow MSA officer enforced and justified gender segregation:

"[Mixed-gender socializing] creates this bad atmosphere, and you [women] should try to stay away from men. And, integration creates deep feelings. You start getting bad feelings, like, you know, you want to do something." – Huda

MSA leaders denounce mixed-gender social interaction that is not strictly related to MSA business by labeling it as categorically “unnecessary,” based upon the perception that such social interaction will inevitably lead to sexual attraction, which they see as socially undesirable and antithetical to the environment they are trying to maintain. Huda, who because of her leadership status exerts some social authority within the organizational context, promotes the fear of a possible sexual engagement between two unmarried individuals and implies that “doing something” is a necessary and undesirable outcome of these “bad [sexual] feelings.”

Not all SAMA female students tolerate the more conservative practices of their student organizations, however. Some defy the partition in their prayer areas by choosing not to pray in the women’s section in a separate room or behind a partition. Instead, they pray in the back of the men’s prayer area, especially if there’s more space there. For instance, Bushra and other girls in a campus MSA began talking amongst themselves about the imposition of the physical partition behind which she and her friends prayed. Whenever the women's prayer hall became crowded, Bushra and her friends would be the first among the women to stand and pray in *front of* the curtain or partition. Often times, after some women made the move to pray in the same space as the men, their actions resulted in other women joining them in front of the partition.

An article in the New York Times discussed possible shifts in campus MSA cultures focusing on the idea of “acceptability” for inclusion in the group. The lead example was a debate as to whether a mini skirt wearing female student could be allowed to join the MSA at Berkeley.⁵⁵ Other anxieties cited in the article include various forms and levels of male female interaction.

At the same time, some South Asian Muslim girls may also choose to associate less with other campus Muslims because they wish to avoid a religious/cultural clique or enclave, or the appearance of the same. To many youth, college means a search for “new” experiences, and associating with fellow Muslims (or Pakistanis, Arabs, etc.) may lead to a limiting of potential horizons of experience. This may happen because it can be relatively easy to associate with similar peers, and girls are afraid that they will then not make the time and effort to reach out, make new friends and experience new things. Some youth report that they dislike the appearance of constituting a cultural or religious clique: they feel that a group of “hijabis”⁵⁶ or a large group of South Asians that always “stick together” is “intimidating” to outsiders, or appears socially unapproachable. Some Muslim youth seem to feel that the American “melting-pot” demands that they not restrict themselves to fellow Muslims. This is particularly so in the case of upwardly mobile upper-middle class youth at wealthy colleges for whom college is an important

⁵⁵ Neil Macfarquhar. “For Muslim Students, a Debate on Inclusion.” New York Times, February 21, 2008.

⁵⁶ “Hijabi” is the term for a Muslim woman who observes modest dress including the covering of the hair with a scarf. Hijab literally means barrier or curtain but in “Muslim English” is has come to refer specifically to the headscarf.

phase prior to professional life where they must make important connections and be “groomed” for interaction with diverse (or mostly white) elites.⁵⁷

Conclusions

In each phase of their lives, South Asian Muslim American girls negotiate their multiple identities in the face of religious, cultural, and social pressures. As young girls, they go through ceremonial rites of passage that stress religious adherence and conformity, beauty, and chastity, and that foreshadow future gender roles as brides, mothers and caregivers. As they enter later childhood, they face gender-specific constraints on their dress and behavior that are based on a combination of South Asian culture and Islam, and they begin to contest these restrictions often by appealing to Islamic ideals of equality and fairness in response to those restrictions that they see as arbitrary or culturally-rooted. Those who attend Islamic schools face more stringent restrictions on their dress and interaction with male peers, but they often find ways around these restrictions and assert more progressive ideals, such as individuality and autonomy. As they move on to college, many SAMA girls find Muslim Students Associations to be a legitimate and respectable social outlet in which they can meet male and female peers who share some elements of their ethnic and religious identity. While some girls choose to start (or continue) wearing the hijab, they often characterize that choice as a reflection of independence and feminism, and they often retain an interest in American fashion and culture. Other SAMA girls assert autonomy by not wearing the hijab when they are no longer under their parents’ supervision, but still retain and value the Muslim component of their identity. (such as---give an example)

Throughout all of these stages, SAMA girls are negotiating aspects of their American, South Asian and Muslim identities, selecting aspects of each in ways that enables them to construct an identity that they view is internally consistent while being true to their religion, their parents’ culture, and the culture in which they are growing up. Instead of abandoning any of these three identities, they choose elements from all of them that empower them to resist stereotypes, overcome religious, cultural, and social constraints and reconstruct a sense of girlhood on their own terms.

The position of the South Asian Muslim girl in American culture is marked by manifestations of incipient girl power. Her autonomy is evidenced by her ability to make choices as part of a “complex navigation” of multiple identities. These choices do not exclusively represent a liberalizing or assimilationist move towards the mainstream majority,⁵⁸ and they may incorporate a range of acts of resistance both within the context of a girl’s family and community and in opposition to norms and expectations of the majority population.

These acts are often met with fascination by the mainstream culture with the unexpected voices of “young women whose positions in their native culture raise

⁵⁷Shabana Mir. “American Muslim Women College Students: Identity Strategies and Campus Climate”. Ph. D. dissertation. Education Policy Studies and Anthropology, University of Indiana is a source for some of these observations on college life among SAMA girls. See Marcia Hermansen and Shabana Mir. “Identity Jihads: The Multiple Strivings of American Muslim Youth.” Religious Perspectives on Spirituality in Childhood and Adolescence, Aostre Johnson and Gene Roehlkepartain (eds.) Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 423-436

⁵⁸ Tess Kay. “Daughters of Islam: Sisters in Sport.” 138.

particularly obvious differences from the majority culture.”⁵⁹ As a final example, we present the emergence of SAMA girls manifesting power by becoming culture producers. In response to a call for American Muslims to represent themselves in videos as part of a contest “One Nation Many Voices” sponsored by the progressive, internationally oriented, network “Link TV”, several SAMA girls made award-winning films on themes such as hijab and arranged marriage that employed wit and humor both to assert and celebrate difference and to normalize and humanize themselves and the Muslim community in general.⁶⁰ It is acts like these that augur SAMA girl power being increasingly acknowledged and recognized both within and outside the communities from which these girls emerge.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰In the 2007 LinkTV, “One Nation: Many Voices”, contest for films featuring perspectives on Muslims in America, major awards, including first prize, went to young female SAMA film-makers for, “A Land Called Paradise” by Lena Khan and “Arranged” produced by Mediha Sandhu. These films can be viewed at <http://www.linktv.org/onenation2007/winners>. Accessed Sept. 25, 2009. American Muslim self-representations are not unproblematic as studied by Evelyn Alsultany in □ “Selling American Diversity and Muslim American Identity through Nonprofit Advertising Post-9/11.” □ *American Quarterly* 59, (3, 2007): 593-622 and Mucahit Bilici. “Finding Mecca in America: American Muslims and Cultural Citizenship.” Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2008.