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The Impact of Islam as a Religion and Muslim Women on Gender Equality: A Phenomenological Research Study

by

Sonia D. Galloway

A Dissertation Presented to the
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Nova Southeastern University
2014

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Nova Southeastern University
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences

This dissertation was submitted by Sonia D. Galloway under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

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11/12/14
Date of Final Approval

Neil Katz, PhD., Chair

Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family and friends. A special gratitude to my son, Daryus K. Drayton, whose love and wittiness has inspired me to reach for the stars. I also dedicate my dissertation to my mother, Ms. P. Harris Galloway, for her continued love and support in all my endeavors. My siblings, Jocelyn, Jennifer, and Roderick, who have never left my side and hold special places within my heart.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables ... v

List of Figures ... vi

Abstract ... vii

Chapter 1: Introduction ... 1

- Introduction ... 1
- Statement of Problem ... 3
- Background of the Study ... 4
- Research Questions ... 9
- Purpose of the Study ... 10
- Research Design ... 11
- Theoretical Framework ... 14
- Significance of the Study ... 18
- Definition of Terms ... 20
- Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations ... 21
  - Assumptions ... 21
  - Limitations ... 21
  - Delimitations ... 22
- Summary ... 22
- Organization of the Study ... 23

Chapter 2: Literature Review ... 24

- Introduction ... 24
- Religion ... 24
- Islam ... 26
- Islam and Women ... 31
- Present Condition of Women in Islamic majority Societies ... 39
- Political Participation ... 40
- Education ... 42
- Employment ... 44
  - Eypyt ... 46
  - Iran ... 46

    - Iraq 46
    - Jordan 47
    - Lebanon 47
    - Morocco 47
    - Saudi Arabia 47
    - Syria 48
    - The West Bank and Gaza 48
    - Yemen 49
    - Afghanistan 49
    - Pakistan 49
  - Islamic Feminism 50
    - Cause 50
    - Definition 51
  - Challenges to Islamic Feminism 58
  - Religion 60
  - Feminism 61
  - Non-Participation 64
  - Western Influence 66
  - Islamic Fundamentalism 69
  - Islamic Law (Shari'a) 74
  - Marriage 78
  - Divorce 80
  - Inheritance 81
  - Dress 82
  - Islamic Schools of Jurisprudence (fiqh) 88
  - Literature Review Summary/Conclusion 90
- Chapter 3: Methodology 95
  - Pilot Phase 96
    - Introduction 96
    - Location and Participants 97
    - Objectives 99

Materials 99
Procedures 99
Evaluation Criterion 99
Methodology 100
Methodological Limitations 101
Findings and Results 101
Research Methods and Design 102
Phenomenology as a Method 102
Selection of Participants 105
Materials/Instruments 106
Data Collection, Processing and Analysis 108
Informed Consent 108
Field Issues 109
Access to the Organization 109
Observations 110
Interviews 110
Documents and Audiovisual Materials 110
Confidentiality 110
Data Collection Method 112
Data Analysis 113
Trustworthiness 115
Methodological Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations 116
Ethical Assurances 117
Reflexivity/Desired Outcomes 118
Summary 119
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results 120
Data Analysis Methodology 120
Data Analysis Results 124
Religious Consciousness 125
Sub-theme: Qur'anic Verses and their Interpretations Regarding Muslim Women 129

  Islam as a Religion 133
  Islamic Tenet/Principle 135
  Gender Equality 138
    Sub-theme: Muslim Women Interpreting Qur’anic Passages 141
  Islamic Covering 145
  Religious Activities 150
  Muslim Women Roles 156
  Public and Private Treatment 159
  Western Muslim Women vs. Muslim Women in Majority Islamic Societies 163
  Fundamentalism 168
    Sub-theme: Islamic Law (Shari’a) 172
  Voice and Expectations 177
  Conclusion 183
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations 184
  Discussion 184
  Limitations of the Study 193
  Conclusions 194
  Implication for Practice and Recommendations 196
  Suggestions for Future Research 199
References 200
Appendix A: Informed Consent 222
Appendix B: Letter to Participants 224
Appendix C: Participant Release Agreement 225
Appendix D: Pilot Phase Interview Questions 226
Appendix E: Revised Interview Protocol 227
Appendix F: Thank You Letter to Participants 229
Appendix G: Memorandum of Consent to Conduct Study 230

List of Tables

Table 1: Demographics of Muslim Women in Pilot Phase 98

Table 2: Demographics of Muslim Women in Main Study 123

List of Figures

Figure 1. World religion and gender inequality. 6

Figure 2. Islam and gender inequality. 9

Figure 3. Implications for further study in gender equality via world religions. 199

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine and explore the meanings, structures and essence of the lived experience of Muslim women via an Islamic theoretical (Kalam) framework. The study's goal was to describe a detailed and comprehensive description of how Muslim women use Islam to promote gender equality and improve treatment within their daily lives. The critical importance of gleaning a better understanding of Islam and the perceived invisibility of Muslim women motivated the researcher to undertake this study.

The research study included a qualitative phenomenology research approach. Data were collected from multiple sources: observations, semi-structured individual interviews and transcriptions from participants from various and diverse geographical locations, educational levels, sects, socio-economic backgrounds, and nationalities. Inductive analysis allowed for the emergence of patterns and themes in relation to Muslim women and gender equality within Islam. An Islamic theoretical (Kalam) model provided a conceptual framework for the study, which allowed participants to discuss acquiring and/or achieving gender equality within Islam without separating their religion from their respective traditions and cultures.

Thirteen significant themes emerged from the research that helped to illustrate how Muslim women can employ Islam to promote gender equality while improving their lives. The anticipated results of this research study may also be useful in improving gender relations within Islam by serving as a roadmap to resolving conflict between Muslim women and Islamic clerics and scholars.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Gender is defined as distinct from sex in that it refers to the social
and cultural constructs which, while based on the biological
sex of a person, defines his or her roles in society (Mosse, 1993).

Introduction

Throughout recorded history, women have been dehumanized, disposed, diminished, degraded, marginalized, disenfranchised, secluded, subjugated, and silenced. In ancient India, widows were forced to be burnt alive on the pyre of their dead husbands. In pre-Islamic Arabia, female infants were burned alive. Female infanticide still occurs in many countries today. Under the Pakistani hudood ordinances enacted in 1977, a woman who brings charges of rape is asked to produce four Muslim male eye-witnesses of the incident. If she fails to produce the witnesses, she is charged and punished for the crime of adultery (Quraishi, 1997). In 2002, the Saudi religious police forced fleeing young girls back into a blazing school building in Mecca because the girls had not put on their abayas. In 2007, the Egyptian government reported that 96% of women were forced to undergo genital mutilations (Slackman, 2007). Lastly, the Taliban's near fatal attack on a fifteen-year-old Pakistani girl for the 'crime' of championing the cause of women's education (Ahmad, 2012) has inflamed the debate of what is gender equality and can it be attained for Muslim women.

A half billion Muslim women inhabit approximately forty-five Muslim majority countries, and another thirty or more countries have significant Muslim minorities including countries in the developed West. According to Abusharaf (2006), Muslim women have come to live under an extremely conservative patriarchal gender-based system that embraces Islam and Shari'a in its most reactionary and intransigent form regarding Muslim women, e.g., Iran, Sudan, and Northern Nigeria. Many other Muslim women live in majority Islamic countries where Shari'a is greatly modified, i.e., Kenya, Ghana, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. In majority Islamic societies Muslim women are striving not only to attain basic human needs and rights, Muslim women are using Islam to demand gender equality via a more liberal reading of the Holy Qur'an and Islamic jurisprudence, new civil liberties, and new relationships to the outside world (Afary, 2004a).

In discussion of Islam, Muslim women, and gender equality, controversy has continued to swirl around the historical inferior position of women. Article 18 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* declares "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance" (United Nations, 1948); however, to achieve full gender equality in a meaningful and authentic sagacity, equality under the law is simply not sufficient. The historically ontologically inferior position of women, social roles, and cultural and traditional context must be taken into account.

> Formal or de jure equality, which involves simply "adding women" to the existing paradigms is an inadequate response to women's inequality. Realizing women's substantive or de facto equality involves addressing the institutionalized nature of women's disadvantage and changing the cultural, traditional and religious beliefs that typecast women as inferior to men. It also means recognizing that notions of masculinity and femininity are interdependent. (Jain, 2005, p. 88)

Within Islamic theology (Kalam), biological differences between men and women are recognized and the supreme virtue of motherhood is extolled, but for the Holy Qur'an biology is not destiny. The Holy Qur'an expresses the moral and spiritual equality of men and women by balancing virtues and rewards for both genders in identical terms; therefore, Muslim women are of the strong opinion that Islam is inherently gender neutral and promotes gender equality.

This phenomenological research study, which examines and explores the meaning, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women, also seeks to advance knowledge of how Islam, as a religion, can promote gender equality via an Islamic theology (Kalam) framework. This research study further addresses the effects Islam will have on future gender relations between Muslim men and Muslim women within patriarchal gender-based regimes.

Statement of Problem

According to Al Hibri (1982), religions have a patriarchal view of the relationship between genders; the problem regarding gender inequality within Islam is indicative of cultural practices and traditional patriarchal and male-dominated religious interpretations used to subjugate Muslim women for centuries. While there has been an increase in the awareness of Muslim women's quest for gender equality via an Islamic theological (Kalam) framework, there is an absence of comprehensive research and studies to provide Muslim women, non-Muslims, researchers, academia, and non-governmental organizations with proactive steps that can be taken to assist with bringing gender equality within Islam. Muslim women believe Islamic theology (Kalam) promotes gender equality for all adherents, as well as offers Muslim women the opportunity to re-examine and reinterpret Qur’anic religious passages in a modern day context. Although Muslim women seek gender equality, how to achieve it without separating religion from culture has caused some Muslim women to accept traditional patriarchy within Islam. As Muslim women begin to grasp the attractiveness and remunerations of Islamic feminism so will gender equality eventually manifest within the religion and culture of Islam. Because of this eventual manifestation, Islamic feminism has become a phenomenon that is significantly increasing in prevalence.

While Islamic feminism is a vehicle to bring about gender equality within Islam, many Muslim women hesitate to participate in this pacifist movement for various reasons that include the family system one resides within, individualism versus. the larger organization, differentiation of sex roles, and separate legal status for Muslim women (Badran, 2002). As Islamic feminism is a new phenomenon, Muslim women believe the theological (Kalam) core of Islamic feminism is in alignment with their daily religious practices and beliefs. Even as differences exist between Islamic feminism’s desired outcomes and Muslim women’s long history of subjugation and disenfranchisement, their quest to use Islamic theology (Kalam) to re-examine and re-interpret Qur’anic religious interpretations inspires their belief that Islam can promote gender equality. This shared belief assures that Muslim women and Islamic feminism have a bestowed interest in dealing with issues of gender inequality within Islam via an Islamic theological (Kalam) framework.

Background of the Study

According to McGuire (2002), religion has been historically related to conflict on several levels: 1) between religious groups, 2) within a religious group, and 3) between a religious group and the larger society. Within Islam conflict has arisen on all the aforementioned levels, specifically regarding Muslim women's involvement in political leadership, women's positions in the household, women's positions in marriage, and women's rights to read and interpret passages in the Holy Qur'an and the hadith. In Islam, the Holy Qur'an emphasizes that Allah in His perfect wisdom has created all species in pairs, so men and women have been created of the same species. Specifically, the Holy Qur'an states,

> "He has made for you mates of your own kind" (42:12), and "He it is Who has created you from a single soul and made there from its mates, so that the male might incline towards the female and find comfort in her" (7:190).

Although the Holy Qur'an posits neutral gender, patriarchal gender-based regimes have been successful in imposing their conservative, male-dominated, misogynistic religious interpretations to control and/or disregard Muslim women in a changing and dynamic Islamic society.

In addition, Islam's egalitarian message guarantees unalienable rights to Muslim women, namely the right to life, the right to obtain education, the right to conduct business, the right to inherit and maintain property, and the right to keep their names. However, patriarchal gender-based regimes have consistently used Islam, as a religion, to repudiate Muslim women's rights via historically and culturally religious interpretations. As there is no consensus within the Islamic world on the assigned role and status of Muslim women, activists are striving to advocate for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice within an Islamic theology (Kalam) framework, while highlighting the teachings of equality within Islam to question patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings (Badran, 2002).

The issues of women's social status and role in society are ideological contentions that have permeated all societies from the beginning of civilizations. Throughout history, Muslim women have experienced discrimination, marginalization, restrictions of their freedoms, and restrictions of their rights. The following model demonstrates the historical role religion has played in women's lives throughout the centuries.

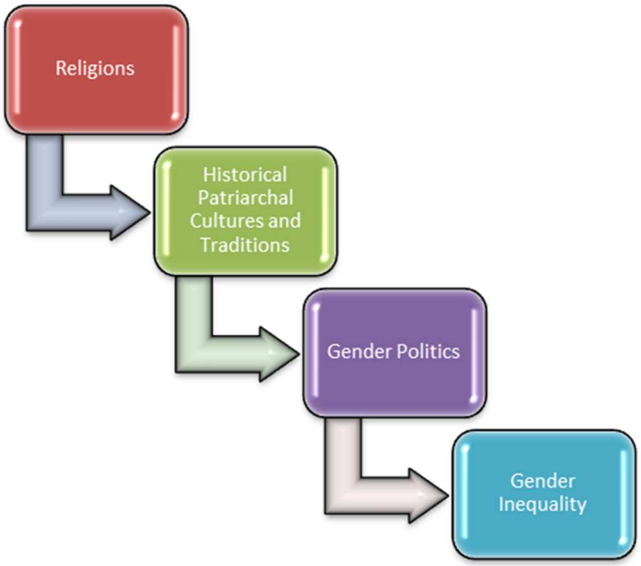

Figure 1. World religion and gender inequality.

Additionally, Muslim women are now battling a loss of self, as "the Holy Qur'an raises many problems and provides no means a simple and straightforward code of law" (Keddie & Baron, 1993, p. 59), thus proposing the Holy Qur'an has several interpretations. As such, laws can be reshaped (Keddie & Baron, 1993, p. 15) to ensure that the unalienable rights for Muslim women and the egalitarian message of the Holy Qur'an are not distorted and restricted by Islamic clerics whose goal is to remain in control of Muslim women's lives. According to Afary (2004a), Islamic clerics argue men and women are equal but have different capacities according to their assigned gender roles, thereby, Islamic clerics "demand greater control over women's bodies, emphasizing women's roles in procreation and call for women's submission to patriarchal values" (p. 131). Ali Engineer (1994) argues, "Unless patriarchal values and patriarchal structures are dispensed with, male attitudes towards women will continue to be one of domination" (p. 297).

Islamic feminism, according to Ahmadi (2006), is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm" (p. 35) used to empower women, and to bring about legal changes and societal transformation. Even so, Islamic fundamentalists have continuously sought to "recuperate traditional norms and codes, including patriarchal laws and family rules for women, put pressure on states to enforce public morality, increase religious observances and tighten controls over women" (Keddie & Baron, 1993, p. 7). For example, the Taliban in Afghanistan forbade women to leave the private sphere and closed down schools for girls. The disenfranchisement of women from participating in the public sphere and their subjugated roles in the public sphere clashes with John Esposito's examination of the role Islam played in women's right when he stated: "The early days of Islamic women's activism generated the drive to rethink gender in Islam in new and sometimes radical ways" (as cited in Ahmadi, 2006, p. 37). What is taking place today in the Islamic world is an internal conflict between Muslims, not an external battle between Islam and the West as demonstrated by Islamic feminists' struggle "to rescue Islam's central values from a small but violent minority" (Wright, 2011, p. 42)

Literature posits Islamic feminists have tasked themselves to deconstruct the gendered Islamic discourses that are in the mainstream, where Shari'a is implemented and to cleanse Islam of its patriarchal influences and tendencies (Bardakoğlu, 2008). Moreover, Islamic feminists argue, Islam itself is a gender equal religion that has been distorted by the male dominated tradition of Islamic jurisprudence (Bardakoğlu, 2008), therefore, "if the Muslim world is to adapt to the changing roles of women in modern society, it must assign Islam to the place of the private and personal" (Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002, p. 351). Additionally, literature posits that social conditions and prevailing cultural values also play crucial roles in the perception of what gender equality means, as over the century many iniquities have crept back into Muslim societies.

As evident in the Islamic world, indigenous cultural values, patriarchal traditions, dormant misogyny, and the power dynamics between genders have reasserted themselves in the guise of religious orthodoxy. An example of this evil can be seen in Al-Ghazali's book entitled *Faith in Divine Unity and Trust in Divine Providence: Book 35 of the Revival of the Religious Sciences* (2001), in which, he advocated that women be kept ignorant. Statements that achieve such ends might include: 'She must not be well-informed nor must she be taught to write. She should stay at home'; 'If you relax the woman's leash a tiny bit, she will take you and bolt wildly'; 'Their deception is awesome; the guile is immense and contagious'; and 'Wickedness and feeble mind are their predominant traits.'

The Holy Qur'an proclaims: "There is no doubt that it is a perfect book, and a guidance for the righteous" (2:3), yet individuals termed "Islamic fundamentalists" by Western society have a long history of patriarchal dominance in which most of the Islamic writings are exclusively in the hands of male religious scholars who have interpreted Quranic religious passages in ways that have marginalized, subjugated, and disenfranchised Muslim women for approximately the past thirteen hundred years. The

Qur'an makes no statement about the constructed superiority of men over women in the Muslim world. On the contrary, the Holy Qur'an says:

> Surely, men who submit themselves to God and women who submit themselves to Him, and believing men and believing women, and obedient men and obedient women, and truthful men and truthful women, and men steadfast in their faith and steadfast women, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms, and women who gives alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who are chaste and women who are chaste, and men and women who remember Allah much-Allah has prepared for all of them forgiveness and a great reward. (33:36)

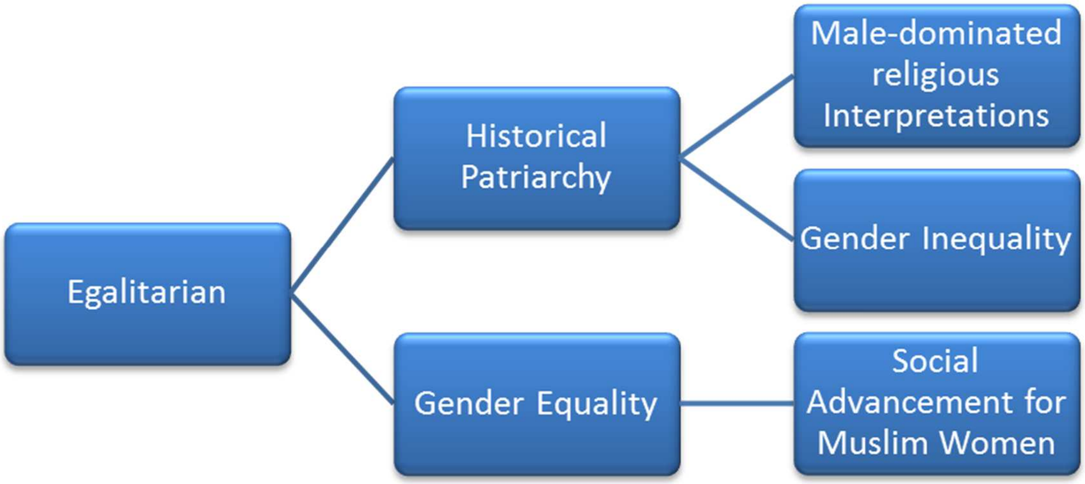
Male-dominated religious Interpretations
Historical Patriarchy
Gender Inequality
Egalitarian
Gender Equality
Social Advancement for Muslim Women

Figure 2. Islam and gender inequality.

If gender is to be understood as a social construction of sexual differences, the question becomes: What explanation(s) can be given to posit an understanding of the differences in gendered identities across cultures and/or over time?

Research Questions

As explained in the background of the research study, traditional patriarchal religious interpretations have caused a sense of invisibility of Muslim women. Literature posits gender equality can be achieved via Islam, as it is a religion steeped in egalitarianism for all its adherents. Even as the Holy Qur'an contains suras demonstrating equality for both Muslim men and Muslim women, individuals or groups of individuals have partaken in the hijacking of Islam for personal gain. This phenomenological research study attempts to examine and explore the lived experiences of Muslim women within their natural environ(s) to understand how the influence of Islam can help to promote gender equality.

The primary research question to assist the researcher in understanding the phenomena of this research study can be formulated as follows: What are the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women seeking gender equality via an Islamic theoretical (Kalam) framework? The primary research question can be broken up into the following three sub-research questions to help identity recommendations related to this phenomenological research study:

1. How can Islam be employed to promote gender equality for Muslim women and not separate religion from culture?
2. How did Islam's influence awaken the religious consciousness of women seeking spiritual and/or religious empowerment?
3. How can Muslim women re-examine and reinterpret Qur'anic religious passages to improve gender equality and treatment with Islam?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to create a detailed and comprehensive description of the lived experiences of Muslim women while advancing an understanding of how Islam, as a religion, can promote gender equality for Muslim women. Other desired outcomes include:

1. Find out by means of a literature review: How big a gap exists in understanding Islam and its influence on Muslim women; how the intersection of culture, traditions, patriarchy, and religion can be restrictive of women's right within Islam; and why Western media has perpetuated the image of Muslim women as being the Other, in which, there is something inherently dangerous about them or that Muslim women are oppressed and are in need of being saved.
2. Bring awareness that Muslim women have become an invisible population whose voices have been omitted from the ideological and theological (Kalam) frameworks of Islam.
3. Introduce Islamic feminism as a viable nonviolent social movement in which Muslim women can strive for gender equality by demanding the re-reading, re-examination, and re-interpretations of traditional patriarchal religious interpretations in a modern context.
4. Provide trustworthy information for future researchers who wish to examine and explore Islam's influence on Muslim women and gender equality.

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine and explore the phenomena associated with Islam and Muslim women's lived experiences while seeking gender equality via an Islamic theological framework. The research questions to this study are answered using qualitative data that materialized from audio-taped individual semi-structured interviews, observations, and transcribed interviews. This study attempts to understand what meaning lived experiences have for Muslim women and more specifically, to understand how Islam, as a religion, can foster gender equality via its egalitarian message. To study the concept of gender equality, the researcher used the phenomenology research method. Using this method allowed the researcher to understand the meaning of Muslim women's lived experiences and also allowed the researcher to 1) suggest recommendations, and 2) identify how Muslim women's quest for gender equality will challenge traditional patriarchal and male-dominated religious interpretations that have been used to marginalize, disenfranchise, and subjugate Muslim women.

The purpose of qualitative research is to understand and explain participant meaning (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Furthermore, Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research

> As an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher build a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

Consequently, using a qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to study the phenomena of Muslim women's lived experiences seeking gender equality via an Islamic theological framework. Qualitative research allows the "researcher to bring her own worldviews, paradigms or set of beliefs to the research project" (Creswell, 2007, p. 15), thereby, allowing the researcher to use a "theoretical framework to further shape the study" (Creswell, 2007, p. 15).

A phenomenology design research method is an ideal tool when "a deep understanding of a phenomena as experienced by several individuals" (Creswell, 2007, p.

62) is the objective of a research study. To ensure a deep understanding has taken place, Creswell cautions the following:

1. Phenomenology requires at least some understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions.
2. The participants in the study need to be carefully chosen. Participants must have experienced the phenomenology in question.
3. Bracketing personal experiences may be difficult for the researcher to implement. (2007, p. 62)

Participants in this phenomenological research study included Muslim women residing in various and diverse global geographical locations that were willing to share their lived experiences within Islam. The participants' demographics also included their identified sect, age, nationality, years practicing, present level socio-economic status, and present level of education obtained. Participation was voluntary with participants having the ability to leave the research study at any time without risk, harm, retribution, and/or retribution. Each participant's informed consent was obtained and a detailed explanation of the study was given prior to the audio-taped semi-structured interview session. Participants were informed via email about the interview date and time and were given a courtesy email or telephone call a day prior to the schedule interview. Data collection was conducted during the audio-taped interview, as well as after the interview had been transcribed and reviewed by participants for their feedback and further input. Upon receipt of the transcribed interview, data was reviewed, analyzed, and interpreted into patterns, themes, and meaning to lay the foundation for codification.

Additionally, participants received instructions on the nature and purpose of the phenomenological research study through the consent agreement form. Participants also received an assurance of confidentially to make them more comfortable with sharing and explaining their personal views (Cobb & Forbes, 2002). The phenomenological research study used 15-20 inductive open-ended interview questions with the objective of elucidating descriptive lived experiences of Muslim women. The semi-structured interview protocol appears in Appendix E. Lastly, participants were given the opportunity to obtain further information related to this research study before, during, and after the process. Participates also had an opportunity to provide feedback to questions, the interview process, and the entire research process. The researcher provided her contact information to participants in the event they may need clarification and/or concerns regarding the research study.

Theoretical Framework

Islam, as a religion, is built upon a strong ideological and theological (Kalam) framework which its adherents believe makes it the last perfect religion. The teaching of Islam encompasses the essence of economics, well-being, and the development of Muslims at the individual, family, society, and universal levels (Bardakoğlu, 2008). As a comprehensive religion that governs the lives of Muslims, Islam is guided by six articles of faith (Aquidah): 1) belief in one God; 2) belief in all the prophets from Adam, Moses, Jesus, and Prophet Muhammad as the last messenger; 3) belief in the books of faith, the Torah, Psalms, Injil, and the Holy Qur'an; 4) belief in the day of atonement and life after death; 5) belief in angels; and 6) belief in destiny, that posits the pluralism and diversity within Islam. Islam is also a religion whose egalitarian message guarantees equality to all its adherents, yet tradition, culture, and patriarchy have taken from Muslim women what Islam guarantees.

Religions have a patriarchal view of the relationship between the genders. The relationship between Adam and Eve symbolizes how many religions view women. Al Hibri (1982) writes:

> God was declared male, and man was declared to be created in His likeness. Eve became the symbol of temptation and sin. The woman was consequently judged as a less likely candidate for salvation and an everlasting life in heaven than man. (p. 176)

Islam, a male-made religion founded in patriarchy, is ill-reputed for its repression, subjugation, disenfranchisement, marginalization, and discrimination against Muslim women, as Muslim men have appropriated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women. As the Islamic tradition has remained rigidly patriarchal, the Holy Qur'an makes no statements about the inherent superiority of men over women. The Qur'an says:

> "O mankind, We have created you from a male and a female; and We have made you tribes and sub-tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable among you, in the sight of Allah, is the one who is the most righteous among you. Surely, Allah is All-Knowing, All- Aware." (49:14)

A result of sociological constructions that are passed down from generation to generation, patriarchy is "a dual system of domination of a small percentage of privileged men over other men, women and children" (Duderija, 2014). Hartmann (1979) defines patriarchy as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, through hierarchy, establish or create interdependence or solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. Patriarchy's lack of empathy and considerations of the needs of others is psychologically damaging and creates a non-natural state for humans, thus, allowing for the shrouding of beliefs that posit gender equality within religion.

Through the theoretical framework of Islamic feminism, the researcher attempted to examine and explore the meanings, structures, and essence of lived experiences of Muslim women seeking gender equality via Islamic tenets and principles. Defined as a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm, Islamic feminism's aim is full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in their public and private spheres (Coleman, 2006). With an understanding of how Muslim women conceive and practice their religion in diverse ways, Islamic feminists have tasked themselves to deconstruct the gendered Islamic discourses within Islam that have been used to oppress Muslim women.

According to Islam, the Qur'an is divine; therefore, Islamic feminists' theoretical core is grounded in Qur'anic interpretations or tafsir (Badran, 2005). As Islam was revealed in a patriarchal Arabian society, the Qur'an was deeply affected by the cultural norms of society in which was revealed. Islamic feminists argue the religious message of the Qur'an, a message of revolutionary social egalitarianism, must be separated from the cultural prejudices of 7th Century Arabia (Aslan, 2005). Badran (2002) posits Islamic feminism has a twofold agenda to expose and eradicate patriarchal ideas and practices glossed as Islamic, and to recuperate Islam's core idea of gender equality, thus offering a mode for Muslim women to advocate for gender equality, yet maintain their Islamic identity. According to Badran (2002), the greatest task within Islam is separating culture from religion; therefore, Islamic feminism uses fundamentals of Islamic thinking: the Holy Qur'an, the Sunnah (traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and ijithad (independent thinking to challenge the ways in which Islam has been distorted by Shari'a rulings issued mostly by ultraconservative men), to promote gender equality within the Muslim world. Islamic feminism also allows Muslim women to transcend and destroy old binaries that have been construed by patriarchal elites whom Islamic feminists identify as leaders who manipulate Islam for their own personal gains.

All religions have accorded women inferior status and relegated them to a secondary position (McGuire, 2002); however, Islamic feminists argue Islam has assigned Muslim women a position of dignity and honor. Islamic feminists do not see Islam as the inherent root of gender equality; rather Islamic feminists embrace their faith, culture, and tradition while advocating interpretations that reflect a more modern understanding of women's role in society. Barlas (2002) argues, as the Qur'an describes it, humans, though biologically different, are ontologically and ethically-morally the same/similar in as much as both women and men originated in a single self, have been endowed with the same natures, and make up two halves of a single pair. Islamic feminism allows Muslim women to connect theory with practice, thus creating an inter-Islamic phenomena that is being experienced in various and diverse global locations.

The idea that Islam can liberate Muslim women and promote gender equality within Islam rather than restrict Muslim women has gained a wide audience via Islamic feminism. Yet, a recurring concern for Islamic feminism is rescuing Islam's central values from a small but virulent minority, i.e., jihad against The Jihad, who have continually and consistently used misogynistic and traditional male-dominated religious interpretations to demarcate historically and culturally constructed gender differences within Islam. Religion influences gender relations and outcomes, yet Islamic feminism posits that "Islam is actually a very progressive religion for women, was radically egalitarian for its time and remain so in some of its scriptures" (Coleman, 2006, p. 26). Understanding that "most historical religions are comprehensive meaning systems that locate all experiences of the individual and social group into a single general explanatory arrangement" (McGuire, 2002, p. 27), Islamic feminism provides a mechanism through which Muslim women can "base their ideas and claims primarily in Islam and legitimize their activities with the help of the Islamic tradition" (Coleman, 2006, p. 50).

As it is much harder to change religion than it is to change culture, Islamic feminism seeks "to revive the equality bestowed on women in the religion's early years by re-reading the Qur'an, putting the scriptures in context, and disentangling them from tribal practices" (Coleman, 2006, p. 26). Through a process of evolution, Islamic feminism also serves to bring awareness to the problem of interpretation and the biases and assumptions that a particular age brought to Islam's readings and renderings (Keddie & Baron, 1993). Islamic feminists see Islam not as the source of gender inequality; rather Islamic feminists believe Islam offers a solution to the absence of Muslim women's voices in the construction of Islam's ideological and theological tenets and principles. Islamic feminism allows for multiple critiques of Islam, as Islamic feminists are not questioning the sacredness of the Qur'an, only the temporality of its interpretations (Coleman, 2006). Islamic feminists want to go back to the Qur'an, not the jurisprudence created by different people at different times in order to highlight that "women are as human as men, and their rights and duties are complementary" (Halper, 2005, p. 131).

Significance of the Study

Islam, as a religion, posits gender equality for all its adherents, yet the Islamic theological (Kalam) core and desired outcomes of Islamic feminism are unfamiliar to researchers, academia, non-Muslims, and non-governmental organizations. As a result, there is not a plethora of research studies available on either Islamic feminism or its accomplishment from using Islamic theology (Kalam) as a facilitator to bring gender equality within Islam. Historically and culturally constructed patriarchal gender roles within Islam, Western media's depiction of Muslim women in need of saving, and misogynistic religious interpretations have forced the issue of gender inequality within Islam to the forefront of Muslim women and Islamic feminism's agendas. As the Muslim world comes to grips with its gender inequality internal conflict, Muslim women, non-Muslims, researchers, academia, and non-governmental organizations are seeking ways to understand the phenomenon of using Islamic theology (Kalam) against Islamic theology to promote gender equality within Islam.

This phenomenological research study is significant, for its desired outcome(s) is to provide non-Muslims, Muslims, government agencies, charitable organizations, banking institutions, non-governmental organizations, and (social) media information, suggestions, and recommendations on how to provide sustainable social, economic, and political opportunities for Muslim women seeking gender equality within Islam to improve their lives. As Muslim women constantly struggle with how they can acquire gender equality within Islam without separating religion from culture, Islamic feminists are seeking proactive ways to highlight Muslim women's rights guaranteed to them via Islam. A gap clearly exists between the concepts and understanding of biological sexual differences (essentialism) and gender (social construction) within the traditional patriarchal Islamic culture and Islam, as a religion. Until this gap narrows, it may be difficult or impossible for Muslim women to remove themselves from the yoke of patriarchy guised as religion.

Definition of Terms

Fitna: Temptation, trial. Specifically, the term is used to describe the civil wars that rent the Muslim community apart during the time of the rashidun and the early Umayyad period (Armstrong, 2000b, p. 204).

Hadith: (Arabic). "Traditions"; documented reports of the teachings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad which do not appear in the Qur'an, but which were recorded for posterity by his close companions and the members of his family (Armstrong, 2000a, p. 374).

Hudood: Literally "limits." Refers to crimes of theft, extramarital sexual activity, false accusations of unchasity, and consumption of alcohol specified by the Qur'an and carrying harsh capital penalties (Esposito, 2002, p. 183).

Ijithad: (Arabic). "Independent Reasoning"; the creative use of reason to apply the Shari'a to contemporary circumstances. In the fourteenth century, the majority of Muslims decided that "the gates of *ijithad*" were closed and that scholars must rely on the legal decisions of past authorities instead of upon their own reasoned insights (Armstrong, 2000a, p. 375).

Kalam: A discussion, based on Islamic assumptions, of theological questions. The term is often used to describe the tradition of Muslim scholastic theology (Armstrong, 2000b, p. 205).

Kuffar: Unbeliever (Esposito, 2002, p. 184).

People of the Book: Religious group with a revealed scripture or divine revelation. Used by Muslims to refer to Christians and Jews (Esposito, 2002, p. 186).

Sunnah: (Arabic). “Custom”; the habits and religious practices of the Prophet Muhammad, which were rooted for posterity by his companions and family and are regarded as the ideal Islamic norm. They have, thus, been enshrined in Islamic law so that Muslims can approximate closely to the archetypal figure of the Prophet. The term Sunnah also applies to the main branch of Islam (Sunni Islam) (Armstrong, 2000a, p. 378).

Tafsir: Qur’anic exegesis, interpretation (Stowasser, 1994, p. 198).

Tawhid: (Arabic). “Making One”; the divine unity which Muslims seek to imitate in their personal and social lives by integrating their institutions and priorities, and by recognizing the overall sovereignty of God (Armstrong, 2000a, p. 378).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

During the process of this phenomenological research study, several assumptions, limitations and delimitations will arise.

Assumptions.

1. Participants’ essence is the defining characteristic of the research study.
2. Participants have their own thoughts, interpretations, and meaning of their lived experience.
3. All participants are seeking gender equality within Islam.
4. The participants answered all the interview questions openly and honestly.

Limitations. The phenomenological research study is limited to its findings in the following ways:

1. A limitation of this phenomenological study may exist in the means of sampling. If the sample size is too small, it may be difficult to find prominent patterns and themes from the data.

2. The instrument used to collect data may inhibit the researcher's ability to conduct a thorough analysis of the results. The researcher may regret not including a specific leading questions that, in retrospect, may have assisted in elucidating detailed descriptions of a particular lived experience that can emerge later in the research study.
3. Self-reporting data is limited as it can only be independently verified, meaning that the researcher has to take what participants say at face value.

Delimitations. The phenomenological research study is also delimited in its findings in the following ways:

1. The research study included only participants that matched the selection criteria established for the study. The criteria for selection was exclusive to only Muslim women aged 18 and over.
2. Only Muslim women aged 18 and over who speak and understand English participated in this research study, as the researcher is only fluent in English. Procuring a translator would have been time-consuming and costly and would not necessarily have guaranteed accuracy in data.

Summary

Revealed in a masculine and patriarchal culture, Islam has been distorted to disempower, subjugate, and marginalize Muslim women for centuries. With the advent of Islamic feminism, Muslim women have been given an apparatus to use Islamic theology (Kalam) against Islamic theology to promote gender equality within Islam. Islamic feminism has allowed Muslim women, non-Muslims, researchers, and academia to start exploring and examining issues related to gender equality from an Islamic theoretical

(Kalam) framework. As Islamic feminism continues to evolve, it can assist in the removal of negative connotations associated with Islam and gender inequality. While there is a fair amount of literature directly related to Islam, Muslim women, and gender equality, very little research exists that is specific to Islamic feminism. This phenomenological research study aims to provide information to afford non-Muslims, Muslims, government agencies, charitable organizations, banking institutions, non-governmental organizations, and (social) media information, suggestions, and recommendations on how to provide sustainable social, economic, and political opportunities for Muslim women seeking gender equality within Islam to improve their lives.

Organization of the Study

The remainder of the study is organized into five chapters, a bibliography, and appendices in the following manner. Chapter 2 presents a review of the related literature dealing with evolving trends in the practices and procedures used to evaluate Islam, women, and gender equality. Chapter 3 delineates the research design and methodology of the study. The instrument used to gather the data, the procedures followed, and determination of the sample selected for study is also described. An analysis of the data and a discussion of the findings are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 contains the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the study. The study concludes with a bibliography and appendices.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter examines and explores the literature that is relevant to understanding the development of and interpretation of the results of this phenomenological research study. The first part of this review of literature describes religion, Islam, and Islam and Muslim women. The second part introduces the theoretical (Kalam) framework, Islamic feminism, its benefits, and challenges. Each sub-theme summarizes the assumptions, strengths, weaknesses, and major findings of Islamic feminism. The third part of this literature review is a summary of research on Islam, Muslim women, and gender equality. This is not meant to be an exhaustive review of literature. It is intended to familiarize the reader with the basic assumptions about Islam and how Muslim women can use its egalitarian message to promote gender equality, as well as the interpretation of the results.

Religion

Literature posits that there is a persistent theme in virtually all religions that revolves around the status of women in deity and society (Moaddel, 1998). Although social scientists have long viewed religion as a force for mobilization, and have seen religious institutions as foundations for many social movements (Casanova, 1994), there are underlying assumptions and presuppositions that women were considered a source of dangerous temptation and a threat to male celibacy, endowed with a lower aptitude, and dependent on men (i.e., Christian wives were instructed to be obedient to their husbands, Muslim women were veiled from the eyes of strangers, and Jewish women were denied the opportunity to study the Torah) (Carmody, 1979; Hargrove, Schmidt & Devancy, 1985; Johnstone, 1992). The teachings of religion on women are subject to change yet, Kandiyoti

(1991) observes, relationships between religion and the state have consequences for how religion is understood, as well as for gender and women’s movements. The discrepancy in teachings of religion on women will make it hard for all religious people in any age to make their traditions address the challenge of their particular modernity (Armstrong, 2002).

McGuire (2002) claims religion is not only one of the most powerful, deeply felt, and influential forces in human society, it has also shaped people’s relationships with each other, influencing family, community, and economic and political life. McGuire also asserts religion has an essential cognitive aspect and constructs what the adherent knows about the world. Clifford Geertz (1993) defines religion as:

> (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing their conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (p. 4)

Within the Islamic majority societies, rapid social changes have left people unsure about where they stand. Using the ambiguity found in the entire area of gender role expectations in contemporary societies as an example, McGuire (2002) postulates “although the old regulations no longer hold, new regulations and norms have not been crystallized” (p. 35) to bring gender equality to women within Islamic majority societies. For women in Islamic majority societies, religion became the catalyst to address the theme of gender equality, as gender roles in most societies is a major factor in social stratification (Abusharaf, 2006).

Literature also advances the notion that religion varies as to the degree of emphasis it places on a core sacred text, as the wording of sacred text can be at the center of many controversies and interpretations, i.e., the Qur’an (McGuire, 2002). Not only are the meanings of religious texts heavily affected by the moral and ethical predispositions and commitments of the readers of those texts, meanings are also affected by the technical tools that people use to understand the text (El Fadl, 2005). Religious meanings help individuals interpret their experiences and influence their actions. As an individual's religion develops and changes over his or her life course, recurring themes in literature center on, "Is religion losing its influence?" and "How do religious groups variously respond to societal changes and modernity?" (McGuire, 2002, pp. 5-6). Religion contributes to both social conflict and cohesion, yet religion is the expression of social forces and social ideals. Religion is not faith but is concerned with sacred history and interpretations; therefore, framed within a functional definition, the question becomes, what does religion do for the individual and social group while bringing gender equality to women?

Islam

Defined by a core set of beliefs and practices, Islam, the second largest religious faith in the world, is a monotheistic religion based on revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, which were later recorded in the Qur'an—Islam's sacred text. Islam is "din wa dawla": both a system of individual faith and conduct, and a comprehensive guide for the organization of society and state. Islam is an action-oriented worldview that encompasses social, cultural, and political elements, including religious and secular reasoning (Barazangi, 2009) whose adherents are called Muslims. Islam claims to be the last and most perfected religion while valuing free individual choice to believe or disbelieve; however, Karabell (1995) claims that when the word "Muslim" is mentioned, American college students think of gun-toting, bearded, fanatic terrorists, hell-bent on destroying the great enemy, the United States. Islam, a name given by Allah and derived from the Arabic root “SALEMA”, stresses three fundamental principles: 1) the requirement of truth and transparency, 2) the moral dimension and the priority of values, and 3) the importance of respect of man and the norms of balance (Barlas, 2002). Long committed to religious pluralism (i.e., religious minorities such as Jews and Christians lived and flourished in much of the Islamic world, and the millet system of the Ottoman Empire exemplified the openness of Muslim societies towards Jews and Christians) (Mazrui, 2005), Islam posits a message of equality, universalism, diversity, inclusiveness, peace, and submission (El Fadl, 2005). Nasr (2003) also advances, “Islam is a religion that emphasizes equilibrium and justice in all aspects of human life” (p. 31). The foundation of Islamic pluralism can be found within verse 2:256, which says: “There can be no compulsion in religion” (Qur’an 2:256).

A monotheistic religion articulated by the Qur’an, “He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute, He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him” (112:1-4), Islam sets out the obligations for its adherents. Comprised of diverse schools and interpretations that are deeply rooted and united in the principles of the Islamic revelation (Nasr, 2003), Islam is primarily an orthopraxic religion, one in which an individual’s actions make one an observant Muslim. The most foundational and critical issue in Islamic theology, according to El Fadl (2005), is the issue of God and the purpose of creation. El Fadl also claims that the relationship of the individual to God is the most significant dynamic in Islam. Lastly, El Fadl states, “God charges Muslims with a sacred and central obligation: the duty to enjoin the good and forbid evil and to bear witness upon humanity for God” (2005, p. 32). Islam also provides its adherents with a framework for worship called The Five Pillars of Islam which serves as a sign of their commitment to the faith. Nasr (2003) identifies the Five Pillars of Islam as: 1) The Testament of Faith (Shahada)—*La ilaha illa Llah* ("There is no god but God"); 2) canonical prayers (Salat); 3) obligatory fasting of Ramadan (sawm); 4) almsgiving (zakat); and 5) pilgrimage (hajj) as not only the backbone of the Islamic faith, but a way to teach Muslims to consistently work at developing a relationship with God.

Smith (1979) claims "Islam provides women a position of honor and respect, with clearly stated rights and obligations" (p. 577); however, Cooke (2000) posits "Islam has been misconstrued by secular women as repressive of women's rights and aspirations" (p. 84). Muslims have yet to derive a theory of equality from the Qur'an as evident by the Qur'an's recognition of men as the locus of power and authority. Arkoun (1994) argues patriarchal monopoly is possible because "the Qur'an has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary and psychological contexts and then been continually re-contextualized in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors" (p. 5). "This is not a detail which can be considered negligible or reinterpretable: for a believer, this inferiority is fundamental, because it proceeds from a divine prevalence, this inferiority is the mark-natural, ineffaceable-of the woman" (Smith, 1979, p. 526). Muhammad al-Ghazzali asserts that the concept "of the supposed inferiority of a woman as such in Islam is pure fiction and should be completely disregarded" (as cited in Smith, 1979, p. 526). The Qur'an provides support of al-Ghazzali's claim when it says: "Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds" (74:38) and "…so their Lord accepted their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work of any of you whether male or female. You proceed one from another…" (3:195). However, al-Ghazzali counters himself when he posits, "the marked difference in the physical, mental and emotional constitution of man and woman is a brute fact" (as cited in Smith, 1979, p. 527). The Qur'an acknowledges the differences between men and women; yet the Qur'an is explicit in identifying the different but equal (Davis, 2006; Dickens, 1998) and complementary roles of men and women (Roald, 2001). In general, the Qur'an has been followed when it is not inconvenient to men or to the patriarchal family to do so, and not followed when it was.

Islam as a religion is totalistic and permeates the complete society. Armstrong (2002b) observes Islam is a religion that requires people to live in a certain way, rather than to accept certain creedal propositions. For this reason, "Western people often assume that Islam is a violent, militaristic faith which imposes itself on its subjected peoples at sword point (Armstrong, 2002b, p. 29). Literature posits, "Islam today is a living reality faced with multiple problems and challenges, but still deeply anchored in the Islamic tradition and the truths that have guided its destiny since the descent of the Quranic revelation more than fourteen centuries ago" (Nasr, 2003, pp. 185-186). Today more than 1.3 billion people from different racial and cultural backgrounds are Muslims in fifty predominately Muslims nations (Davis & Robinson, 2006). Buehler (2011) argues, "Islam is perceived as a global threat to Western civilization and its values" and portrays Islam as a code of beliefs and actions that is irrational, anti-modern, and rigid (p. 645). Campbell (1992) put forth that the Prophet Muhammad clearly encouraged his followers to struggle against the enemies of Islam through their traditional form of armed actions and set the example himself by leading from the front on several military expeditions. The Qur'an gives insight to this armed action in several verses: "Fight in the cause of God who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors. And say them wherever you catch them and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter" (2:190); "And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression and there prevail justice and faith everywhere" (8:39); and "Strive hard against the unbelievers and be firm against them" (66:9). Based on the aforementioned verses, Crandall (2008) argues Islam is not a religion of peace, but instead a religion of hatred, intolerance, and violence. Crandall claims Muslims are making increasing demands that Western laws give way to Shari'a, as it the goal of Islam and Muslims to have the world under Shari'a.

Many critics of Islam advance the notion that there is a significant gap between what the Qur'an says and the manner in which its teachings are practiced (Ali, 1993). Other critics argue Islam is ultimately a religion which provides men with status, control, and authority over women and which supports a system of inequitable relations (Hashim, 1999). Masoud Kazemzadeh (2002) deems "Islam to be a contributing factor to gender inequality where the patriarchy in Islamic countries in general has used and abused the tenets of Islam to perpetuate such inequities" (p. 137). Proponents of Islam argue "despite the popular image of Islam as literalist, the religion has always had scope for interpretation" (Rinaldo, 2008, p. 1790; see also Hefner, 2000). The application and interpretation of the norms about the behavior and the rights of Muslim women has been a matter of contention for a long time in Muslim societies. According to Silvestri (2008), the unequal treatment of women that we often see in Muslim society is not part or parcel of the faith but of a male dominated society that has manipulated it. It is not the Qur'an but rather the social convention of patriarchal cultures that accounts for why women in Islamic countries are deprived of equal social status (Badran, 2005; Munir, 2003; Wilson, 2006). Literature also posit that there is nothing innately Islamic about misogyny, inequality, or patriarchy, as all have often been justified by Muslim states and clerics in the name of Islam.

Baden (1992) claims that for a vast majority of women in the Islamic/ Arab/Muslim majority societies, Islam remains a tremendously powerful influence. Badran (1992) also defines Islam as a legitimate tool for engaging with and tackling gender issues in Muslim societies. Recent research on women and Islam not only describes how women are using revisionist interpretations of Islam to press for gender equality (Mir-Hosseini, 2006), Muslim women are also redefining Islam as a legitimate tool for engaging and tackling gender issues in Muslim societies (Baden, 1992). Islam is a dynamic religion of continual renewal, thus laying the foundations for an “ideal just society” (Cooke, 2000, p. 149) in which Muslim women can conceive and practice their religion in diverse ways. For Muslims the Qur’an is infallible (Mazrui, 2005) and “Islam speaks about power and self-empowerment or worldly self-enhancement” (Mernissi, 1988, p. 9); therefore, Muslims believe “God was the God of the Qur’an and Hadith, to be accepted and worshipped in his Reality as He had revealed it” (Campbell, 1992, p. 127).

Islam and Women

Haddad and Esposito (1998) argue that for more than a hundred years, Arab women have been engaged in public debate on their role in a rapidly changing society. Both women and men have conducted the debate within an Islamic framework; they have turned to the Qur’an, the Shari’a, and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad to define women’s rights in the modern age. While modernists have argued for the most liberal interpretation of Islam possible, the conservatives have used the same sources to argue for restrictions on women’s roles (Haddad & Esposito, 1998, p. 45). Today the roles of women are constantly changing to meet the political, economic, and societal needs of modern societies. Nowhere are these changes more prevalent and more contested than in Islamic majority societies. Islam, as a religion, posits gender equality and egalitarianism, while at the same time guaranteeing women certain rights: the right to life, to education, to conduct business, to inherit and maintain property, and to keep their names (Haddad & Esposito, 1998).

Islam's message of equality does not endorse systems of social differentiation, therefore, the ideal that Islam can liberate women from the throngs of a constructed patriarchal society has gained wide acceptance. For example, Coleman (2010) posits Mumtaz made women's rights within Islam a particular focus of his work. Coleman (2010) also mentions Ali (1898) who presented a compelling defense of women's equality before God in his book *Rights of Women*. According to Coleman (2010), Ali tackled a range of controversial issues including inheritance, marriage, divorce, polygamy, girl's education, and purdah. Ali also debunked the many Islamic reasons cited for male superiority and was critical of common harmful marriage practices, in particular child marriage and marriage without the consent of both parties. Another example is that of Qasim Amīn who also made women's right in Islam a central feature of his scholarship. Amīn's *The Liberation of Women* (2000) was a passionate plea for women's emancipation, which Amīn called a 'patriotic duty'. Amīn also constructed religious arguments to reconcile Islam with modern views on women. Amīn condemned polygyny, made the case for a woman's right to divorce, strongly favored girl's education, and argued that the veil was the most obvious sign of Islamic inferiority to the West.

In Islam, men and women are moral equals in God's sight. Middle Eastern gender relations have been influenced by a particular conjunction of classic patriarch and Islam;

therefore, women are constituted as a mere subject of religious discourse and tradition (Edross, 1997). Literature posits men and women are expected to fulfill the same duties of worship, prayer, faith, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca as supported by Barazangi (2009) who claims: "Islam regards men and women as created equal for different but complementary biological functions" (p. 417). According to Islam, the Qur'an expresses two views on the role of women: 1) the equality of women and men before God in terms of their religious duties, and 2) their placement under care of men.

The Qur'an further explains that men and women are equal in creation and in the afterlife, but not identical: "A woman is not created for the purpose of a man. Rather, they are both created for the mutual benefit of each other" (30:21). "O mankind: Reverence your Guardian Lord Who created you from a single person created of like nature his mate and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; reverence Allah through Whom you demand your mutual (rights) and (reverence) the wombs (that bore you): for Allah ever watches over you" (Qur'an 4:1); "It is He who created you from a single person and made his mate of like nature in order that he might dwell with her (in love). When they are united she bears a light burden and carries it about (unnoticed). When she grows heavy they both pray to Allah their Lord (saying): 'If You give us a goodly child we vow we shall (ever) be grateful'"(Qur'an 7:189); and "(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves and pairs among cattle: by this means does He multiply you: there is nothing whatever like unto Him and He is the One that hears and sees (all things)" (Qur'an 42:11). Gender relations in the Middle East have a proven dynamic with women's spheres of action contrasting and expanding at different moments and rates in response to a variety of factors (Keddie & Baron, 1993).

Literature also informs that the Prophet Muhammad is not only seen as a figure who testified on behalf of women's rights, but also instituted rights of property ownership, inheritance, education, and divorce, as well as weighed their opinions seriously, all of which gave women certain basic safeguards. As Islamic majority societies struggle to modernize, and in some cases democratize, the issue of women's rights in the public and private spheres of society, the results will continue to elicit strong feelings and controversy. Mernissi (1991) posits gender differences are historically and culturally constructed; therefore, Islam as a religion will be instrumental in helping to deconstruct and remove gender bias suffered by women in Islamic/ Arab/Muslim majority societies. Jawad (2003) posits Amina Wadud advocates a holistic approach for interpretations of women in the Qur'an. A holistic approach will incorporate modern, social, moral, economic, and political issues, including women's issues in demanding gender equality. Wadud also believes that if the Quranic view of women is fully comprehended, Islam will become a motivating force for women's empowerment by stressing that the Qur'an recognizes the woman as an individual in her own right.

The Qur'an intended to liberate women; however, the question of women's roles continues to play a crucial function in many societies today. El Fadl (2005) argues that behind every single Quranic revelation regarding women was an effort seeking to protect women from exploitative situations and from situations in which they are treated inequitably; yet in many Islamic majority societies today, literature informs that national leaders' goals of improving women's roles in society are being subverted by traditions (Haddad & Esposito, 1998). While trying to affirm the equality of both genders by constructing constitutions, national leaders must keep in mind Shari'a puts men in charge of women. This creates a double edge sword for national leaders who are trying to bring Islam and its tenets into modern society.

Haddad and Esposito (1998) posit three types of constitutional views in which women's roles can be defined: 1) The traditional (altaqlidiyya) view in which a woman is wife and mother and her identity is bound by her relationship in the family. Many women's roles within this view are found in Kuwait, the Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Northern Yemen, and the Sudan; 2) The progressive (al-taqaddumiyya) view in which aside from her role as wife and mother, the woman is treated as educated and cultured, as a working woman, and as one engaged in the political process. This view is prevalent in Syria, Southern Yemen, Algeria, and Iraq; and (3) The accommodationist (al-tawfiqiyya) view is best illustrated by the Moroccan and Egyptian constitutions. The woman is placed in the traditional roles of wife and mother; however, women are guaranteed opportunities in political, social, cultural, and economic spheres, with the contingency that these opportunities do not subvert the principles of Shari'a. As previously mentioned, the Qur'an teaches that men and women are equal in creation and in the afterlife, but not identical; therefore, trying to create gender equality in Islamic majority societies will continue to be debated and fought.

Muslim women in majority Islamic societies suffer the worst case of invisibility. The social and intellectual segregation of women has been justified as a method of limiting fitna (defined in key terms in chapter one) (Barazangi, 2009). The separation of the public sphere from the private sphere has also been sanctified by religion, reaffirmed by national ideology, and maintained by religious based family laws or personal status codes that privilege men and subordinate women (Berkovitch & Moghadam, 1999). As a religion of diversity, Islam allows women in Islamic majority societies to challenge the patriarchal constructed roles of women. What is taking place now in Islamic majority societies is an internal conflict between traditionalists (those whose main objectives are to keep women marginalized and subjugated and moderates), and individuals whose aim is to bring about liberation of women via education, political participation, and economics (Aslan, 2005).

Muslim women in Islamic majority societies throughout history have experienced discrimination and have been subject to restrictions of their freedom and rights. Silvestri (2008), El-Saʿdāwī (2007), DeVoe (2002), and Delorme (2007) claim that the social structures and political leaders have legitimized their physical, legal, or psychological subordination of women in religious terms, thus constructing a distorted, imagined social reality in which Islam requires and produces the subjugation of women. The authors also claim these beliefs can become so much entrenched in communities to the extent that they are regarded as constituting reality and religious leaders become unable or unwilling to challenge them. The emancipation of women was a project dear to the Prophet's heart (Armstrong, 2002b, p. 16); therefore, women argue there is in fact an 'ontological equity' of man and woman inscribed in the Qur'an and that they are called to share spiritual responsibilities, moral values, and religious duties, including the tasks of the imam, in building a just society (Krausen, 2005; Wadud, 2006).

Wright (2011) posits that there are three controversial issues facing women in Muslim majority societies in the 21st Century: women's rights, sexuality, and loss of belief itself. Not only are these controversial issues facing women in Islamic majority societies, their lives have varied greatly by class, mode of production, time, and place (Keddie & Baron, 1993), thus making it hard to unify around a common cause. In many Islamic majority societies, most women pass the greater part of their lives in the private sphere. As engaged and active orthopraxic Muslims, women in Islamic majority societies are using the private sphere to become more aware of "the Qur'an's intended gender equality which has been undermined by patriarchy and foreign importations" (Keddie & Baron, 1993). The home and the larger family structure in which she lives are for the Muslim woman her world. Nasr claims

> that for a Muslim woman to be cut off from her home and larger family structure would be like being cut off from the world or like dying. She finds the meaning of her existence in this extended family structure which is constructed so as to give her the maximum possibility of realizing her basic needs and fulfilling herself. (as cited in Dodds, 1968, p. 113).

Today, women in Islamic majority societies are "strongly committed to Islam and view the family as the foundations of an Islamic state" (Metcalfe, 2011, p. 5; see also Metcalfe, 2008; Ramadan, 2009b), one in which women are demanding gender equality.

In the public sphere, the roles of women in Islamic majority societies are transforming and serving as "a passive force in changing the negative practices of contemporary Islamic thought and the resulting injustices" (Barazangi, 2009, p. 406) suffered by women. Berkovitch and Moghadam (1999) posit five major ways in which women are involved in national and ethnic processes: 1) biological, 2) as ideological producers, 3) as reproducers of national and/or ethnic group, 4) as participants in various struggles, and 5) as signifiers of ethnic and/or national differences. Furthermore, literature shows how these aforementioned processes have allowed women in Islamic majority societies to use the teachings of Islam as support to posit gender equality within Islam. For many women in Islamic majority societies, an ideal public sphere will need three principles to function effectively: 1) The key constitutive element of the public sphere is rational: critical on issues of common interest. Decisions and policies that are assumed to serve the common good, thereby bring about emancipation; 2) The public sphere must remain inclusive so that "access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas, 1974, p. 49); and 3) Particular identities, interests, and status differences are seen as the main impediment to the attainment of rational solutions to so-called common ideals and should be bracketed out of public debates (Calhoun, 1992; Çinar, 2008).

As previously mentioned, gender relations in the Middle East have proven dynamic, with women's spheres of action contracting and expanding at different moments and rates in response to a variety of factors (Keddie & Baron, 1993). The quest for women's equality is not a new quest in relation to women in Islamic majority societies; although gender relations in Islamic majority societies have been greatly influenced by a particular conjunction of classic patriarchy and Islam. Debates will continue to dominate discussions over the appropriate level of female participation in Islamic majority societies. Traditionalists' concerns for men's jobs have added urgency to the conservative call for women to adhere to their traditional roles as mothers, housewives, sisters and daughters. The state of subjugation experienced by women in Islamic majority societies has been socially constructed by patriarchal and misogynistic discourses and interpretations, thus making it impossible for women to have an active voice in society. As one of the most contentious issues within Islam today—the role of women in society (Coleman, 2006)—women in Islamic majority societies are beginning to use Islamic theology to demand gender equality within their own communities and societies. The oppressive laws and the violence perpetrated against women in the name of Islam could very well be a last gasp of patriarchy.

Present Condition of Women in Islamic majority Societies

Women in Islamic majority societies have struggled for equality and basic rights for century; as their lives have varied greatly by class, mode of production, time and place. Coleman (2010) argues patriarchy and religious conservatives have conspired against women around the world and throughout the ages, and it runs particularly deep in the modern Middle East. Religious attitudes toward women have helped to justify and enforce limited public roles for women, gender segregation and harsh punishment for any perceived transgression. Today across the Islamic world, women's rights are one of the most contentious political and ideological issues facing many governments along with economic needs, political rage and social despair (Wright, 2011). The advancement of women's rights has not been easy because of its collision with culture and religion; however, major trends are occurring across the Islamic world: (1) women's demands and efforts to gain a political voice; (2) women's demands for greater educational and economic opportunities; (3) a shift in influence from secular elites to mass-based Islamist movements and the class issues entails; (4) women's quest for legal rights, particularly in the sensitive area of family law; and (5) the influence of new media, especially satellite television, on shaping the public's perceptions of the role of women in society (Coleman, 2010). The advancement of these trends will allow women to fully participate economically, politically, and socially in society.

Political Participation

In many Muslim societies, the greatest challenge is to find ways to empower women without pitting women's rights against deeply held religious values; yet, the past few years have brought about a great upsurge of Islam on the political plane which can be seen nearly everywhere in the Islamic word (Nasr, 2003). Women in Islamic/Arab/ Muslim majority societies are forging their way to become a part of the Islamic community (ulama) where their voices can be heard; yet, societal norms that relegate women to a subordinate status, the rise of a political Islam, and the growth of Islamic movements have continued to impede progress. Governments and monarchies remain resistant to addressing inequalities for women through progressive policy or legislation and often pursue policies of repression.

Muhammad Asad (1980) argues the Qur'an's verse describing the qualification of true believers, "…and whose rule in all matters of common concern is consultation among themselves" (42:38), reaches all aspects of political life and that to fulfill the requirements of this verse; a legislative assembly should be formed that is representative of the entire community, women and men. The Qur'an also states: "O Prophet! If believing women come unto thee, taking oath of allegiance unto thee …then accept their allegiance and ask Allah to forgive them. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful" (60:12), in defense of the right of women to choose their leaders without any discrimination in terms of limiting women to be active in the political arena. Women within Islamic/Arab/ Muslim majority societies feel it is their religious responsibility as women to contribute to their communities, to obtain education and employment, and to become a strong voice and play a greater role in civic life.

Islam gave women a right to express her political allegiance and opinions and to take part in politics. Literature states women in the Muslim world were granted the right to vote on a universal and equal basis in the following countries: Lebanon (1952); Syria (to vote 1949, restrictions lifted 1953); Egypt (1956); Tunisia (1959); Mauritania (1961); Algeria (1962); Morocco (1963); Libya and Sudan (1964); Yemen (partly 1967, fully 1970); Bahrain (1973); Jordan (1974); Iraq (1980); and Oman (partly 1994, fully 2003); Kuwait (2005); Saudi Arabia (announced it would give women the right to vote in 2015) (Lewis, 2013); yet, their representation in parliaments and ministerial positions range from none in most countries to a maximum of about 12% in a few cases. According to Al-Kitbi (2004), Muslim women have been able to increase their representation in parliament through the use of quotas and appointments. In September 2008, the following countries had the highest female representation in their lower houses of parliament: Iraq (25.5%), Tunisia (22.8%), United Arab Emirates (22.5%), and Djibouti (13.8%) (Al-Kitbi, 2004). According this same report, women's participation in government at the ministerial level has increased slightly, but remains low. The most significant change took place in Morocco, where the cabinet of October 2007 included seven women.

Literature indicates female representation in the judiciary has grown dramatically in Islamic majority societies. According to the World Bank compendium report on the status and progress of women in the Middle East and North Africa (2009), there were 30 female judges appointed by the Supreme Judicial Council of Egypt, Jordan appointed its first female court chief in 2007, the United Arab Emirates appointed its first female judge in 2008, and the Yemeni Supreme Court appointed its first female judge in 2006. The report also claims women account for 16% of lawyers and 10% of judges in the West Bank and

Gaza in 2005, 18% of judges in Morocco, and 37% of judges and 29% of lawyers in Lebanon (World Bank, 2009). Literature also posits the political representation of women in Islamic majority lags behind all the countries in world; yet, Muslims in Bangladesh (Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina), Pakistan (Benazir Bhutto), Azerbaijan (Lala Shorkat), Senegal (Mame Madier Boye), Kosovo (Kaqusha Jashan), Indonesia (Megawati Sukarnoputin), and Turkey (Tansu Ciller) have all been led by women (Moghadam, 1994).

The role of women in politics in Islamic majority societies is largely determined by the will of those countries' leadership to support female representatives and cultural attitudes towards women's involvement in public life (Hammond, 2008). Dr. Rola Dashti, a female candidate in Kuwait's 2006 parliamentary elections, claimed that the negative cultural and media attitude towards women in politics was one of the main reasons why no women were elected (as cited in Hammond, 2008). Dr. Dashti also pointed to "ideological differences" with conservatives and extremist Islamists opposing female participation in political life and discouraging women from voting for a woman. Lastly, Dr. Dashti posited malicious gossip, attacks on the banners and publications of female candidates, lack of training, and corruption as barriers to electing females (Hammond, 2008). In contrast, one of the United Arab Emirates' female Member of Parliament (MP), Najla al Awadhi, claimed that "women's advancement is a national issue and we have a leadership that understands that and wants them to have their rights" (Al-Fassi, 2007, p. 4).

Education

The Qur'an and Hadiths of the Prophet both obligate Muslim men and women to acquire knowledge and education. It is a duty for every Muslim. Along with verse 35:28 of the Qur'an which says, "Those truly fear Allah, among His Servants, who have knowledge”, the Prophet’s Hadiths repeatedly emphasizes the acquirement of education and knowledge for every Muslim male and female. For example, the Hadith states: “Seeking knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, man or woman” and “Seek knowledge from the cradle to grave” (Lemu & Heeren, 1978, p. 25).

Access to education varies widely among Islamic majority countries. Literature posits the right to education is regarded as necessary for women in Islamic majority societies. Education is the tool that will enable women in Islamic majority societies to become good mothers for the future and active members in society (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2003). Educational attainment for Muslim women in Islamic majority societies has proven vital to their survival. Coleman (2010) has pointed out two promising trends; the first is the rising level of women’s education. Second, education may not change the system immediately, but it has slowly moved women into different spheres of civil society. Although the Middle East is a part of the world where women’s education has been lacking and/or absent, many Islamic majority countries are closing the gap.

Muslim women’s right to education in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been strongly oppressed by political movements groups such as the Taliban. Rostami-Povey (2007) states that during the Taliban regime, many women, who had previously been teachers, secretly began to educate young girls in their neighborhoods. Many of these women involved in teaching were caught by the Taliban and persecuted, jailed, and tortured. Also as a show of its outright ban on women’s education, the Taliban shot a Pakistani school girl and young women’s rights activist by the name of Malala Yousafzai on October 12, 2012. Due to this incident and the recent death of a Pakistani female teacher in April 2013, the Pakistan government was condemned by the international community and various human rights organizations. As a result, Pakistan is held accountable to examine the education system for women in Pakistan (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

In Saudi Arabia, literature informs that one of the official educational policies is to promote "belief in the One God, Islam as the way of life, and Muhammad as God's Messenger" (as cited in Metz, 1992, para. 7). Official policy particularly emphasizes religion in the education of girls:

> The purpose of educating a girl is to bring her up in a proper Islamic way so as to perform her duty in life, be an ideal and successful housewife and a good mother, ready to do things which suit her nature such as teaching, nursing and medical treatment. (as cited in Metz, 1992, para. 8)

Literature also claim that although the quality of education is lower for females than males, Saudi Arabia's educational policies specify a woman's right to obtain suitable education on equal footing with men in light of Islamic laws (Baki, 2004). In Yemen, literature informs that the female school enrollment rate is the lowest in the Middle Eastern countries. The tradition of early marriage in rural areas hinders girls' schooling and leads to high dropout rates. Parents in rural areas are not willing to send their girls to mixed gender schools due to fear of loss of chastity, negative social attitudes towards girls' education, and a lack of female teachers.

Employment

Islam does not prohibit women from working outside the home. However, there are certain conditions to be followed to safeguard the dignity and honor of women and the purity and stability of the Islamic society. Islam posits several restrictions for women to follow when working outside the home:

1. Outside employment should not come before, or interfere with women’s responsibility as wife and mother.
2. A woman’s work should not be a source of friction within the family, and the husband’s consent is required to eliminate later disagreements. If she is not married, the women must have her guardian’s consent.
3. The women’s appearance, manner, tone of speech, and overall behavior should follow Islamic guidelines. These may include: restraining her glances in relation to any men near the work place, wearing correct Islamic dress, avoiding men, not walking in a provocative manner, and not using make-up or perfume in public.
4. A woman’s job should not be one which causes moral corruption in society, or involves any prohibited trade or activity, affects her own religion, morals, dignity and good behavior, or subjects her to temptations.
5. A woman’s job should not be one which is mixing and associating with men.
6. A woman should try to seek employment in positions which require a woman’s special skills, or which relate to the needs of women and children, such as teaching, nursing other women, midwifery, medicine with specialization’s like pediatrics or obstetrics-gynecology (Ramadan, 2009b).

In many Islamic majority societies, Moghadam (2003) asserts that a class of female professionals and workers employed in the public and private sectors has certainly emerged due to rising educational attainment, changing aspirations, economic needs, and the demand for relatively cheap labor. Moghadam (2003) also argues that relations of genders have accounted for the pervasive income gap between male and female workers, a gap that is detrimental to women but lucrative to employees. The income gap also accounts for the vast numbers of economically active women in Islamic/ Arab/Muslim majority societies' lack of formal training, lack of access to social security, work in the informal sector, and level of poverty. The following data demonstrates how and why labor participation of women in the public sectors in various Islamic/Arab/ Muslim majority societies remains the lowest in the world at 32%.

Eypyt. Egypt's female labor participation in 2008 was 23% while women's unemployment rate stood at 21%. The male labor force stayed constant at 77% with occasional fluctuations (World Bank Central Database as cited in World Bank, 2009). Women also accounted for 32% of government employees versus only 18% of private sector employees. Factors that contributed to this rise include less employment discrimination on the grounds of marriage and maternity leave in the public sector (Egypt Institute of National Planning & UNDP as cited in World Bank, 2009). Female unemployment in 2008 was 21% while male unemployment stood at 7% (ILO as cited in World Bank, 2009). Female unemployment also increased with higher levels of education (World Bank, 2007).

Iran. In 2008, Iran's female unemployment stood at 15% for women versus 8% for men. As in Egypt, the unemployment rate for women increased with higher levels of education. The data also demonstrated women are present in all fields of employment, even in traditionally male-dominated fields such as the police force and fire services (Statistical Center of Iran as cited in World Bank, 2009).

Iraq. In Iraq, women's economic activity is one of the lowest in the region at 13% compared to 75% for males (IHSES as cited in World Bank, 2009). Forty-five percent of women described their access to employment opportunities as poor and 27% said they did not have any opportunities at all (Women for Women International as cited in World Bank, 2009).

Jordan. According to the Department of Statistics in Jordan, the labor force participation rate was 15% for females in 2007, compared to 64% for males (Government of Jordan, Department of Statistics as cited in World Bank, 2009). Women worked predominately in the public sector in education and health (2009). Female unemployment also increased with higher levels of education—in 2007, females with bachelor's degrees and above accounted for 50% of unemployed women compared to 22% for men (2009). A 2007 study on women's entrepreneurship also showed that female-owned firms accounted for approximately 15% of all firms in Jordan (Chamlou, 2008).

Lebanon. Lebanon's female labor force participation rate of 37% is much lower compared to the male labor force participation of 84%. Data also demonstrated women, whose mobility was more restricted by socio-cultural barriers, were not able to move to the Gulf to take advantage of new employment opportunities available (UNDP and the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs as cited in World Bank, 2009).

Morocco. Of all employed women in Morocco, 56% are unpaid family helpers, 31% are wage workers, and 11.7% are self-employed (World Bank Central Database as cited in World Bank, 2009). In 2006, women's economic activity was 29% with female-owned firms standing at 10% (Chamlou, 2008).

Saudi Arabia. Data demonstrated an estimated 70% of working women in Saudi Arabia were expatriate female workers (Saudi Arabia MDG Report as cited in World Bank, 2009). The female unemployment rate was 15% versus 5% for men with women's unemployment increasing with higher levels of education. In an effort to enhance women's economic and employment opportunities, the Saudi Arabian government has drafted a new labor law; however, women's economic activities have been restricted by mandates which require written permission from a male guardian for work and travel. In addition to restrictions, strict segregation laws and special facilities for female employees can make it very costly for employers to hire females, especially in the private sector (World Bank Central Database as cited in World Bank, 2009).

Syria. In Syria, while the women's labor force participation is now one of the highest in the region at 41%, it is significantly lower than the male labor force participation of 90%. Women in urban areas are mainly employed in the public sector, while rural women are predominately self-employed or unpaid workers (World Bank Central Database as cited in World Bank, 2009). Women are also restricted from working certain types of jobs, for example, working in mines, quarries, metal foundries, and glass smelters. Women are also forbidden from working certain hours of the night (CEDAW Report as cited in World Bank, 2009).

The West Bank and Gaza. Participation of Palestinian women in the labor force was 15.7% in 2007. Key factors included a weak economy, reluctance on the part of employers to employ women, and socio-cultural barriers to women's employment. Data demonstrated that the economic activity rate for women was higher in the West Bank than in Gaza (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics as cited in World Bank, 2009). Data also demonstrated female unemployment increased with higher levels of education, and Palestinian women in the West Bank faced more than a total of 570 physical obstacles including checkpoints, flying checkpoints, earth mounds, road blocks, trenches, and a matrix of administrative procedures (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics as cited in World Bank, 2009).

Yemen. Yemen's female labor force in 2006 was 31%, much lower than other low-income countries (World Bank Central Database as cited in World Bank, 2009). Unemployment for women is very high at 46% compared to 13% for men (The Republic of Yemen, Women's National Committee as cited in World Bank, 2009). Yemeni women are the worst paid and often complain about strenuous workloads, low or delayed payment of salaries, isolation, lack of legal rights, and physical and mental abuse (ILO as cited in World Bank, 2009).

Afghanistan. Despite the very traditional role ascribed to Afghan women and the multitude of other constraints that they face, women play a key role in the Afghan economy. They comprise a significant proportion of the labor force in Afghanistan—close to 40% in rural areas and 20% in urban areas. In urban areas, women work as doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, engineers, and civil servants. Some women work for local and international NGOs. Up from 31% in 2008 to 35% in 2009, unemployment is cited as the second biggest problem Afghan women face (World Bank, 2010).

Pakistan. Pakistan has long been a tough place for women seeking employment beyond the farm or factory. About 22% of Pakistani females over the age of 10 now work, up from 14% a decade ago, government statistics show. In agriculture, where women account for three-fourths of all workers, female laborers such as cotton and chili pickers earn less than 50 cents a day. In the informal manufacturing sector—companies that make, blouses, bed sheets, or soccer balls—women make up 57% of the workforce, but they spend more hours on the job and receive lower pay than their male counterparts, according to the

Pakistan Institute of Labor and Economic Research (as cited in Mangi, 2011, para. 5). In 2009, the agency says, women in light manufacturing earned an average of 2,912 rupees ($34) monthly, about 40% of the average earnings for men.

Islamic Feminism

Cause. Since the 19th century there have been modern reforms in the position of women. Changes in the economy and society in the past two centuries, along with the Western cultural impact, brought about forces within Middle Eastern societies forcing changes in the conditions of women. After the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution took away most of women's freedoms, along with their ability to make decisions of themselves and their children (Ahmadi, 2006), the 1980s allowed for increased participation of women in the labor force (Moghadam 2003) via women mobilizing around economic issues during the United Nations' Decade for Women (1975-1985). The Decade for Women signaled official international interest in the lives of Third World women; it provided women a forum in which to speak, and gave an impetus to global feminism (Amireh, 2000). According to Senegalese feminist writer, Fatou Sow, "The Decade gave women 'le droit a' la parole'- the right to speak out, as well as the right to be heard" (Moghadam, 2003, p. 89). In 1985, the Nairobi Conference gave women's groups another forum to begin bridging previous regional and ideological divides that allowed for the growth of a critical mass of educated, employed, mobile, and politically conscious women around the world. Ahmadi (2006) argues oppressed women in the Islamic nations have been deprived of their fundamental human rights. The general lack of research on ethnic/ minority women globally reflects the marginalization of their experiences (Edross, 1997), thus erasing women from the public sphere. There is a consensus throughout the Arab world for social change, yet people feel threatened by it. Recent feminist literature show women are always disproportionately affected by social, political, and economic turmoil (Ayotte & Husain, 2005), thus creating a need for gender equality via Islamic feminism.

Definition. Jacinto (2006) claims Islamic feminism seeks gender justice and equality for all women though they do not always agree on what constitutes justice or equality or the best way of attacking them. Islamic feminism positions are local, diverse, multiple, and evolving, allowing women to politicize the private sphere and attack the theological discourse that deliberately ignores women's real issues. What, then, is Islamic feminism, and how does it differ from other feminisms? Many Islamic feminists are Muslim women who live within their faith while questioning the legal restrictions of Shari'a demanded by the Islamists. Considered a phenomenon and a process of evolution that attempts to harmonize Islamic principles with modern values such as human rights and the equality of the sexes, Islamic feminism has come to be seen as the antidote to the marginalization suffered by women in Islamic majority societies by traditionalists. If Islamic feminism is seen as the antidote to the marginalization suffered by women, why is it that we find some Muslim men saying women in Muslim states cannot be granted full enjoyment of human rights (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2000)? Islamic feminism takes a twofold task to respond and eradicate patriarchal ideas and practices glossed as Islamic and to recuperate Islamic core idea of gender equality (Badran, 2005). Islamic feminism also seeks to reform Islamic majority societies via legal codes, bureaucracy, and legislative and justice systems by putting barriers against female discrimination.

A creation of Islamic/Arab/Muslim women, men, and non-Muslims for whom religion is important in their daily lives and who are troubled by inequalities and injustices perpetrated in the name of religion, Islamic feminists attempt to labor toward a more gender-neutral interpretation of the Qur'an and a more balanced application of Islamic law while at the same time struggling to inject their political and religious views into the male dominated, conservative societies in which they live (Aslan, 2005). Today women in Islamic majority societies are interested in resisting the sacred texts with the aim at gaining more public power and voice (Jacinto, 2006). Jacinto (2006) also argues feminists' interpretation of the classic text constitutes a sweeping challenge to the central assumptions and presuppositions of patriarchal and misogynistic interpretations. Women are more conscious that they have been deliberately excluded from the sacred, not because Islam prescribed it, but because Islam was revealed in a heavily patriarchal society that managed to engrave a specific picture of women in the Muslim unconscious (Jacinto, 2006).

Islamic feminism is also predicated on the idea that Muslim men, not Islam, have been responsible for the suppression of women's rights and its proponents advocate for a return to the society the Prophet Muhammad originally envisioned for his followers (Aslan, 2005). Islamic feminism's priority is to go straight to Islam's fundamental and central holy text, the Qur'an, in an effort to recuperate its egalitarian message of equality. Though not a global movement, a variety of factors and conditions coming together today appear to be contributing to the sudden emergence of the post 9/11 era of Islamic feminism. The variety of factors and conditions include, but are not limited to, a coming of age of a new cohort of American born or raised American Muslims along with converts, new space for criticism of Islam, and presence of Islamism in the fabric of America (Ahmed, 2011).

As a new term coined in the 1990s, "Islamic feminism is an inter-phenomenon that was produced by Muslims and made its appearance in different parts of the world and in various contexts" (Cre'tois, 2013, p. 26). Defined by Islamic scholar and feminist, Dr. Margot Badran, Islamic feminism is:

> a concise definition of Islamic feminism gleaned from the writings and work of Muslim protagonists as a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all insan (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence, or fiqh) conceptualizing a holistic umma in which Quranic ideals are operative in all spaces. (Fawcett, 2013, p. 1)

Working within an Islamic framework, theology versus theology, Islamic feminists not only embrace their faith, culture, and traditions while fiercely advocating for legislative reforms and interpretations that reflect a more modern understanding of women's role in society (Fawcett, 2013), they also use the classic Islamic methodologies of *ijithad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an), tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, and anthropology (Ahmadi, 2006) as well.

Fawcett (2013) also posits Islamist feminists are advocating for progressive law and women's rights and have identified state actors or elites as the culprits—leaders who have manipulated Islam for their politics means, often oppressing large segments of society, including women, in the process. According to Boland (2013), Islamic feminists are not seeking to eliminate or eradicate Islam in the public sphere; Islamic feminists argue that their fight for women evolves from their faith. By using the Qur'an to counter patriarchal and misogynist interpretations, Islamic feminists have the ability to introduce discussions about women's rights and gender equality, themes that threaten Shari'a in Islamic majority societies (Wagner, 2012).

According to Shirin Ebadi, the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, "God created us all as equals" (Aslan, 2005, p. 74) and "by fighting for equal status, we are doing what God wants us to do" (Aslan, 2005, p. 74). Ebadi worked tirelessly in defending the rights of women in Iran and saw this cause not as a social reform movement, but a religious obligation. Amina Wadud posits 'gender jihad' is a vehicle to end male domination of Islam and to reinterpret the religion's rigid tenets. Wadud gives interpretations on four areas: divorce; polygamy; obedience and punishment; and women's value (as cited in Wright, 2011). On divorce, Wadud asserts "the Koran does not deny a woman's right to reject her husband. The Koran imposes new measures to prevent men from abandoning or misusing women" (as cited in Wright, 2011, p. 152). According to Wadud, "Islam's goal was to ensure that wives were equally treated and that widows and orphans were cared for at a time when states had no formal welfare net" (p. 153) when interpreting Quranic verses on polygamy. Speaking on the topic of obedience and punishment, Wadud claims "the Koran never states that a woman's submission to her husband makes her a better Muslim" (p. 153). Finally, on a woman's values, Wadud argues that gender should not play a part and has nothing to do with the value of a woman.

Coleman (2010) argues Islamic feminism may very well be the most promising way to promote gender justice across the broader Middle East today. Islamic feminism's greatest potential lies in its ability to work within the values of Islam, not against them. A pacifist movement, whose goal is to minimize losses and realize achievements, Coleman also argues Islamic feminism has the potential to be embraced by local leaders and religious leaders (2010). Literature states some of the most influential Islamic feminism thinkers are men. For example, Khaled Abou El Fadl is known to encourage his wife to lead him in prayer. El Fadl (2005) also writes frequently about the need for an Islamic Reformation and has issued a number of high profile fatwas in favor of women's rights. El Fadl (2005) argues that it is the misinterpretation of the Qur'an that has led to repression of women, not Islam. Sudanese scholar and law professor Abdallah Ahmed An-Na'im argues that Islam promotes liberal values, including unequivocal support for women's rights. In his book *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, An-Na'im (1996) makes the case that while men and women may have differences, "such differences…do not justify legal discrimination" (p. 17). Tariq Ramadan frequently speaks in praise of Islamic feminism. In his book *In the Footsteps of the Prophet*, Ramadan (2009a) retells the story of Muhammad's life; portraying the Prophet as a great trailblazer for women, steadfastly reforming customs and practices in their favor. Ramadan aims to show that Islam is open to interpretations and finds much in the life of Muhammad that supports the full empowerment of women today.

Literature also gives examples of religious leaders in support of Islamic feminism. According to Coleman (2010), Ayatollah Saanei, referred to as the "Women's Mufti", openly challenged many of Iran's restrictions on women. He believes that women should be allowed to hold any job and argues that Iran's restrictive family laws need to be revised. Ayatollah Saanei continues by saying a woman's testimony should be valued the same as a man's and ruled that women can lead prayers while men pray behind them. Lastly, Ayatollah Saanei ruled that women have a right to abortion on grounds of compassion and issued a fatwa condemning discrimination based on gender. Ayatollah Muhammad Kazem Mousavi Bejnourdi argues that veiling should not be compulsory, saying, “Hijab is ineffective when observed out of pressure and intimidation. It is only valuable when one believes in the concept” (Coleman, 2010, p. 127). According to Coleman, Benazir Bhutto, the Muslim world’s first female head of state, argues in her book *Reconciliation* for the unabashed promotion of Muslim gender equality (2010). Bhutto states: “Islam prohibited the killing of girls and gave women the right to divorce, child custody, alimony, and inheritance long before Western societies adopted these principles…Thus, the message of Islam is pro-women’s rights” (Coleman, 2010, p. 158). Bhutto calls upon women in Islamic societies to join together to serve as the catalyst for economic, political, and social change.

Islamic feminism has allowed more women to have their voices heard and put forth a new vision of women in Islam (Cre’tois, 2013). In their quest for gender equality, Islamic feminists have sought to read and reinterpret passages in the Qur’an differently by thinking about them in a modern context to find new meanings; these reinterpretations have been fought by traditionalists, who see the words of the Qur’an as immutable and literally the words of God given to the Prophet Muhammad. Dr. Siti Musdah Mulia in her careful study of the holy texts found that Islam at its essence is progressive when it comes to women’s rights (Coleman, 2006). Dr. Mulia has written several books on the rights of women, focusing particularly on the issues of marriage, polygamy, domestic violence, and divorce. In 2004 Dr. Mulia caused controversy when she produced a detailed counterpoint to Indonesia’s Islamic legal code. Dr. Mulia recommended prohibiting child marriage, outlawing polygamy, allowing interfaith marriage, and permitting women to initiate divorce (Coleman, 2006).

Islamic feminism allows for multiple critiques and allows Islamic feminists to argue that "Allah, in speaking directly to both men and women values them equally and showed a commitment to egalitarian ethics" (Ramadan, 2009b, p. 5). Muslim female scholars such as Afshar (1987), Al Hibri (1982), El-Saʿdāwī (1980, 1983), Manji (1998), Mernissi (1994, 2003), Moghissi (1997), and Wadud (2006) have continued to expand the path of feminism, both by criticizing monolithic/Orientalist approaches to feminism imposed by the West, and by taking into account a new dimension of difference in their own particular and original way. The aforementioned female scholars, according to Barlow and Akbarzaden (2006), the aforementioned female scholars call for rationality and condemn fundamentalism, not by discharging religion, but by adhering to and using religion as a lever. In seeking to find new meanings via re-readings and reinterpretations, some women (e.g., Amina Wadud, Rifaat Hassan, and Saudi Arabian Fatima Naseef) focus exclusively on the Qur'anic interpretations (tafsir) to successfully uncover the Qur'an egalitarian message. Amina Wadud argues that Islam has to be flexible to accommodate all people throughout time, who want to believe (Wright, 2011). Wadud also saw a need to reinterpret Islam's intentions by stripping away centuries of embellishment added long after the faith was founded. Other Islamic feminists such as Lebanese Aziza Al-Hibri and Pakistani Shaheen Sarder Ali apply their rereading of the Qur'an to their examination of the various formulation of the Shari'a, while Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and Turkish Hidayet Tuksal focus on re-examining the hadith (Badran, 2002). According to Wright (2011), it is only in the past couple of decades that women have begun to say that we should look at the text and come up with our own conclusions. God's relationship to the individual is based on piety, not gender.

Challenges to Islamic Feminism

As a pacifist movement adapted to address and meet the needs of women in Islamic majority societies, Islamic feminism faces many challenges different from secular movements. Kandiyoti (1996) points out that the debate concerning the compatibility of Islam and feminism is based on a fundamental fallacy. This fallacy resides in addressing Islam qua religion and interrogating its central texts in search for an answer to the question of women's rights. Barlow and Akbarzaden (2006) advance the notion that "Islamic feminism is a loose and ideologically elastic movement" (p. 1482); while Mojab (2001) describes Islamic feminism as a contradictory term in which its various forms do not have the potential to be a serious challenge to patriarchy. Mojab goes on to posit that Islamic feminism is extremely limited in both theory and practice, and also claims that "Islamic feminism lacks a theoretical framework of rights and laws whose discourses and practices appear like another copy of liberalism and legal positivism" (2001, p. 139). However, Weisberg (1993) posits that Islamic feminism looks at laws as neutral a neutral instrument, which serves diverse or conflicting interests equally. Weisberg frames Islamic feminism as 'legal positivism' which understands law as an autonomous self-contained system uninvolved in the production and reproduction of power relations. Shahidian (1998) argues that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron—a contradiction in terms:

> If by feminism is meant easing patriarchal pressures on women, making patriarchy less appalling, 'Islamic feminism' is certainly a feminist trend. But if feminism is a movement to abolish patriarchy, to protect human beings from being prisoners of fixed identities, to contribute towards a society in which individuals can fashion their lives free from economic, political, social and cultural constraints, then

> Islamic feminism proves considerably inadequate. I define feminism in these latter terms, and for that reason, I consider Islamic feminism an oxymoron. (as cited in Moghadam, 2002, p. 1149)

For many other critics, Silvestri (2008) informs that they dismiss altogether the possibility that change can be operated from within, and that it may be more productive to invest energies in (re)discovering values of personal autonomy and dignity outside the faith of Islam. Finally, Coleman (2006) asserts that critics dismiss Islamic feminism as a fringe movement. Critics say Islamic feminism is too small, too weak, and too marginal to move mainstream opinion. Mernissi indicates her doubt that the Islamic framework could ever accommodate a fully gender equal society (as cited in Barlow & Akbarzaden, 2006). Mernissi states,

> Controversy has rage throughout this century between traditionalists who claim Islam prohibits any change in sex roles and modernists who claim that Islam allows for the liberation of women…but both factions agree on one thing: Islam should remain the basis of society. (as cited in Barlow & Akbarzaden, 2006, p. 1484)

Mernissi further argues that:

> there is a fundamental contradiction between Islam… and equality between the sexes. Sexual equality violates Islam's premises, actualized in its laws, that heterosexual love is dangerous to Allah's order. Muslim marriage is based on male dominance. The desegregation of the sexes violates Islam's ideology on women's position in the social order: that women should be under the authority of fathers, brothers or husbands. (as cited in Barlow & Akbarzaden, 2006, p. 1484)

The issue of gender inequality is an acute problem in countries where women's lives are governed by laws, and configured by customs and traditions. Mernissi (1991) argues "the problematic position of women in Muslim societies is a result of male-dominated (mis)interpretations of the holy texts of Islam, rather than of the essence of Islam itself" (p. 56), a stark contrast to earlier thought.

According to literature, some supporters of Islamic feminism equate it with liberation theology in the West. The supporters argue that Christian feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in the USA, undertook a struggle which was similar to Islamic feminism (Tohidi, 1997) in which new interpretations were needed to fix new contexts. Farida declares, "I think the most important thing for Islamic feminism is to implement the teachings of Islam in our everyday lives, and because life is dynamic, there is always room for reinterpretation of texts" (as cited in Rinaldo, 2008, p. 1791). Farida continues by positing that "the values contained in the texts will be applicable to at all times and will always be meaningful; thus not trapping one to a particular interpretation which in the end makes life difficult" (as cited in Rinaldo, 2008, p. 1791). Moghadam and Sadiqi (2006), in support of Islamic feminism, argue that feminization of the public sphere means that more women are involved in the public sphere and in civil society as members of organizations as well as participants in public debates. Islamic feminists' multiple critiques allow them to consider the possibilities of alliances others might not in their quest for gender equality.

Religion

According to literature, the greatest task for Islamic feminists is separating culture from religion. The theoretical core of Islamic feminism is grounded in Quranic interpretation or tafsir (analysis), thus making it hard for Islamic feminists to delineate from their religious beliefs when advocating for gender equality across cultural lines. According to Coleman (2006), Islamist feminists recognize that “Islam as a very progressive religion for women and was radically egalitarian for its time and remains so in some of its scriptures” (p. 26). Nasr (2003) posits “ the religion of Islam is the matrix and worldview within all human activities, efforts, creations and thoughts take place or should take place” (p. 26). Islam is thus “not only a matter of private conscience, it is also concerned with the public domain” (Nasr, 2003, p. 10). Islamic feminism is effective in the Middle Eastern countries precisely because it is unique to Western feminism.

Feminism

Another challenge centers on reconciling Islamic feminism to the definition of feminism and the nature of women’s movement worldwide. Feminism grew out of the tensions that women faced within existing social movements and organizations, such as communism, liberation, or student movements, as well as disillusionment with male dominated movements and organizations and challenges to masculine bias in organizations as well as in society at large (Keddie & Baron, 1993). Rupp and Taylor (1999) posit that

> scholars note ‘feminism’ is a contested term even in the present, and historical literature is full of kinds of feminists who would surely have had a hard time finding common ground: Nazi feminists and Jewish feminists, catholic feminists and Islamic feminists, socialist feminists and utopian feminists, social feminists and equity feminists, imperial feminists and national feminists. (p. 363)

Many other scholars and Western feminists posit that “Islamic feminism and its attempt to reconcile Islam and feminism detract from a larger feminist movement and dilute the ability to effect change more successfully and rapidly” (Rupp & Taylor, 1999, p. 363). Critics are also baffled as to why Islamic feminists neglect to implement Western feminism to strive for equal rights and not just gender equality in Islamic majority societies.

Literature posits that there is not separation of church and state in Islamic societies; therefore, Western feminism is ineffective at addressing the needs of women in Islamic majority societies. Saliba (2000) argues that "the rise of Islamic women's movements throughout the Arab world has further challenged the secular, liberalizing assumptions of feminisms by focusing primarily on progressive readings of Islamic texts to argue for a more egalitarian Islam tradition that enhances women's rights" (p. 1090). Literature also posits not only do U.S. feminists often assume that in order for Arab women to become real feminists, "Arab women must dissociate themselves from Arab men and their own culture, but their attitude is often informed by a unmistakable bias against Islam" (Majid, 1998, pp. 85, 88). Many Muslims are frequently mistrustful of feminism not only because they see the feminist emphasis on equal rights as being at odds with the Islamic notion of the complementary of the sexes, and the specific roles and rights laid down for men and women which they believe reflect their particular strengths and weaknesses (Afshar, 1987), but also because Western feminism does not take into account the importance of Islam for women. Islamic feminists also claim, "They [Western feminists] say that the rules have been made by men for women to follow. But they do not understand that Muslim women believe these to be divine rules…By liberating them from these 'man-made' regulations they are in fact liberating them from them their own religion" (Smith, 1979). The Western popular media regularly assesses that Muslim women are incomparably bound by the unbreakable chain of religion and patriarchal oppression (Motha, 2007).

Lastly, Connolly and Patel (1997) argue that coalition building and networking for those who position themselves as Islamic feminists are risky. There are many with whom Islamic feminists may at some point have to work but whose motives they may have reason to suspect (e.g., those of their compatriots, who are secular, white Western feminists). The challenge, according to Connolly and Patel (1997), is how to collaborate on behalf of women "without losing the specificity of the concrete struggles of different women" (p. 381). Islamic feminists concern to remain embedded in their own cultural, religious, and political realities has made them suspicious of appeals to international feminism (Cooke, 2000).

According to Moghissi (1998) the term, 'Islamic feminists', has been used in "inaccurate" and "irresponsible" ways. Moghissi (1998) also asserts that almost all Islamic and active women are designated Islamic feminists even though their activities might not even fit the broadest definition of feminism. Moghissi complains that the term Islamic feminism encompasses members of the female political elite who believe in the Shari'a and its prescribed gender rights and roles (1998). Lastly, Moghissi (1997) is critical of the term and the emphasis on the achievements of those who advocate for women's rights, believing that women who reinterpret the Qur'an obscure the political, ideological, and religious differences and mask the valiant efforts of socialists, democrats, and feminists to work toward secularism. Hammed Shahidian (1998) similarly argues that the politics of "Islamic feminism" is problematical, whether in Iran or elsewhere. Shahidian (1998) also argues that the emphasis on the achievement of Islamic women obscures the contributions of the left and secularists in the face of continued Islamist repression in Iran (as cited in Moghadam, 2002). In support of Moghissi's (1997; 1998) and Shahidian's (1998) arguments, contemporary Arab feminist scholars argue that if any significant advance is to be made in the status of women, there must be a complete severance of Islamic tradition from the issue of the position and status of women (Keddie & Baron, 1993). The clashes occurring among nationally or regionally framed feminism are mainly due to disagreements between Western feminists who emphasized women's needs for legal equality and sexual autonomy and Third World feminists who emphasized imperialism and underdevelopments as obstacles to women's advancement (Keddie & Baron, 1993) will remain a hindrance until trust can be built between the two.

Non-Participation

Islam consists of gender equality principles governing women's roles and rights in both the public and private sphere (Abusharaf, 2006); however, despite progress in Islamic majority societies, "it seems Muslim women move two steps forward and one step back in most areas in the Middle East" (Adamu, 1999, p. 115). Although women today in Islamic majority societies are active participants in many spheres, e.g., grassroots organizations; development, economic, education, health, and political projects; relief efforts; charitable associations; and social services (Keddie & Baron, 1993), Islamic feminism remains a controversial concept and idea both within and outside the Muslim community. This concept of controversy has often drawn much criticism and mischaracterizations causing some women in Islamic majority societies to view the Islamic feminist movement with some apprehension. Literature posits several factors that may hinder some women in Islamic majority societies from participating in the Islamic feminist movement: 1) The family system; 2) Individualism vs. the larger organization; 3) Differentiation of sex roles; 4) Separate legal status for women; and 5) Polygamy (Nasr, 2003). Another factor, according to Ahmadi (2006), is the accusation of importing a foreign ideology whenever women ask for social justice and their rights in a Muslim context. Literature posits that women are increasingly calling for equality and are participating in the politics of the Muslim world; however, readers are reminded by Mahmood (2005) that not all women seek liberation.

Smith (1979) claims in many cases, women in the Middle East who continue to enjoy the love, care, and protection of the males in their lives are not interested in the kind of liberation that would remove them from that protection. According to Smith, “These women look at their ‘liberated’ female counterparts in Western society as burdened by great and unnecessary responsibilities from which they are happy that their religion provides a protection” (1979, p. 529). Literature claims women’s liberation in the Muslim world is often seen as another concession to the influences of the West, which has already done so much to undermine Islam. Middle Eastern women have no desire to usurp the position of males in society. Middle Eastern women also have no desire to challenge any attitudes that reflect a “female against male” approach to a culture in which such a high priority is put on the complementary nature of the roles of women and men (Smith, 1979).

Movements place a heavy burden on women who are seen as the bearers of tradition, religiosity, and morality (Moghadam, 2003); therefore, non-participation in the Islamic feminist movement by women in Islamic majority societies has been justified by many traditions: “Islamic practices about women are often said to be resistant to change because of their Quranic sanction, believed to be the word of God” (Keddie & Baron, 1993, p. 5). Further, Lewis (1998) posits “What Islam has generally asked of its believers is not contextual accuracy in belief but loyalty to the community and its constituted leader” (p.

124) and “There is in Islam a tradition of unquestioning submission to authority” (p. 130). Women in Islamic majority societies have gained assumed leadership roles in the Muslim world, yet for many women, “a feminist interpretation of the Qur’an must show a positive view toward equality and convince the traditionalists that the feminist interpretation is more accurate than other interpretations” (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 50) in order for them to feel comfortable advocating for their rights and freedom.

Western Influence

Ayotte and Husain (2005) posit that

> One of the most important advances in the history of feminism was the recognition of structural violence (i.e., inadequate education and healthcare, exploitative employment conditions, endemic poverty and other conditions that inflict damage on the lives without brute immediacy of physical violence) against women as a significant aspect of gender oppression. (p. 126)

Mernissi’s (1991) vivid dominate Western image of women in contrast to the image of Islamic majority societies’ image as passive, exotic, and veiled victims who react to events instead of actually participating in them, has led many in the West to condemn Islam as blocking the way to women’s rights. Literature advances the notion that “there can be no doubt Islamic feminists have been ‘inspired’ by the writings and collective actions of feminists from the West and the Third World” (Moghadam, 2002, p. 1164); however, literature also posits that “Islam has become a powerful political protagonist and resistance to Westernization” (Cooke, 2000, p. 177).

Middle Easterners, according to Lewis (2003) and Catherwood (2006), complain that the West judges them by different and lower standards than it does Europeans and

Americans, thus leading to anti-Americanism. As the image of Islam and of Muslims is subjected to constant construction by Western media, intellectual and political discourse, and the popular cultural industry, American response to Islam is to rescue Muslim women from Islam (Bardakoğlu, 2008). Some women from Muslim majority societies, i.e., Nawal El Saadawi, argue that "the problems facing Middle Eastern women are compounded by the encroachments of Western culture" (Mernissi, 2003, p. 31) and not Islam. For Islamic feminists, they are caught in the middle of a conflict between Islam and the West, facing a double edge sword (Adamu, 1999). Also in the West, Islamophobia was taking root after the attacks on September 11, 2001 and terrorist attacks by Muslims in Britain and Spain. According to Ahmed (2011), these attacks set in motion a variety of actions and responses, including several acts of murder.

Ahmadi (2006) informs readers that Islamophobia began with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the political power after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and reached its climax after September 11, 2001. As the Western and traditional constructed image of Muslims as Islamic terrorists strapped with explosives ready to be martyred for Allah and eager to take as many innocent people as possible with them (Aslan, 2005), Islamophobia has become a chronic disease, one reinforced by the mass media, religious groups, and other interest groups who benefit directly or indirectly from the propagation of fear (Buehler, 2011). For Islamic feminists, Islamophobia and its negative responses and reactions has made it hard for Islamic feminism to take root and fight for gender equality on a global scale. The controversies around the hijab and burqa have emerged as the flashpoint of conflicts and tensions around the issue of Islam and the West. Abu-Lughod puts forth the following question when speaking about relations between Islam and the

West: “Why was the media focused on asking questions about Islam while ignoring what was crucial to what Afghan women were suffering: the ‘history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the United States’ role in this history?” (as cited in Ahmed, 2011, p. 224).

Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002) claim, following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the burqa clad body of Afghan women became the visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only “us”, citizens of the West, but our entire civilization (pp. 341-342). Laura Bush in her November 17, 2001 radio address to the Nation pronounced: “Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror- not only because our hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us” (Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002, p. 342). Kadioğlu (1994) posits that “the image of the Muslim woman epitomizes the Other in reference to her Western counterpart” (p. 650); therefore, legitimizing the political construct of oppression of women in Islam. Post September 11, 2001 also opened Islam to abuse from the Christian Right in America on a global scale. Several members from the Christian Right took aim at Islam and denigrated all Muslims. Franklin Graham, Billy Graham’s son, called Islam a “very wicked religion” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 224). Jerry Falwell described the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist. Ann Coulter stated, “We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity” (Ahmed, 2011, p. 224). Anti-Islamic sentiments as aforementioned have reduced Muslims to stereotypes of “Islam against the West”, “Islam’s war with modernity”, and “Muslims rage, extremism, fanaticism” and terrorism” (Elver, 2012, p. 169).

The Twenty-first Century has been a highly contradictory era for Islamic feminists. Islamic feminism has evolved into "a remarkable and courageous feminist movement, one that attempts to undo the outdated notion that feminism is a Western or 'imported' phenomenon and that it is irrelevant to Middle Eastern and Muslim women" (Afary, 2004a, p. 13). However, the concept of modernity makes it hard for Islamic feminists to work exclusively within the Islamic framework. Within Islamic/Arab/ Muslim majority societies, the internet has created new spaces for women working within very different cultural environments to access knowledge and to transform it (Moghadam, 2003). Aslan (2005) describes these new spaces as political independence, economic prosperity, and military might, areas that are found within the framework of Islamic feminism. The most outspoken voices of Muslim women who condemn the inferior role ascribed to women in Muslim societies and family or societal imposition of specific Islamic practices do not reject their own Islamic faith altogether. These outspoken women call for the ability and the right to choose within the faith (Silvestri, 2008).

Islamic Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism, an English word used to describe the various movements to renew or revive Islam over the centuries (Campbell, 1992), has its origins in the Biblical literalist movement of Christianity. Campbell (1992) also claims fundamentalism is concerned with the fundamentals of belief and practice and has surfaced in every major faith in response to the problems of our modernity. Armstrong (2002) posits that fundamentalist movements in all faith share certain characteristics: 1) a deep disappointment and disenchantment with the modern experiment which has not fulfilled all that it promised; 2) an expression of fear; 3) intrinsically modern movement and could appear at no time other than our own; 4) innovative and often radical in their interpretation of religion; and 5) highly critical of democracy and secularism (pp. 165-166). Fundamentalism, according to Armstrong (2002), begins as an internal dispute with liberalists or secularists within one's own culture or nation. For Islamic fundamentalism, the ultimate struggle is not against the Western intruder but against the westernizing traitor at home. According to Badran (2005), Islamic fundamentalism alleges the West has foisted feminism, first secular and now Islamic upon Muslims to the detriment of Islam and society.

Islamic fundamentalism, an aggressive, expansionist, and uncompromising movement is seen as a cultural phenomenon. Islamic fundamentalists regard the Qur'an as immutable and divine, and seek a return to an imagined model of 7th Century Arabia at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Rashid, 2001). Islamic fundamentalism is not a homogeneous movement, yet its adherence is to a single and narrow set of principles. According to Moghadam (2003), Islamic fundamentalist movements are a reaction to the threat of "Western" cultural domination. Afary (2004b) also claims Islamic fundamentalism is not just a response to modernity and Western culture; it is also a product of Western politics. Women's rights and the conflict over the roles, rights, and privileges of men and women, and the structure and status of the family are at the center of this conflict and reaction. As a principlist movement, Islamic fundamentalists create fear in order to gain absolute power. One example of absolute power is the Taliban.

The Taliban entered the global stage along with a massive contingent of Muslim militants—the Mujahadin or "those who wage jihad"—from the Middle East and Far East, Central and South Asia, and North and East Africa. The Taliban was trained in terror tactics and indoctrinated with a militant combination of Shah Walli Allah's religio-political ideology and Wahhabism's radical pluralism (Aslan, 2005). Under the Taliban regime severe restrictions were placed on the liberty and basic freedoms of all women, thereby practically erasing them from public (Adamu, 1999). The Taliban's use of the Purist Islamic Revolution model and its subjective reading of the holy texts made it easy for them to close down all girls' schools, keep women in the home, ban entertainment, and order men to grow long beards (Rashid, 2001). The Taliban also inspired a new extremist form of fundamentalism which refused to compromise with traditional Islamic values, social structures, or existing state systems.

The Taliban set out as an Islamic reform movement that filled an ideological vacuum left after the War on Terrorism, a war intended to extinguish the terrorist group Al Qaeda after the September 11, 2011 attacks. Rashid (2001) argues that the Taliban is poorly tutored in Islamic and Afghan history, knowledge of the Shari'a, the Qur'an, and the political and theoretical developments in the Muslim world during the Twentieth Century. The Taliban's declared aims to restore peace, discard the population, enforce Shari'a law, and defend the integrity and Islamic character of Afghanistan gave the Taliban absolute power and created fear for Afghans—both men and women. The Taliban was also opposed to modernism and had no desire to understand or adopt modern ideas of progress or economic development. The Taliban's justification for such inhumane treatment, according to Rashid (2001), rested on the following statement: "God was on their side and that their interpretation of Islam was the only interpretation" (p. 133). Rashid (2001) also claims the Taliban's leaders feared that peace would destroy the movement because they had no agenda for the reconstruction of Afghanistan; thus the Taliban were unwilling to change its policies. Literature also posits when the Taliban regime was established in

Afghanistan, Western governments had their own reasons for ignoring the plight of Afghan women, even though the dismal record of the Taliban on human rights and women's rights was well known. Central Asian leaders and the Clinton Administration became obsessed with the idea of a pipeline to carry oil and gas from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean to avoid the hostile territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Afary, 2004a). In this instance, Moghadam (2003) asserts that Islamic fundamentalist movements reflect the contradictions of modernization, and the conflict between traditional and modern norms, relations, and institutions.

Islamic fundamentalists need to claim monopoly of truth by declaring its version of Islam absolute and all other interpretations as heresies. Islamic fundamentalists also exert pressure on states to enforce public morality, increase religious observance, and tighten controls over women; Islamic fundamentalists consider the woman to be a man's property throughout her life, with ownership shifting from father to husband (Coleman, 2006). In *Women and the Koran* (1997), Hekmat gives an example of this attitude towards women:

> The same attitude is seen in many animal species. For example a male ape that has several females in his possession will not permit any other male to approach them, even if the males are the offspring of his own females. (p. 91)

Islamic fundamentalists also hold women accountable for the potential misdeeds of men and require women to veil themselves in order to prevent the encouragement of vulgar thoughts. Ahmadi (2006) argues that men's duty is to facilitate women's reproductive and nurturing roles. Ahmadi (2006) also posits that women are responsible for childbearing, rearing, and socialization, but lack custodial rights. Lastly, Islamic fundamentalists demand greater control over women's bodies, as in wearing the hijab or burqa, and emphasize women's role in procreation and call for their submission to patriarchal values (Afary, 2004b).

Keddie and Baron (1993) argue that Islamic fundamentalism has had an appeal for some women, especially among the traditional classes, and encourages women's participation in many spheres; however, El Fadl (2005) claims that Islamic fundamentalists respond to feelings of powerlessness and defeat with uncompromising and arrogant symbolic displays of power, not only against non-Muslims, but even more so against fellow Muslims and women in particular. Islamic fundamentalists often praise and celebrate the role of women as mothers, but in every other role, women are portrayed as deficient and subservient. Islamic fundamentalists are also interested in focusing on and inflating what separates Muslims from non-Muslims instead of trying to find common ground in forgiveness and mercy and read history in such a way that Muslims are always made to be the victims and non-Muslims are always made to be the aggressors.

According to Sayyid Qutb, the Father of Islamic radicalism, the Qur'an has never changed and will never change nor should its interpretations (as cited in Aslan, 2005). Qutb, disgusted by what he saw as the United States' "materialistic attitude and its 'evil and fanatical racial discrimination' both of which he blamed on the West's compulsion to pull 'religion apart from common life'" (as cited in Aslan, 2005, p. 161), advocated for a new ideology of Islamism which calls for the creation of an Islamic state in which the sociopolitical order would be defined solely according to Muslim values by arguing that Islam is a comprehensive ideology that governs all aspects of the believer's life (Aslan, 2005). Using religious texts such as the Qur'an and books of Prophetic reports, and traditions like a shield, Islamic fundamentalists could avoid criticism or escape challenges that mandate the use of reason and rationality (El Fadl, 2005) for gender equality.

Islamic feminists and the West posit that there are problems with Islamic fundamentalism. By definition, fundamentalism is a reactionary movement that cannot remain tied to power and is imperative to suppression—the more one tries to squelch it; the stronger it becomes (Aslan, 2005). El Fadl (2005) explains, as aforementioned, that Islamic fundamentalists are interested in focusing on and inflating what separates Muslims from non-Muslims and making religion a tool of oppression and even violence instead of trying to find common ground in forgiveness and mercy. On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalists have been successful in pushing religion from the sidelines and back to center stage (Armstrong, 2002) where Islamic feminists can fight for gender equality.

Islamic Law (Shari'a)

Islamic Law (Shari'a) is another challenge for Islamic feminism. Often known as Muslim Personal Law or Muslim Family Law, Muslim jurists and all Muslims believe justice and equality are intrinsic values and cardinal principles in Islam and Shari'a (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). In Muslim belief, Shari'a—literally "the way"—is the "expression of the will of Allah manifested in his guidance of Muhammad and preserved by the community in their scripture, the Qur'an" (Waines, 2003). This immutable law is central to the individual and collective Muslim identity. Islamic feminists argue the Sharia's' legislations discriminate against Islamic/Arab/Muslim women in the areas of polygamy, divorce, custody of children, maintenance, and martial property. Developed by the ulama over several centuries and by a variety of processes (Keddie & Baron, 1993), Islamic law is the basis for the judgment of all behavior in Islam as good or bad, to be rewarded or punished.

Shari’a recognizes five categories of behavior (Aslan, 2005): 1) those that are obligatory (wajib); 2) those that are recommended (mandub); 3) acts toward which the Divine Law is indifferent (mubah); 4) acts that are reprehensible or abominable (makruh); and 5) those that are forbidden (haram) (Nasr, 2003). Shari’a is only meant to regulate one’s external actions (Aslan, 2005); hence, Islamic feminists posit that Shari’a is open to a wide range of understanding. Today, across the Islamic world, progressive Muslims are seeking to reinterpret its rules to accommodate a modern role of women (Coleman, 2006). Islamic feminists also posit that the rules of law that apply to women cannot be static and unchanging (El Fadl, 2005). Islamic feminists believe that a feminist approach to gender in Islamic law and sacred texts is possible (Ahmadi, 2006), yet changes in Islamic law pertaining to women have met considerable resistance (Keddie & Baron, 1993). Reforms within Shari’a which are based on the Qur’an and sunnah, which include input from Muslim women, and which do not discriminate against women are possible if constructive dialogue and a willingness to change is agreed upon by ultraconservative men and women in Islamic majority societies.

In the Western context and for some Muslims, Shari’a has become synonymous with patriarchal laws and cruel punishments. For most Muslims, Shari’a is the essence of justice, while for others; Shari’a is a powerful political ideology (Mir-Hosseini, 2012). Placing women in oppressive and subjugated positions in society is fundamentally at odds with Islamic morality (El Fadl, 2005), yet Islam’s clerical class has continued to maintain its monopoly over religious and misogynistic interpretations simply by maintaining its monopoly over religious learning (Aslan, 2005). Britten (2007) claims that “Islam gives women a very high position and a lot of rights, but over the years the patriarchal system and political power have marginalized women and made them invisible" (p. 425). Amina Wadud, a convert to Islam, asserts that "Islam actually aims to overcome the patriarchal system, not strengthen it" (as cited in Wright, 2011, p. 151); however, recently it seems that for every step forward, women in Islamic majority societies are pushed two steps back by Islamic law. Islamic feminists see part of their task is to deconstruct the gendered Islamic discourses that are in the mainstream where Shari'a is implemented, as they do not see Islam as the problem, but the solution to gender equality in Islamic majority societies.

Barazangi (2004) asserts the following: "Women have the human right and responsibility to participate in the interpretation of the Qur'an" (p. 3). Women will only be able to claim their egalitarian position in society if they practice their right to find meaning in the Qur'an that supports their rights has autonomous individuals. In *Women's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading*, Barazangi (2004) directs the reader to a variety of passages in the Qur'an in which she rejects patriarchal and misogynic interpretations and proposes new interpretations: 1) "God created the pairs (alzawjayn) - male and females" (53:45); 2) "O humankind (ya'ayuha-al-nas), be conscientious of your Guardian God (Rabbakum) who created you of a single entity (nats wahidah). Created, of those same entity its mate (zawjaha)" (4:1). Barazangi (2004) interprets the aforementioned passages to mean, "Woman is not a secondary principle of human creation, but is a primary principle in the human pair" (p. 71). Islamic feminists are not alone in their quest to obtain gender equality via reinterpretations of the holy text. Cherágh Ali (1883), Moaddel and Talattof (2000), and Ahmad (1967) argue that since Islamic law was in part a product of the times, it could not constitute a timeless moral code for Muslims, thus necessitating a new legal frame in accord with the standards of modernity. Islamic interpretation is highly variable and has differential impacts on the role of women (Mernissi, 2003; Metcalfe, 2010; Roald, 2001).

Islamic feminists are not anti-Shari'a. In many of their discourses, Islamic feminists use the fundamentals of Islamic thinking, the Qur'an, the sunnah or traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and ijithad (independent reasoning) to challenge the ways in which Islam has been distorted by Shari'a rulings issued mostly by ultraconservative clerics. Wadud argues that "Islam was always meant to be progressive, not regressive" (as cited in Wright, 2011, p. 151) and "that gender equality has been distorted by the male dominated tradition of Islamic jurisprudence" (as cited in Wright, 2011, p. 151). Islamic feminism discourse lies in the concept that men and women are moral equals in God's sight. Males and females are expected to fulfill the same duties of worship, prayer, faith, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca. The problems faced by women in Islamic majority societies lie in the way passages within the Qur'an are misinterpreted. Many women in Islamic majority societies believe it is their duty and responsibility to go back to the Qur'an for reinterpretations of the verse, not the jurisprudence created by different people, times, and contexts. Islamic feminists also understand many hadiths are taken out of context and wish to connect Islamic theory with practice; which may include dress, education, political participation, and work.

From its inception in the 1990s, Islamic feminism has continued to create much tension between traditionalists who advocate continued patriarchy and moderates advocating for continued liberation of women. Islamic feminists, in their quest for equality, seek to employ the discourses of Shari'a in their daily actions to eliminate the socially constructed gender biases created by patriarchal clerics and their practices. According to

Armstrong (2002), the ethos of the Shari'a like that of the Qur'an was egalitarian. Armstrong (2002) also claims, to this day, that Muslims remain deeply attached to the Shari'a, which has made them internalize the archetypal figure of Muhammad and made him a living presence in their lives and a part of themselves.

Marriage

Marriage customs vary in Islamic majority societies. The Hanafi, Hanbali, and Maliki Islamic Jurisprudence Schools all posit marriage is recommendatory, while the Shafi Islamic Jurisprudence School considers marriage to be (mubah) preferable (El Fadl, 2005). The general principle of the aforementioned dictates center on the Prophet Muhammad and his efforts to enjoin his followers to marry. The Qur'an says: "And among His signs is this, which He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts. Undoubtedly in these are signs for those who reflect." (30:21), and "And Allah has made for you your mates of your own nature, and made for you, out of them, sons and daughters and grandchildren, and provided for you sustenance of the best." (16:72). Islamic law dictates that marriage cannot be forced (Badawi, 1971/2008) and is recognized as a contract (Keddie & Baron, 1993). As written in the Qur'an, it is also lawful for a Muslim man to take up to four wives, provided he treats them equally: "If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or that which your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice." (Qur'an 4:3); yet the Qur'an is clear that men with more than one wife are never "able to be equitable between your wives, be you ever so eager" (4:125) and "God has not made for any man two hearts" (33:4).

Islamic feminists, as well as many Westerners, view marriage customs in Islamic majority societies as inherently against the morals of human rights. Many in the West depict women in Islamic majority societies as property of their husbands and victims of domestic violence. Traditionalists have often referenced Sura 4:34 to justify wife beating:

> Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand. (Qur'an 4:34)

Islamic feminists claim Sura 4:34 was never meant to justify wife beating.

Laleh Bakhtiar translates Sura 4:34 as: "Men are supporters of wives because God has given some of them an advantage over others and because they spend of their wealth. So the ones who are in accord with morality are the ones who are morally obligated, the ones who guard the unseen of what God has kept safe. But those whose resistance you fear, then admonish them in their sleeping place, then go away from them; and if they obey you, surely look not any way against them; truly God is lofty, Great" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 63). Although Muslim marriage is often criticized as a "contract of purchase" of a wife and as an inequitable relationship for the women, Islamic studies experts explain that the roles of the spouses in Islam "are perceived as complementary, reflecting their different capacities and dispositions in conforming with the values of traditional patriarchal society" (Silvestri, 2008, p. 23; Waines, 2003, p. 95).

Divorce

Islam recognizes divorce, yet it tries to discourage it by all mean. According to Dawud (2004), "the Prophet of Islam told the believers that 'among all the permitted acts, divorce is the most hateful to God'" (p. 2013). The Prophet Muhammad also proclaimed: "The most perfect in faith amongst believers is he who is best in manners and kindest to his wife" (Dawud, 2004, p. 2014). However, today there are separate rules of divorce for men and women under the laws of Shari'a. The inequity in divorce lies in the idea that men seem to have absolute power in obtaining a divorce. The interpretation of scholars in the past has been if the man initiates the divorce (talaq), then the reconciliation step for appointing an arbiter from both sides is omitted. When a man initiates the three steps (initiation, reconciliation, and completion) of divorce (talaq) he must pay the dowry in full or allow the wife to keep all of it if she has already been given it in full. The Qur'an explicitly prohibits the divorcing husband from taking back their marriage gifts to their wife: "But if you decide to take one wife in place of another, even if you had given the latter a whole treasure for dower, take not the least bit of it back; Would you take it by slander and a manifest wrong?" (Quran 4:20).

Mernissi (2003) advance the notion that the right to divorce is given to men only, except in very exceptional cases. Women's right to initiate divorce is often limited compared to men in Islamic majority societies. Women will often face legal and financial obligations, as well as, forfeiture of their children when initiating or suing for divorce (Hamada, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2004). Islam offers Muslim women the right to dissolve the marriage through khula or she can sue for divorce. When a woman dissolves the marriage through khula, if the husband is not at fault, the wife is required to return her dowry to end the marriage because she is the contract breaker. Women must also wait one menstrual cycle to ensure she is not pregnant.

Many of the laws regarding divorce in many Islamic majority societies are based on Quranic references. There has also been much distortion and propagation of misunderstanding about a women's right related to divorce. Situations will vary greatly depending on what Islamic school of jurisprudence they follow, whether they are Sunni or Shiite, and cultural traditions. Any difference in powers between the husband and his wife with regard to divorce can be extracted from the following verse within the Qur'an: "...And due to them [i.e., the wives] is similar to what is expected of them, according to what is reasonable. But the men have a degree over them [in responsibility and authority]. And Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise. (Qur'an: 2:228)

Inheritance

According to Sura 4:7, women in Islamic majority societies are entitled to the right of inheritance: "For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much - an obligatory share". Islam allows women half the inheritance share available to males who have the same degree of relation to the deceased. In many Islamic majority societies, Shari'a has allowed inherently unfair inheritance laws and customs to exist towards women.

Dress

Islam does not mandate women to wear hijab, yet contemporary scholars have made it an obligation. Islam does, however, require both men and women to dress modestly. There are three verses commonly cited as Quranic evidence of the female Islamic veil: 33:53, 33:59-60, and 24:30-31 (Bucar, 2012) and one verse of the male Islamic veil (24:58). The 'verse of the hijab' (33:53), the first revelation related to Islamic veiling, asks all Muslims to abide by various rules when visiting the Prophet (Bucar, 2012); however, it does not entail a clear mandate for all Muslim women to cover:

> O believers, enter not the houses of the Prophet, except leave is given you for a meal, without watching for its hour. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have had the meal, disperse, neither lingering for idle talk; that is hurtful to the Prophet, and he is ashamed before you; but God is not ashamed before the truth. And when you ask his wives for any object, ask them from behind a curtain [hijab]; that is cleaner for your hearts and theirs. It is not for you to hurt God's Messenger, neither to marry his wives after him ever, surely that would be, in God's sight, a monstrous thing. (Arberry, 1996, pp. 127-128)

Ali (2010) interprets the verse of the hijab as:

> O you who believe! Do not enter the Prophet's houses- until leave is given you- for a meal, (and then) not (so early as) to wait for its preparation: but when you are invited, enter; and when you have taken your meal, disperse, without seeking familiar talk. Such (behavior) annoys the Prophet: he is ashamed to dismiss you, but God is not ashamed (to tell you) the truth. And when you ask (his ladies) for anything you want, ask them from before a screen [hijab]: that makes for greater

> purity for your hearts and for theirs. Nor is it right for you should annoy God's Messenger, or that you should marry his widows after him at any time. Truly such a thing is in God's sight an enormity. (p. 319)

The 'mantle verse' (33:59) posits that "all Muslim women are encouraged to draw close their jilbab, so that they will be recognized, and not harassed or molested" (Bucar, 2012, p. 38). Verse 33:59 is concerned with protecting all Muslim women from attacks, inappropriate sexual relations between men and women, and female appearance outside the home (Bucar, 2012): "O Prophet, say to thy wives and daughters and the believing women that they draw their veils [jalibab] close to them; so it is likelier they will be known, and not hurt. God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate" (Arberry, 1996, p. 128), and "O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments [jalibab] over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God if Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful" (Ali, 2010, p. 320).

Lastly, verse 24:30-31 directs women to reveal some sort of hidden zina (adornments) and to cover their 'awra (private parts) in front of men except close male relatives or male servants (Bucar, 2012):

> Say to the believers, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts [furujahun]; that is purer for them. God is aware of the things they work. And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornments [zina] save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils [khumur] over their bosoms [juyub], and not reveal their adornment [zina] save to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband's

> fathers, or their sons, or their husband's sons, or their brothers, or their brother's sons, or their sister's sons, or their women, or what their right hands own, or such men as attend them, not having sexual desire, or children who have not yet attained knowledge of women's private parts ['awra]; not let them stamp their feet, so that their hidden ornament may be known. And turn all together to God, O you believers; haply so you will prosper. (Arberry, 1996, pp. 49-50)

Ali's interpretation of verse 24:30-31 states:

> Say to the believing man that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty [furujahun]: that will make for greater purity for them: and God is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments [zina] except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils [khumur] over their bosoms [juyub], and not display their beauty [zina] except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sister's sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex ['awra]; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O you Believers! You turn all together toward God, that you may attain Bliss. (pp. 261-262)

According to Bucar (2012), "the three relevant Qur'anic verses contain tremendous diversity, especially in regards to what the veil is, who has a duty to veil, and for what reason" (p. 46). For the male, the Qur'an says:

> O ye who believe! Let those whom your right hand possess, and the (children) among you who have not come of age [attained puberty] ask your permission (before they come to your presence), On three occasions: before morning prayers; the wile Ye doff your clothes for the noonday heat; And after the late-night prayer: These are your three times of undress: outside those times It is not wrong for you or for them to move about attending to each other. (24:58)

Today, the hijab has come to cover a wide interpretation of behaviors and garments.

In many Islamic majority societies the veil exists as a dichotomy (e.g., in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia women are forced to wear hijab against their will), whereas in other countries, wearing the hijab is not mandatory but encouraged and worn at will. In some Islamic majority societies, hijab is viewed has a product of the patriarchal nature of Islam, while still others view hijab as a symbol of their identity and a way to counter cultural imperialism. Wright (2011) advances the notion that "hijab is now about liberation, not confinement. It is about new possibilities, not the past. It provides a kind of social armor for Muslim women to chart their own course, personally or professionally" (p. 144). Hijab offers a way of "symbolically reconciling tensions around issues of work and gender roles" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 124) by making it easier for women to earn a living outside the home while maintaining societal esteem and self-respect (El Guindi, 1999; Hoodfar, 1993; MacLeod, 1991; Moghadam, 1993; Mule & Barthel, 1992).

Hijab also symbolizes increase in faith, pride in being a Muslim, support for the Palestinian cause, identity, sense of closeness to other Muslims sisters, culture and heritage, obedience to God's command as set forth in the Qur'an, pride in religion, protest against mainstream society, rejection to or resistance to, and challenge to sexism of the rules of dress (Ahmed, 2011). The hijab makes visible to the dominant society the presence among them of a dissenting minority who are affirming their heritage and values and taking a stand in challenging the inequities and injustices of mainstream society (Ahmed, 2011). Proponents of hijab also argue that if it is acceptable for a Christian nun to cover her head and body for religious reasons, then why is it not for a Muslim woman?

Literature posits there are women in Islamic majority societies who are opposed to hijab. For these women, the process of unveiling occurred initially because of the Western meaning of hijab—a sign of the inferiority to Islam as religion, culture, and civilization. Women in Islamic majority societies also interpreted hijab to mean the submission of women in Islam. Hijab further symbolizes the non-existence of rights for women in Islamic countries, and the reduction of women to a sexual object that may be appropriated (Cliteur, 2011). Fatima Mernissi argues in *Islam and Democracy* that “the veil is not just a scrap of cloth; it is an allusion of labor. It sends women back to the kitchen” (as cited in Schneier, 2011, p. 34). Fadela Amara states, “The veil is the visible symbol of the subjugation of women, and therefore has no place in the mixed, secular spaces of France’s public school system” (as cited in George, 2006, para. 11). Hirschkind and Mahmood (2002) claim, “Women’s voluntary adoption of what are considered to be patriarchal practices are often explained by feminists in terms of false consciousness, or an internalization of patriarchal social values by those who live within the asphyxiating confines of traditional societies” (p. 352).

In *A Quiet Revolution* Ahmed (2011) describes the findings of two scholars who set out to study women’s consciousness, agency, and motivations around the issue of the hijab. Among the questions posed to women by Arlen Elowe Macleod in 1983 was “Why it was, in their opinion, that some women were beginning to wear hijab?" and "Why, after wearing western dress their whole lives, women would suddenly decide to alter their dress so radically?" (as cited in Ahmed, 2011, p. 119). The answers varied from a "general sense that people in their culture were turning back to a more authentic and culturally true way of life" to " in the past people had been 'thoughtless and misled' and now realized that their behavior had been wrong" (as cited in Ahmed, 2011, p. 119). Macleod (1983) concluded, the "essence of the meaning of their veiling" was that it was a response to the local and specific circumstances and relationships in which the women were immersed, rather than a response to "larger questions of politics and international relations" (as cited in Ahmed, 2011, p. 123). Macleod (1983) also concluded that the hijab trend was initially a women-initiated movement controlled and driven forward by women's own needs, choices, and volition; however, by the late eighties the hijab was increasingly becoming co-opted by men (as cited in Ahmed, 2011).

According to Ahmed (2011), Sherifa Zuhur's study (1988) explores and compares the views and attitudes of the unveiled women with those of the "new Islamic woman" on a number of issues, including women's rights. Zuhur found that unveiled women did not believe that the veil was required by Islam. Many women claimed the veiling was spreading through society because women were being paid to wear it by the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups and by funds from Saudi Arabia and Libya. Veiled women considered unveiled women to be failing to practice a foundational Islamic requirement, and they saw their own adoption of the hijab to be a sign of their social and moral awakening (Ahmed, 2011). Macleod and Zuhur, both, set out to investigate whether women who wore hijab were more religious than those who did not. Although both concluded that women who wore hijab were not more religious than those who did not, Zuhur found that while veiled and unveiled women may be equally pious, the ways in which they conceived of and practiced their religion differed in subtle but palpable ways. The difference lay in the profoundly different emphasis they placed on the importance of the “inner” practices of religion, on the one hand, and on the “outward” and “visible” practices on the other (Ahmed, 2011, p. 128).

The issue of women’s dress has recently become the most visible symbol sign of the struggle over women’s identity (Mernissi, 2003). Is hijab meant to protect women’s chastity, control their movements, and separate them from the free world? (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2000). For Berkovitch and Moghadam (1999), the veiling and unveiling of women had become a symbol of modernization, Westernization, anti-colonial struggles, the quest for national identity, or the search for cultural authority. Literature suggests the veil, the emblem of women’s oppression and marginalization, has been rejected by some and considered by others as a tool for emancipation (Cooke, 2000); however, it is wrong to conclude that all hijab wearing women are oppressed (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2000).

Islamic Schools of Jurisprudence (fiqh)

A diverse and tolerant justice system, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) is the knowledge of Islamic laws, what is permissible, what is forbidden, what is obligatory, what is disliked (not recommended or unfavorable), what is recommended or (favorable), what is correct, and what is incorrect. Derived from the Qur’an and Prophetic traditions, Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) covers two main areas: 1) rules in relation to actions and 2) rules in relation to circumstances surrounding actions. Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) in the Twenty-first Century is largely defined by eight Islamic schools of jurisprudence: the Shafi, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali schools-majority Sunni sect; Jafari and Zaydi schools- Shiite sect, and Ibadi and Thahiri schools among other Muslims. Today, the five schools of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) accepted by all Muslims are Ja'fari (predominate among Shi'as, including those who live in Iraq and Iran), comprising 23% of the Muslims; the Hanafi, comprising 31% of the Muslims with adherents in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Central Asia, The Caucasus, The Balkans, Turkey, Parts of Iraq, and Egypt; the Maliki, comprising 25% of the Muslims with adherents in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Upper Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mali, Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Senegal, Mauritania, Syria, and Yemen; the Shafi′i, comprising 16% of the Muslims with adherents in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Yemen; and the Hanbali, comprising 4% of the Muslims with its adherents in Saudi Arabia. The remaining small percentage follows other minority schools, such as the Zaydi and the Isma′ili (Chirri, 1986). Keddie and Baron (1993) posit each school represents in part the different regional origins of the schools and are recognized as absolutely authoritative and their differences are only fundamental. Their differences have more of an impact on the legal systems in each country than on individual Muslims, as many do not adhere to one school in their personal lives.

Literature informs that although each school is deeply rooted and united in the principle of the Islamic revelation (Nasr, 2003), in the modern Muslim world, the traditionalist school of Hanafi is the largest school of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). The Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) is the most influential (Aslan, 2005). Hanafi doctrines have always been considered among the most flexible and liberal in Islamic law, including in the areas of criminal law, treatment of non-Muslims, individual freedoms, marriage and guardianship, and ownership and use of property. The Hanafi school posits that “What a Muslim reads between the physical covers of the Qur’an—its every word and letter—is itself the actual word of God; eternal and uncreated” (Aslan, 2005, p. 158). For Islamic feminists, traditional patriarchal and misogynic interpretations advanced by the Hanafi School of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) are the causes for much tension within Islamic majority societies. Literature is also full of examples of how “the science of Quranic commentary has been the exclusive domain of Muslim men” (Aslan, 2005, p. 69). Today, women in Islamic majority societies are seeking to re-interpret passages of the Qur’an that have been read in their most misogynist interpretation: “God created spouses for you of your own kind so that you may have peace of mind through them” (30:21) and “Men are the support of women as God gives some of their wealth [to provide for them]… As for women you feel are averse, talk to them suasively; then leave them alone in bed [without molesting them] and go to bed with them [when they are willing]” (Qur’an 4:34). Aslan (2005) also puts forward, “as religion is interpretation, which one chooses to except and follow depends on what one is trying to extract from the text” (p. 70). Islamic feminists wish to dispel the traditionalist view that “women’s roles and rights in society are based on ‘abstract’ interpretations of the Quranic verses” and posit the moderate view that puts forth, interpretations are “situational and cognizant of changes in gender roles” (Abusharaf, 2006, p. 719).

Literature Review Summary/Conclusion

Women in Islamic majority societies want equal rights to education, employment, social advancement, and political participation through Islam. The conditions of Muslim women and what they are oppressed by ranges enormously depending on the political conditions in specific moments of time in different countries (Ahmed, 2011); thus, finding a viable balance between political and economic rights while also ensuring basic security will be the toughest challenge for women in Islamic majority societies. What is absent in Islamic majority societies is sensitivity to women's rights and needs due to the fact that meanings of oppression are socially constructed through patriarchal discourse and religious interpretations (Ayotte & Husain, 2005). The future will depend on how modern women in Islamic majority societies choose to understand their past and how they develop and assert their future.

The rights and conditions of women in Islamic majority societies are often acutely in need of improvement. According to Azhadi (2010), the oppressed women in Islamic nations have been deprived of their fundamental human rights and have suffered the infliction of violence against their bodies, in the form of assault, rape, and murder. Ayotte and Husain (2005) posit the aforementioned inflictions are clearly the most visible manifestation of misogyny. Women in Islamic majority societies are still being excluded from equal agency with men, full participation in the shaping of Islamic society, and thus, full and equal Islamic identity (Barazangi, 2009). Women in Islamic majority societies will need to speak for themselves, especially on issues of gender equality if change is to take shape in today's modern society.

Literature posits that women from the Arab world are becoming the agents of possible transformation in the societies in which their voices had traditionally not been heard (Cooke, 2000). Women in Islamic majority societies must continue to remain a passive force in changing the negative practice of contemporary Islamic thought and the resulting injustices (Barazangi, 2009). A new generation of feminists has emerged during the past two decades as woman's issues became an integral part of the modern Islamic discourse. Islamic feminists are not just calling for increased equality and participation in the politics of the Muslim world, they are also working on religious and cultural levels to change women's situation in Islamic societies (Ahmadi, 2006).

Today, Islamic feminists are focusing on education, health, income generation, political voice, and legal rights, particularly in the area of family law, as their levers for change (Coleman, 2010). Islamic feminism provides a mode for women in Islamic/Arab/ Muslim majority societies to advocate for gender equality and maintain their Muslim identity, yet help their societies find ways to integrate Islam with the demands of modernity. The emerging and expanding Islamic feminist understanding in different parts of Islamic majority societies is a sign that women are preparing to fight for their social, economic, and political rights on their own terms. Epistemologically, Islamic feminists advocate an expansion of their faith's position in acquiring gender equality, not a rejection of Islam. Islamic feminists' ultimate goals are to improve the capacities of women and particularly of female scholar-activists and to prevent extremists from hijacking authority over Islam, and to achieve peace and justice (Barazangi, 2009).

Islamic feminism, a new phenomenon, is a pacifist movement used by women in Islamic majority societies to advocate for gender equality. As a new phenomenon, Islamic feminism leaves many questions to be answered, as literature regarding Islamic feminism has been written by women within the Muslim world and recently, women in the Western world with little to no experiences living in patriarchal societies. Questions left unanswered by literature include:

1. How can Islamic feminism be reframed in a way Islamic that fundamentalists see the movement as an effective tool to bring about gender equality?
2. For women in Islamic majority societies what shapes their actions and involvement in feminist and antifundamentalist struggles?
3. How can one be a Muslim and modern simultaneously?
4. Is Islam truly the best answer to Islamic fundamentalism?
5. Can social media and technology serve as viable means of communicating and mobilizing women in Islamic majority societies without adding to their oppressive conditions?
6. What is the root cause of men's fear of women in Islamic majority societies?
7. What are the ultimate goals of Islamic law (Shari'a)?
8. If Shari'a is open to a wide range of understanding, why do Islamic fundamentalists continue to resist changes in Islamic law?
9. Who has the right to speak about or for women in Islamic majority societies? and
10. Will conducting research on women in Islamic majority societies become a way of deconstructing dominant patriarchal interpretations that posit gender inequality?

Women in Islamic majority societies and their struggles have influenced not only gender politics but politics in general while operating within the Islamic and dominant ideological frameworks (Berkovitch & Moghadam, 1999). The modernizing women of Islamic majority societies constitute themselves as political actors with their own voice and distinct forms of collective action, as their modes of activity and discourse have undergone major changes. Women's modes of action, though to different degrees, all challenge the supremacy of religious discourses and especially the existing forms of fundamentalism and should be understood as a result of an interaction between three factors: 1) the state's structure and processes; 2) changing demographics, including the expansion of a population of educated and employed women, and 3) global level process (Barazangi, 2009). In conclusion, Islam, women, and Islamic feminism are the catalyst for gender equality in Islamic majority societies.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine and explore the phenomena associated with Islam and Muslim women's lived experiences while seeking gender equality via an Islamic framework. The research questions to this phenomenological research study is answered using qualitative data that materialize from audio-taped individual semi-structured interviews, observations, and transcribed interviews. This research study attempts to understand what meaning lived experiences have for Muslim women and more specifically, to understand how Islam as a religion fosters gender equality via its egalitarian message. To study the concept of gender equality, this research uses the phenomenology method. Because the combination of Islam and gender equality for women is a new phenomenon and has not been researched much in academia, it is necessary to begin by using a phenomenology approach. Using this method allows the researcher to understand the meaning of Muslim women's experiences and allows the researcher to 1) suggest recommendations and 2) identify how Muslim women's quest for gender equality will challenge traditional patriarchal and male-dominated religious interpretations used to subjugate women.

This study attempts to understand the lived experiences of Muslim women who partake in seeking gender equality via an Islamic framework. Specifically, this phenomenology research study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women seeking gender quality via an Islamic theoretical (Kalam) framework?

2. How can Islam be employed to promote gender equality for Muslim women and not separate religion from culture?
3. How did Islam's influence awaken the religious consciousness of women seeking spiritual and/or religious empowerment?
4. How can Muslim women re-examine and reinterpret Qur'anic religious passages to improve gender equality and treatment within Islam?

This chapter explains the various research methods used to generate the data in this phenomenological research study. A substantial part of this chapter is devoted to an overview of the procedures and outcomes of the pilot phase. This is followed by details about the procedures during the data collection phase as well as discussion of the chosen research methodology and design, the selection process of participants, materials and instruments to be used, limitations and assumptions, and ethical assurances.

Pilot Phase

Introduction. A pilot study is "a mini version of a full scale study or a trial run done in preparation of the complete study. It can also be a specific pre-testing of research instruments including questionnaires or interview schedules" (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001, p. 1). This phenomenological research study was approved by Nova Southeastern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as a low risk, high benefit study. The research study is conceptually based in the idea that Islam can promote gender equality for Muslim women. In the pilot phase of this phenomenological research study various techniques were used to gain a more in-depth understanding of Islam, Muslim women, and gender equality. This included gaining consent and conducting audio-taped, individual semi-structured interviews with Muslim women over the age of eighteen from diverse backgrounds and various global geographical locations, evaluation of process, and reviewing studies and literature on Islam, Muslin women, and gender equality. The final part of the pilot phase consisted of using feedback to reword and/or rewrite interview questions found to be ambiguous and difficult, add interview questions on themes that emerged during the pilot phase, and delete words and/or questions participants found to be redundant in nature.

Location and Participants. The pilot phase of this phenomenological research study was conducted between the months of May and June 2014 face-to-face and telephonically. An overview of socio-economic status, geographical location, age, nationality, years practicing, sect, and educational characteristics can be found in Table 1. A total of five Muslim women over the age of eighteen participated in the pilot phase. Participants were recruited via face-to-face invitations, friends, and colleagues. Selection procedures were based on participants' age and their willingness to be interviewed; however, care was taken to ensure participants selected represented the required dimensions that were important to the study, i.e., age, gender, and sect.

Table 1

Demographics of Muslim Women in Pilot Phase

Pseudonym	Location	Sect	Age	Nationality	Years Practice	Socio-Economic	Education Obtained	Convert	Lived in the Middle East Region
PSA	New York	Sunni	52	American-Pakistani	52	Middle Class	Bachelors	No	Yes
PSB	Canada	Shia	63	Canadian	45	Upper Middle Class	Masters	No	Yes
PSC	Atlanta, Georgia	Sunni	39	African-American	39	Middle Class	Bachelors	Yes	No (Has visited Middle East- Parents live in Abu Dhabi)
PSD	Conley, Georgia	Muslim	59	African-American	22	Middle Class	Bachelors	Yes	No
PSE	Philadelphia	Sunni	19	Turkish	19	Middle Class	2nd year in college	No	No (Has visited Turkey often)

Objectives. The purpose of the pilot phase was six fold, namely to: 1) receive feedback, opinions, and suggestions from participants; 2) highlight ambiguous and difficult questions; 3) record the time taken to complete the audio-taped, individual semi-structured interview and decide whether it was reasonable or if time needed to be adjusted; 4) assess whether each question gave an adequate range of responses; 5) to identify flaws, limitations, or other weaknesses within the interview protocol prior to the implementation of the main study; and 6) evaluate readability of instrument protocol.

Materials. An interview protocol was developed for use in the audio-taped semi-structured interview. The protocol was designed to cover all the aspects of interviewing, including level of readability and design. The interview protocol allowed the participants to examine, explore, and describe their lived experiences within Islam. See Appendix D for a copy of the original interview protocol.

Procedures. A telephone call was placed and/or an email was sent to participants asking for volunteers to participate in the pilot phase of this research study. Participants were given background information and the desired outcomes of the phenomenological research study. Participants were informed that they were not obligated to stay in the pilot phase of this research study and could leave with no risk, harm, or repercussions. Participants who volunteered to participate in the pilot phase reviewed and signed an informed consent documentation before an interview was scheduled.

Evaluation Criterion. An evaluation criterion was developed to allow for a comprehensive assessment of the interview protocol, procedures, and processes. The evaluation criteria for the pilot phase of this research study included:

1. Sample Performance
    a. How well did the purposive sampling conform to the expected outcomes?
    b. How well did the sample perform in terms of generating preliminary data?
    c. How many participants were contacted before acquiring the required number needed for pilot phase?
    d. On average, how many attempts were needed to get participants comfortable enough to participate in the pilot phase?
2. Recruitment
    a. What were the response and refusal rates among prospective participants?
    b. How well did the demographic characteristic of the participants represent the total population of Muslim women?
    c. How did the interviewer identify participants for the pilot phase?
    d. How many participants agreed to participate telephonically rather than face-to-face? Why?
3. Results
    a. Did the interview questions generate varied responses?
    b. Can the researcher assess proposed data analysis techniques to uncover potential problems?
    c. What research question was developed from responses?

Methodology. Phenomenology was employed in the methodological framework for this pilot phase. Phenomenology is the study of lived experience in which the researcher is seeking a phenomena and its explanation. For this research study, the researcher is on a quest to know answers to the following questions: What is the everyday experience like for

Muslim women? What is its essence, structures, and meaning? and How is it experienced? A phenomenological approach is a good fit for this pilot phase, as phenomenology seeks to understand unique individuals and lived experiences. The aim of this pilot phase was to examine, describe, and understand the full essence of Muslim women's lived experiences.

Methodological Limitations. Pilot studies may have a number of limitations. The pilot phase of this research study is limited to its findings in the following ways:

1. The sample was not representative of the total population of Muslim women.
2. The wording of the questions may not have been clear and comprehensible.
3. The interview protocol may not have been valid for adequate data collection.
4. The researcher may make inaccurate predictions or assumptions on the basis of data.

Findings and Results. Conducting the pilot phase of this research study was a vital component to understanding the lived experiences of Muslim women. The range of diverse participants and data collected from the pilot phase was valuable in terms of obtaining feedback from a cross-section of the total population of Muslim women ages 18 and older. The results from the pilot phase were positive overall, as participants expressed gratitude for having a platform in which their voices could be heard. The relationships that were built helped to increase participants' confidence and made them comfortable throughout the process. The majority of participants asked to be contacted for further opportunities to participate in endeavors concerning Muslim women.

The use of an interview protocol was crucial in elucidating lived experiences of the participants. Results indicate participants felt the interview protocol's content and readability level was easily understood; however, several questions were misinterpreted by participants and had to be reworded. One participant expressed that she felt “the subject of gender equality within Islam should not be the focus of the research; as the male has the responsibility and duty to take care of Muslim women.” Participants’ comments, both positive and negative, were very constructive and provided the researcher with useful feedback to improve and revise the interview protocol for the main study. Several questions were deleted, restructured and/or reworded to ensure appropriateness, readability and solicitation of a wide and diverse range of responses from participants. The revised interview instrument allowed participants to engage in meaning dialogue that described their lived positive and negative lived experiences. Positive comments from a majority of the participants indicated that the revised interview protocol would serve as a valuable data collection apparatus during the main study.

Research Methods and Design

Phenomenology as a Method. While the research on gender equality within Islam is limited, phenomenology methods have been employed in numerous studies. This phenomenological research study attempts to understand how Islam, as a religion, can foster gender equality for Muslim women. As defined by Creswell (2009), “phenomenology is a research strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). According to Moustakas (1994), “Phenomenology seeks meanings from appearance and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understanding” (p. 58). As such, the emphasis of this phenomenological research study is to understand the extent to which Islam is used by Muslim women to increase gender equality via an Islamic framework.

A variety of methods can be used in phenomenological research including interviews. The participants in this phenomenological research study were guided in dialogue by an interview protocol that used inductive, open-ended questions in an effort to identify their specific lived experiences and feelings. At the root of phenomenology, according to Cameron, Shaffer, and Park (2001), is "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person allowing the essence to emerge" (p. 34). This phenomenological research study method correlates well with the intent of the study in an effort to understand the lived experiences of Muslim women using Islam within an Islamic framework to increase gender equality.

Qualitative studies are not generalized in the traditional framework; however, some have redeeming qualities that set them above the requirement (Myers, 2000). The research significance of qualitative studies is based on participants' responses to the research question(s); therefore, the issue of generalization of the research findings needs to be explored. As the construct of this study is of phenomenology design, the focus of this research is to understand how Islam fosters gender equality for Muslim women, and more generally, the nature of lived experiences of Muslim women. The rationale behind the choice of this phenomenological study is to help give insight to how Muslim women understand and engage Islam to acquire gender equality. Data to support the aforementioned rationale was collected through inductive methods, i.e., open-ended question interviews.

The intended goal of qualitative research is to offer a rich perceptive and description of a salient issue and provide a report that reflects the researcher's ability to document and present the resulting phenomenon. An individually semi-structured, open-ended question interview was concluded per participant, and then data collected, coded, and analyzed to identify recurring patterns and themes. In addition to the individual semi-structured interviews being audio-taped and transcribed, detailed notes were taken to collect participants' responses. Upon completion of individual interviews, participants' responses were compiled, analyzed, and coded using a classification coding system. The coding system allowed the researcher to represent emerging themes for data aggregation and analysis.

Phenomenological research methods in this study facilitate elucidation of Muslim women's lived experiences and perceptions regarding Islam and gender equality. Phenomenological research methods also measure the participants' lived experiences, contexts, and/or situations in which they experience it (Creswell, 2007). This phenomenological research study illustrates the understanding and lived experiences of Muslim women within Islam and how these lived experiences affect gender equality. In conjunction with participants' responses and written comments on their transcribed interview protocol, journals and other artifacts were solicited as raw data in identification and use for aggregation.

Alternative research methods, such as quantitative research methods, would not adequately address the scope of the proposed research questions of this study. Other research methods would not offer a comprehensive and all-inclusive review of the issues or offer the level of understanding fostered by Muslim women's lived experiences regarding Islam and gender equality. According to Trochim and Donnelly (2008), "Quantitative research is confirmatory and deductive in nature, while qualitative research is exploratory and inductive in nature" (p. 146). The value of the selected qualitative method is that the issue and phenomenon are viewed in its context, while a quantitative study is viewed through a narrow hypothesis employing closed-ended questions aimed at verifying theories. It is evident that a qualitative study is best suited for this phenomenological research study.

Selection of Participants. Muslim women residing in various global geographical locations were selected based upon their willingness to participate and share their lived experiences within Islam. The participants for this phenomenological research study came from a homogeneous population from diverse socio-economic status, nationality, age, years practicing Islam, and sect. Participation in this research study was voluntary and participants could end their participation at any time without repercussions, risk, or harm. No compensation was offered or given for participating in this study.

In qualitative research, the type of sampling employed is determined by the methodology selected and the topic under investigation, not by the need to create generalizable findings. The researcher chose purposive sampling, considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) as the most important kind of non-probability sampling, to identify the primary participants. The sample was based on the researcher's judgment and the purpose of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997), looking for those who "have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (Kruger, 1988, p. 150). The researcher used face-to-face and telephonic individual, audio-taped semi-structured interviews to gain pertinent information regarding Islam, women, and gender equality. These interviewees became part of the primary unit of analysis (Bless & Higson-

Smith, 2000), along with their informed consent (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bailey, 1996; Street, 1998).

For this researcher, understanding that phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of people (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Kruger, 1988, Kvale, 1996, Maypole & Davies, 2001; Robinson & Reed, 1998) involved or who were involved with the issue that is being researched was important. As a way to identify additional participants for this phenomenology research study, the researcher used snowball sampling to identify and recruit hidden participants—that is, participants not easily accessible to researchers through other sampling strategies. Snowballing is a method of expanding the sample by asking one participant, the gatekeeper, to recommend others for interviewing (Babbie, 1995; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Neuman (2000) qualifies a gatekeeper as "someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site" (p. 352), a person from whom permission is required. The researcher requested that purposive sample interviewees give, at their discretion, the names and contact information of Muslim women who a) are willing to share their lived experiences within Islam and b) are willing to discuss gender equality through their understanding of Islam and religious interpretations.

As phenomenology is essentially concerned with the meaning of phenomena within the lived experiences of an individual, the researcher's overall objective of this phenomenological research study was to comprehensively describe and explain the relationship between Islam, women, and gender equality as it relates to the Qur'an and its egalitarian spirit.

Materials/Instruments. This phenomenological research study is based on an individual audio-taped, semi-structured interview using 15-20 inductive open-ended questions that assisted the researcher in identifying and understanding the role Islam plays in Muslim women lives in regards to gender equality. Each participant's informed consent form (see Appendix A) was obtained, as well as, and a detailed explanation of the research study was given before participants were allowed to engage in dialogue with the researcher. Participants were informed that participation in the research study was voluntary and withdrawal from the study could be done at any time without risk, harm, or repercussions to the participant. Ample opportunities were given to the participants to ask questions related to the construct and procedures of the research study at any time during the research process. Every participant received identical inductive, semi-structured open-ended questions, allowing for patterns and themes to emerge from the data. Participants' names and any identifying characteristics were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, appropriate reporting, and data analysis.

The individual audio-taped, semi-structured interviews were conducted based upon an interview apparatus developed by the researcher. The inductive, semi-structured interview questions were developed and constructed in a manner that best elucidates phenomenological lived experiences of Muslim women. According to Van Manen (1990), "At the most general level of the life world we may find that this grounding level of human existence may also be studied in its fundamental thematic structure" (p. 101). Further, Van Manen goes on to reflect that "there are four existential concepts that may prove especially helpful as guides for reflection in the research process. They are; lived space, lived body, lived time and lived human relations" (p. 101). These concepts were considered when developing the phenomenological research study lived experiences inductive interview questions.

Data Collection, Processing and Analysis

Informed Consent. The desired outcome of this phenomenological research study is to make understanding and meaning of Muslim women's lived experiences as authentic as possible; therefore, it was vital to gain permission and approval from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before starting the research process. Participants received a comprehensive overview of the research's desired outcomes to help them facilitate objectivity during the interview. The informed consent document given to prospective participants identifies the purpose, procedures (including time commitment of the subjects), confidentiality of their information, and risks and benefits of the research study. Participants had the right to voluntarily participate in the research study, as well as the freedom to decline participation at any time without retribution. Participants were also be notified via email or telephonically of their interview date and time. Upon completion of each interview, data was analyzed and interpreted into codes, patterns, and themes to lay the foundation for codification with the aid of software or an Excel spreadsheet.

The participants needed to sign an informed consent document before the audio-taped, semi-structured interview commenced. This precaution gave full assurance of the confidentiality and privacy of the participants and allowed participants to provide their views and insights about the topic of the study. The signed informed consent document will be retained in a secure location for a maximum of three years. The collected data will be stored in an Excel file maintained on a password protected flash memory data storage device locked in the researcher's home office. Hardcopies of all transcripts, including the signed informed consent documents and interview protocol, which includes the participants' feedback, will be kept in sealed envelopes and stored in a secure location. Only the researcher will have access to the aforementioned documents at all times. After three years, all hardcopies will be shredded using a shredding machine to protect any participants' identifying demographics and characteristics. Volunteer participants received instructions on the nature and purpose of the phenomenological research study through the consent agreement form (Appendix A). Additionally, participants received an assurance of confidentiality to make them more comfortable in sharing and explaining their personal views (Cobb & Forbes, 2002). The research study used 15-20 inductive, semi-structured, and open-ended leading questions with the objective of examining and understanding the lived experiences of Muslim women as it relates to gender equality within Islam. The semi-structured interview protocol can be viewed in Appendix E Participants were given the opportunity to obtain further information and answers to questions related to the research study before, during, and after the study. The researcher provided her contact information to participants to allow contact for any concerns and/or questions about the research study.

Field Issues

Creswell (2007) identifies several challenges this researcher may face when engaged in studies: access to organization, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials (pp. 139-141).

Access to the Organization. The building of trust and credibility in participants involved in the research was first and foremost for this researcher. A site and/or location and time to conduct observations, interviews, and collect documents were agreed upon between this researcher and the participants in order to remove personal biases and prejudices. Another challenge that may inhibit or restrict access to the organization is working with the institutional review board and its "unfamiliarity of working with unstructured interviews in qualitative research (Corbin & Morse, 2003; Creswell, 2007, p. 139).

Observations. This researcher had the ability to interchange role between nonparticipant or middle-ground person when conducting observations. Though there were times when writing field notes or recording pertinent information becomes a struggle, this researcher "learn[ed] how to funnel the observations from the broad picture to a narrower one in time" (Creswell, 2007, p. 139).

Interviews. There are many challenges this researcher faced when interviewing participants; however, as an experienced interviewer this researcher had the knowledge to "create good instructions, phrase and negotiate questions, deal with sensitive issues and do transcription" (Creswell, 2007, p. 140), proficiently. Throughout the interview process, this researcher also had the ability to handle issues and concerns that may arise and needed to be discussed.

Documents and Audiovisual Materials. In locating documents relevant to the study, this researcher sought permission for use of materials before its actual use. To the fullest extent possible, participants engaged in the study were given equitable access to journals, logs, and recording devices. Consideration was given to the location, the acoustics, and background noise when recording participants in an effort to collect authentic and real data.

Confidentiality. The main study was conducted with selected participants upon approval from the IRB. The first point of contact with the participants was face-to-face contact and telephone calls to solicit and confirm participation in the qualitative research study. The researcher informed the participants that audio-taped interviews will be kept in a secure location for at least three years after the completion of the research study and then shredded by a machine. Each participant was made aware that participation in this research study was voluntary, and therefore, their identity would remain confidential before, during, and after the research study was conducted.

To ensure that ethical standards were maintained during the course of this research study, first, participants were informed about the purpose and desired outcomes of the research study in an effort to obtain informed consent before commencing the study. Secondly, the privacy and confidentiality of participants was ensured by a) not requiring them to reveal their names and any other identifying characteristics to ensure anonymity of their responses and protect them from any retributive action, and b) ensuring that the data collected are not disclosed to unauthorized persons. Care was taken to minimize any harm, risk, or repercussions caused to the participants, by ascertaining at the outset whether they have any objections to participating in the study or whether they foresee any negative impact being caused to them by participating in it.

The raw data was stored in an Excel file maintained on a password protected memory data storage device, after which, data collected was coded to protect confidentiality and privacy. Following acceptance of the completed research study and the passing of three years, the Excel file will be erased from the memory data storage device. Transcribed interviews, consent form documents, and the interview protocol will be kept in sealed envelopes and stored in a secured location for three years, after which, they will be shredded as to protect participants' identities.

Data Collection Method. A pilot phase was conducted to provide an opportunity to collect data and examine the lived experiences of Muslim women. During this phase, data was collected and analyzed to determine if there was a need to further study this phenomenon. Data collected during the pilot phase provided related information about the challenges and factors that may influence the lived experiences of Muslim women. Furthermore, such data was vital for identifying ambiguous and difficult questions, as well as, flaws within the interview protocol.

The main study conducted in the research study consisted of Muslim women participating in an audio-taped, semi-structured interview. For this research study, inductive, open-ended questions offered flexibility and opportunities for respondents to emphasize salient issues that were not mentioned in the interview protocol (Axinn & Pearce, 2006). The researcher conducted individual, semi-structured interviews to capture the perspectives of fifteen participants, five which were used for the pilot phase. The researcher took notes, listened, and asked questions in order to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between Islam, Muslim women, and gender equality, and the participants' thoughts about their lived experiences. Narrative and audio-taped interview texts were analyzed to identify the participants' salient recurring patterns and themes as it relates to Muslim women and gender equality within Islam.

Once the semi-structured interviews were completed, a structured debriefing protocol was put in place. As illustrated by Cozby (2009), "Debriefing occurs after the completion of the study. It is an opportunity for the researcher to deal with issues of withholding information, deception, and potential harmful effects of participation" (p. 47). The intent of the debriefing is to ensure that "if the research altered the participants physicals or psychological state in any way, as in a study that produces stress, the researcher makes sure that participants are comfortable about having participated" (Cozby, 2009, p. 47). It is at this time that the researcher can inform participants of the purpose of the study and avail them of the practical implications of the research study. Once the data was collected, the information was categorized. The objective was to identify any patterns representing concepts the participants presented during the data collection phase. Data was then organized into logical categories that summarized and brought meaning to the manuscript of notes.

Specific codes were developed allowing the researcher to categorize the responses into the above-mentioned construct, while identifying emergent themes. During this data aggregation phase, subcategories were identified, which were not identified during the initial development of the research project. These subcategories were identified and coded and assimilated into the research study's findings. Though preset categories were defined in the initial phase of the research study, setting the initial direction of the research study, emergent categories were identified. The projected process began the research study with preset categories adding emergent categories as they became defined. The inclusion of these additional categories offered greater identification of the issues being investigated.

Data Analysis. Data analysis is a way to discover "patterns, coherent themes, meaningful categories, and new ideas and in general uncovers better understanding of a phenomenon or process" (Suter, 2006, p. 327). "The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind… We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe" (Patton, 2002, p. 278). Data were reviewed after the completion of each semi-structured interview, analyzed, and interpreted into themes and meanings to lay the foundation of codification. Neuman (2003) described the process of data analysis as a means for looking for patterns to explain the goal of the studied phenomena. The analysis of data was devised based on responses collected during semi-structured interviews for both the pilot phase and the main study. From these sources, the emerging themes were categorized and coded. Once the categorization was completed, the data was coded according to the indicators from the literature. This study used an open-coding system to analyze participants' narrative responses line-by-line, phrase-by-phrase, and word-by-word (Creswell, 2003; Suter, 2006).

The study used qualitative data analysis software to evaluate the participants' transcripts. The software provided a systematic analysis of the collected qualitative data. As Patton (2002) stated in his book *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*:

> Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting-what it means for participants to be in the setting. The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (p. 49)

Software was used to analyze the content of the collected data. The analysis identified patterns or similar ideas relevant to the participants' lived experiences and perspectives about the role of Islam as it relates to gender equality for Muslim women. The final analysis led to the development of a report presenting the interpretation of results, limitations, individual insights, and generalizations of the study.

Trustworthiness. Rigor in a study comes from the validity of the research, the reliability of the findings, and the use of triangulation in data collection (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). A valid work must be supported, acceptable, and convincing. Each piece of research adds to their particular discipline and often does so by adhering to the guidelines for proper research. According to Trochim and Donnelly (2008), validity refers to the best estimate of the truth of any proposition or conclusion or inference described in the research. Validity was used to assess the quality of the research conclusions. According to Creswell (2003), validity plays a significant role in a qualitative study in that it is a powerful source used to determine the accuracy of the study's findings. To increase the validity of this study, triangulation was used. Triangulation is the method of using multiple research approaches and methods. Such a technique can help in overcoming the bias and unproductiveness of a single method. It can be applied to both quantitative validation and qualitative validation (Yin, 2003).

Validity and reliability involve checking the status of the data collected to determine if they are valid and reliable (Struwig & Stead, 2001). Internal validity calculates the extent to which the responses from the respondents reflect the same attributes (Fink, 2003). The triangulation technique ensured the validity and reliability of the data gathered through the interview protocol, which asked identical questions to the target sample to determine the integrity of the answers (Fink, 2003). Valid research instruments are paramount to collection of reliable data (Polit & Beck, 2004). The researcher validated the questions in the interview protocol before the commencement of data collection. Preliminary interviews were conducted among five participants during the pilot phase to identify any difficulties that may affect the participants' answers and feedback. The validation exercise also identified ambiguous questions which the participants found difficult to understand. The identified questions were reworded in a manner that best reflects the participants' level of understanding and comprehension before the implementation of the main study.

Reliability refers to the measurement of the quality of the data collected in any research (Behling & Law, 2006). Reliability is a measurement of the consistency of the data with the research background, and is also a measurement of the suitability of the data for analysis (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). This qualitative research study focused on the perspectives of a group of individuals, as Merriam (1998) suggested, "Qualitative research assumes that there in are multiple realities; that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception" (p. 17). Polkinghorne (2005) proposed that in qualitative research, the collection of data must provide evidence for the perspective under investigation, which provides an opportunity to explore the themes arising throughout the data.

Methodological Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations. During the process of this phenomenological research study, the researcher was aware that several assumptions may arise:

1. Participants' essence will become the defining characteristic of the research study.
2. Participants will have their own thoughts, interpretations and meaning of their lived experience.
3. All participants are seeking gender equality within Islam.
4. The participants will answer all the interview questions openly and honestly.

There are some limitations and delimitations to this phenomenological research study. The research study is limited to its findings in the following ways:

1. A limitation of this phenomenological study may exist in the means of sampling. If the sample size is too small, it may be difficult to find prominent patterns and themes from the data.
2. The instrument used to collect data may inhibit the researcher's ability to conduct a thorough analysis of the results. The researcher may regret not including a specific leading questions that, in retrospect, could have assisted in elucidating detailed descriptions of a particular lived experience that can emerge later in the research study.
3. Self-reporting data is limited as it can only be independently verified, meaning that the researcher has to take what participants say at face value.

The phenomenological research study is also delimited in its findings in the following ways:

1. The research study included only participants that matched the selection criteria established for the study. The criteria for selected was exclusive to only Muslim women ages 18 and over.
2. Only Muslim women ages 18 and over who speak and understand English will participate in this research study, as the researcher is only fluent in English. Procuring a translator would be time-consuming and costly and would not necessarily guarantee accuracy in data.

Ethical Assurances. To ensure ethical assurance is maintained, the researcher contacted each participant to discuss the proposed research study. The researcher also informed participants that their participation was voluntary and they were not obligated to remain in the research study. The researcher was obligated to ensure that each participant was protected from harm, risk, or retribution during the research study. In addition, the researcher was also required to give each participant an Informed Consent Agreement (see Appendix A) that comprehensively explained the nature and purpose of the research study (Mauthner, Birch, Jessop, & Miller, 2008). Lastly, privacy was assured to participants via confidentiality and anonymity. Confidentiality of all information, findings, and results from the research study will be stored for a period of time and will only be shared with the researcher's Dissertation Committee and Internal Review Board at Nova Southeastern University. The data will be anonymous to protect the participants in the research study. Data will be kept in a password-protected file and eventually deleted after a period of three years. Hardcopies of data will be secured in a locked and secure location in the researcher's possession.

Reflexivity/Desired Outcomes. In an effort to present the information and lived experiences of Muslim women learned while conducting this phenomenological research study, the researcher reflected upon the ways in which the experiences, beliefs, and personal perspectives of the participants have contributed to promoting gender equality within Islam. The researcher also took great care not to silence the voices of the participants, as well as not to give them too much voice in the written document. As a way of self-monitoring and self-reflecting throughout the research study, the researcher kept a log, a journal, and/or a diary to avoid any and all possible biases and prejudices incurred during the research study. The use of these self-monitoring and self-reflecting techniques and devices allowed the researcher to open her mind to new and exciting ideas, epiphanies, and experiences while not concentrating on pre-given frameworks.

The desired outcome and contribution of this phenomenological research study is to narrow the literature gap on Muslim women and gender equality as it relates to Islam. Another desired outcome and/or contribution of this phenomenological research study involves giving Muslim women a forum through which to increase gender equality via reinterpretations of Quranic religious passages from a female perspective. In the end, the desired outcome or contribution should bring about economic, political, and social changes in the lives of Muslim women within society.

Summary

Chapter three discussed the research methodology that was employed in the qualitative research study, which is that of a phenomenological research design. Also included in chapter three is information on the data collection process as well as data analyses, which included identifying recurring patterns and themes from the answers collected from participants' audio-taped, semi-structured interviews. Finally, this chapter discussed the appropriateness of the research design, the population, assumptions and limitations, and ethical assurances. The following chapter presents the results for this study, where they will be examined and assessed.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of Muslim women seeking gender equality using an Islamic framework. The objective was to better understand how the lived experiences of Muslim women would provide insight on their struggle against patriarchy and male dominated religious interpretations. In the previous chapter, I described the pilot phase and results, the research design, and methodology used in this study. The purpose of this chapter is to report the results and findings from the narrative data gathered and transcribed from fifteen Muslim women.

Rossman and Rallis (1998) describe the goal of phenomenological research as to "seek to understand the lived experience of a small number of people" (p. 68). Selecting passages from interviews to create individual profiles of participants is a laborious and complex process, thus for the researcher the difficulty is in ensuring each participant's voice was heard and her lived experiences understood from her perspective. The passages also provide a comprehensive detail of how Muslim women live their daily lives under the influence of Islam, how they use an Islamic framework to bring about gender equality, and describe how reinterpreting religious passages from a holistic and female perspective can improve treatment of Muslim women within their respective communities.

Data Analysis Methodology

Upon reviewing the literature in chapter two, interviewing fifteen Muslim women, and compiling field notes, a preliminary set of codes were established for the initial deductive analysis phase. Using a deductive approach, narrative data was coded, analyzed, and organized using the philosophical phenomenological method comprised of four intertwining steps: 1) the epoche, 2) phenomenological reduction, 3) imaginative variation, and 4) synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). The following describes Moustakas' four steps. The first step, the epoche, involved writing down predispositions and prejudices in an attempt to bracket any personal biases which could hinder the researcher from appreciating the lived experiences of the participants in this research study. Phenomenological reduction, the second step, has several phases. Initially, all pre-conceived notions were set aside. Next, equal value was given to each statement and irrelevant statements were deleted. Then, the statements were grouped into themes. Finally, a textural description was developed by repeating a pattern of looking and describing. The third step, imaginative variation, sought the fundamental meaning of the phenomenon by constructing structural themes. The final step synthesized all of the textural and structural descriptions together into a combined statement of the essences. To gain a thorough understanding of Islam's influence on Muslim women, this phenomenological research study was based on the following overarching primary research question: What are the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women seeking gender equality via an Islamic theoretical (Kalam) framework?

A qualitative approach to this phenomenological research study presented a rich description of Muslim women's lived experiences to accurately describe the phenomenon. Each Muslim woman was over the age of eighteen and practicing Islam on a regular basis. Data was collected through in-depth, audio-recorded interviews using a semi-structure interview protocol containing ideal and leading questions from fifteen Muslim women from various domestic and international geographical locations. The protocol utilized during the semi-structured in-depth interviews with voluntary participants can be found in

Appendix E of this research study. The demographics and characteristics of participants in the main study can be viewed in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographics of Muslim Women in Main Study

Pseudonym	Location	Sect	Age	Nationality	Years Practice	Socio-Economic	Education Obtained	Convert	Lived in the Middle East Region
Participant A	Toronto, Canada	Don't Prescribe	65	Canadian	65	Middle Class	University Graduate	No	Yes
Participant B	Southeast USA	Sunni	28	African American	8	Lower Class	GED	No	No
Participant C	Southeast USA	Guidance of the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad	50	Black	23	Middle Class	2 years of full class school	Yes	No
Participant D	Newark, Delaware	Sunni	43	American	17	Middle Class	Masters	Yes	No
Participant E	New Jersey	Just a Muslim	68	American	26	Middle Class	2 years of college	No	No
Participant F	Chicago	Sunni	21	American-Pakistani	21	Middle Class	High School Diploma	No	No
Participant G	Northern Virginia	Sunni	36	American	36	Middle Class	Bachelors	No	No
Participant H	New York City	Sunni	55	African American/Native American	33	Middle Class	M.D.	Yes	No
Participant I	Virginia Beach, VA	Just a Muslim	29	American	3	Middle Class	Bachelors	Yes	No
Participant J	New York	Hanafi	19	Turkish	19	Middle Class	Senior in college	No	No

Data Analysis Results

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was research and analyzes how Muslim women describe their need to promote gender equality via an Islamic framework, the influence Islam has on their lives, and how participation in Islamic scholarship helps to promote better treatment of Muslim women via re-reading and re-interpretations of religious passages. Further, this study was to explore how Muslim women's lived experiences help to create their identity and inclusion in the public sphere.

In this chapter, I present the categories identified in this phenomenological research study using selections from the participants' semi-structured interviews. I also illustrate how the daily lives and activities of the participants are influenced by Islam and its affect in each theme. Not every participant discussed every category succinctly as responses depended on the how long the participant had been practicing Islam and her familiarity with Islam. The ranges of selections are intended to allow the maximum number of participants' voices to be represented, as well as to represent the diversity of topics embodied in the emergent themes. Eleven major themes related to the lived experiences of Muslim women emerged with the analysis of data. I have labeled the themes as follows: 1) Religious Consciousness, 2) Islam as a Religion, 3) Islamic Tenet/Principle, 4) Gender Equality, 5) Islamic Covering, 6) Religious Activities, 7) Muslim Women Roles, 8) Public and Private Treatment, 9) Western Muslim Women vs. Muslim Women in majority Islamic societies, 10) Fundamentalism, and 11) Voice and Expectations. The aforementioned themes were identified because they appeared to be recurring and prominent throughout the participants' described lived experiences. Other categories emerged, but were not salient across the diverse participants.

This chapter is structured to present each theme and where appropriate, sub-themes are included which were developed as a result of my analysis of the data. I have chosen selections from the semi-structured interviews that best illustrate participants' lived experiences and provide examples for the sub-themes within each theme.

Religious Consciousness

The participants in this phenomenological research study expressed a gap between their understanding of Islam as a religion and their knowledge that Islam was their ideal religion of choice. It was clear from the data that participants' explanations varied depending on her geographical location, age, years practicing Islam, socioeconomic status, and level of education. The descriptions, however, demonstrate how participants recognized, defined, and experienced their awareness. The commonality found among the participants is "Islam is a way of life" and "encompasses every aspect of my life." The participants shared many similarities regarding their struggles in understanding the meaning of Islam and how influential Islam was in their daily lives. I have chosen to share the participants' descriptions of their awareness in order to provide a diverse depiction of the participants' religious consciousness.

Participant A stated, "That's an excellent question." She further indicated she was born in a Muslim family and grew up as an automatic Muslim and practiced the Five Pillars of her faith without understanding what they meant. She commented, "this was…you know, ritualistic, if you know what I mean." Participant A went on to elaborate on her experience: "Because Arabic was not my first language, I did not know even the meaning of the prayers that I was performing and they were never taught to me. But …some were taught to me…as a dogma. To read the Qur'an in Arabic, to read my prayers in Arabic, but not really understand." Participant A's first awareness that she needed to know more about her faith came when she came to Canada. As a mother of two sons and a husband from a different stream of Islam, Participant A stated "her sons were always questioning us". And because her two sons asked the question why, Participant A and her husband felt they "needed to learn the answers and relearn the faith and spiritual message of the faith." It was at this time Participant A "really embraced the message of my faith truly."

Participant B revealed "I was actually a Christian, I was brought up in church" before converting to Islam eight years ago. For her it was the "animosity of the religion" that made her look at other religions. She stated: "a friend of mine introduced me to a book called Islam for Dummies. So I read the book. And once I started reading it, I couldn't put it down. I basically read straight through the book. And after that I decided that I wanted to begin taking classes. You know I was interested in the religion from there."

The first response from Participant C, a convert, was "Let's see…good question." She fully accepted Islam around 1991. She was first introduced to Islam as a concept and didn't embrace it right away. She admitted that "basically out of ignorance", she didn't know much about Islam. She thought "they were people who didn't believe in Jesus Christ", so she didn't want to hear anything about it. However, once she started researching for herself, she started to see a lot of common factors. She readily admitted that "what she had assumed recently about it, about people not believing in Jesus Christ, which was all false. It's just not observed the same way Christians observes it or looks at it." One question she asked about the Bible centered on "Who was King James and why was he allowed to make a version of the original scriptures?"

Participant D converted to Islam seventeen years ago. She first realized Islam was the religion for her while in college. During her teen years, Participant D stated, "I became a pretty devout atheist, and as I started learning more, actually biology and start looking at nature, I became a little more agnostic in my viewpoints." Upon taking an anthropology class in college, in which she was required to learn about Muslims, Participant D started "attending study groups and reading up on how the treatment of women in Islam was supposed to be, and it seemed to kind of make sense with some of my thoughts and feelings on things. So, I became a Muslim maybe six months after that."

Participant E converted in 1976 "to please my husband's family." She stated that her husband "wasn't very religious, but his father and his brother were, and I knew that if I was a non-Muslim they would give him a hard time. So my original reason for converting was just so that I could please them." At this time in her life, Participant E admitted "I wasn't really believing in anything. I was kind of agnostic, even though my own personal background was very liberal Judaism, and then I also was Christian for a while, so I've been everything." She first started to realize that Islam was the real, true religion, when "we started socializing with a lot of different Muslim people, mostly Egyptians from my husband's country originally but all living here in the US." She started to read books and talk to people and said it "was a gradual process."

Participant F was in high school "when I kind of took that on and decided that that's what I wanted to actively be." She remembered a particular situation –"when it was mentioned that I'm Muslim and a classmate said, "Why are you a Muslim?" She goes on to say that before she could respond, a friend of hers said, "Because she's from Pakistan" and people dispersed before she had a chance to say anything. She readily admits she thought about the occurrence for a long time. Participant F thought to herself, “that’s an awfully stupid reason to be Muslim.” It was at this moment she realized she needed “to discover the faith for myself and decide if it was something I wanted. I realized I needed a better reason for being Muslim.”

Raised a Muslim, Participant G loves Islam. As a youth, she was very active in a youth group and a Muslim Student Association. As a history major, she stated “I was confronted with very different views of Islam which caused me to go and examine the religion.” After spending a year examining the religion and learning more, she “came away from that believing more strongly than before. It’s truth to me.”

Prior to reading the autobiography of Malcolm X, Participant H had been looking at different faiths trying to find one she would like better than the Lutheran church. She posited “the Lutheran church wasn’t empowering.” She also stated, “It was with racial, you know overtones and stuff.” It was after reading the autobiography of Malcolm X that Participant H “realized that I definitely wanted to find out more about the faith.”

Participant I, a convert, realized “uh, four years ago, um actually four years ago. I’d say like five years ago and I had an experience and then I had to learn about Islam and actually convert.”

Participant J was born into a Muslim family and realized Islam was the religion she really wanted to practice “like in the seventh grade. I thought I’d decide to wear the head scarf and my mom didn’t really want me to wear it yet because she thought I was too young and if I got bullied I wouldn’t be able to handle it and I told her, ‘No, I want to wear it.’ So I think that was probably when.”

Sub-theme: Qur’anic Verses and their Interpretations Regarding Muslim Women. Data revealed participants believed the Qur’an contains religious passages that posit gender equality for all its adherents; however, time and context has allowed for the distortion of religious interpretations. Participants described challenges in advancing gender equality within Islam when Qur’anic passages of egalitarianism are continually ignored by patriarchal traditions and cultures.

Participant D:

> “I think it depends where you are. I think that I am very blessed to be an American Muslim because in this country, we don’t have the cultural context of tribal community, and so when American, or even Western Muslims, so Muslim from England, as well, I think when they look at the Qur’an and interpret it in terms of a democratic viewpoint, they see how it really is supported by democracy and supports feminism. So, I think that’s important.”

Participant E:

> “That women are equal to men. There are many…we call them ayah, which is sentences in the Qur’an. The Qur’an is divided up into chapters, and then the different sentences are called ayat, so there are many that says that Allah, God, created women to be the companions of men. The punishments for sins is the same for a man and a woman, so the real Qur’an, and the real religion, the way the Prophet, peace be upon him, practiced it was that men and women are equal. However, different cultures in different countries have interpreted to fit their own mentalities, and that’s not really what Islam is all about.”

Participant H:

> "Okay, what are my thoughts? Um that's a really broad category. Um kind of breakdown to nuts and bolts, um you know, women are, are revered in Islam. Um it's…there's a Hadith that says that heaven lies at the foot of the mother and so if you're not, if you don't cherish women and mothers then you're not abiding by what Allah wants us to do. So from my own personal belief and, and experiences, uh, Islam has been very, um, motivating for me in the sense that I have been allowed to be who I am…Um, in terms of the religious interpretations um, what the religion has been and has always been has been about providing spaces for women. That has been from the beginning from when Prophet Muhammad, when he started the religion he gave women, women rights that they never had and rights to have property, to own things and over the years, over the decades, over the century, this has not been followed in many, in some respects, in some certain cultures."

Participant G:

> "The Qur'an is, is right there in its original form for everyone to read, in its original form and in an accessible language. And the prophet's example is also available in great detail, so, um, everything in those is beautiful to me. Now the way that humans have lived, you know, their understanding of it or just their own lives not always necessarily really based on it, but just their lives as Muslims in the subsequent fourteen hundred years is not always beautiful. Sometimes it's been pretty ugly, but in terms of, um, you know, the religion itself everything in it is beautiful to me."

Participant F:

> “Um (laughs)…There’s obviously been a lot of issue with that in the past, but I think that um, with time, we’re getting a lot of new perspective. I think it’s um, becoming clear what Islam intended, I think. I sort of think there are two different categories to be examined here. One I like to think of as Islam’s view of women is. And the other category would be what Muslims think Islam’s view of women is. The first, I think most Muslims would agree is an unchanging definitive truth. But then, obviously, it’s difficult to determine which interpretation is correct. I have my own idea of what Islam intends for women. I see a lot of Qur’anic passages that emphasize a woman’s place as an equal to a man in the eyes of God. The idea that no human being is superior to another in any respect, except for in their relationship to God, is a basic principle of Islam. And since one’s relationship with God cannot be determined by anyone except by that individual and by God, there is no room for judging or believing any group of people to be superior to another. Including gender equality. There isn’t really any room for dispute here.”

Participant I:

> “Well, I, as far as, um, just parts about women, for instance, what the religion says, I do have a, do have an opinion, how could I have an opinion when these are the words of God, of guidance. I feel like my opinion is to, uh, is just in agreement. It’s like learning about it for what the Qur’an says. Um, and it’s just a matter of understanding that, that knowledge, that divine guidance and practicing

> it. So, I think that everything that's in there is, um, I guess you can say correct and something that should be followed and something that uplifts everybody."

Participant A:

> "Well, there are many interpretations, and that I think is one of the problems. Uhm, the, the interpretations have been done by men for fourteen hundred years, until about three years ago, when the first translation was done by a woman. Now, there are different interpretations, some harsh, some not so harsh, and I believe that the area of women in Islam needs a lot more interpretation, a lot more debate and discussion and some, uh, you know, clearing of passages that seem to be, uhm, promoting violence against women."

All of the aforementioned lived experiences are significant because each participant provided an example in their own words of how they became aware of their religious consciousness and Islam's meaning in their respective lives. Many of the participants' lived experiences revolved around their intimate relationships with themselves and how Islam's influence helped to bring "peace" and closeness to "one God" in their daily lives. Participants further described their religious consciousness and the challenges they have by not understanding Arabic. For all participants, Arabic is not their mother tongue, therefore, grasping a true meaning of the interpretations of Qur'anic passages has been difficult for them, as they became aware of their religious consciousness from exposure, rituals, and traditions. While the participants portrayed an understanding of their gap between understanding Islam as a religion and awareness of their religious consciousness, there still exists an internal and external conflict that challenges their awareness on a daily basis.

The theme Islam as a Religion presents a discussion of the participants' lived experience and how their meaning of Islam influences their daily lives. This section examines how the participants' awareness of their religious consciousness helped to define their meaning of Islam.

Islam as a Religion

Each of the participants discussed what Islam meant to them as a follow up to their awareness of religious consciousness. This is significant, as participants each had a different meaning of Islam and how it influences their lives:

Participant B described Islam's meaning as the following:

> "Islam means that, um, having a belief and realizing that there is only one God and only him is we to worship. And he, uh, you follow in the way of the path of Muhammad, basically looking at Muhammad as, uh, like a type of means as to how one should live their life as a Muslim, um, doing good deeds and things like that. But not to be mistaken as worshipping Muhammad, but only, uh, worshipping one God, Allah."

Participant C:

> "Islam I don't see as a religion, per se. I know a lot of Orthodox are people who are practicing Islam on a totally different level than I'm at. Islam is not something that I look at as not being a religion, it's more so a way of life. I liken it to the Ten Commandments, where you don't steal, you don't do this, you don't do that. Basic fundamental principles as far as being a good person. There is just basic fundamentals that I enjoy knowing of, whether or not I'm one hundred percent on it or not as far as practicing it. As far as the religious factor, no I'm not a religious

> person. I don't see Islam in religious sort of state of mind as a so called Orthodox Muslim would. I reiterate it's a way of life as far as the fundamental principal that you practice or strive to practice. It's just to have peace in your life. It's to try and have some peace in your life. I'm going to attract peace in my life."

Participant F:

> "Um… to me, it means, um, a path towards living life in the most perfect way possible. Oh yeah, I believe it's, it's a path to becoming as close to God as possible and um, which, I think like allows us to live in the happiest way possible. So its happiness, becoming closer to God, um, kind of also like living life in a way that's beneficial to everyone around us, and like living life in a way that's peaceful and harmonious. To me, Islam is an elevation of one's existence towards harmony with goodness."

Participant G:

> "Islam is my foundation and it's my worldview, and its makes complete sense to me. There's nothing that doesn't make sense to me when I look into the full context of any particular situation or teaching. And there are so many things that I find amazing about it. I love and believe in the general principle that one god sent the same basic message through many prophets and that this final religion of Islam completes what came before it. It makes sense to me and, um, it makes me happy."

Participant I:

> "Um to me is a way of life and its means to, for me to submit to what God wants me to do and, um, like do. And he is our creator, he knows best, and so for me, it's sort of a way of life. It's easy to submit to this idea of, of life."

Participant J:

> "Mm-hmm. I think it's kind of like a way of life for me. It's not like something extra, like some people plan their life around like, I don't know, their work or whatever, and I like to plan my life around what Islam tells me to do. So like the five daily prayers for example, I'll plan my life around that really. If there is a like, an Islamic holiday, I like plan my life around that and it's not like something extra for me, it's just a way that I live my life I guess, I don't know."

Islamic Tenet/Principle

The theme Islamic Tenet/Principle discusses what belief took precedent in their lives within the religion of Islam. As aforementioned, Islam has various meaning to the participants, therefore, participants identified and described their lived experiences based on the tenet/principle that had a prominent effect on their lives. In addition, participants' responses detailed how diverse Islam's influence played in their daily lives and lived experiences.

Participants E:

> "Islam has Five Pillars. The first one is called Shahada, and that means the declaration of faith, and you say that you believe that there's one God, and he's only one. He never had a child, and he never was born again. He's been in existence through all eternity. That's the declaration of faith, and you have to say

> it with meaning in your heart. The second one is prayer. The third one is fasting, and that means you fast during the month of Ramadan. The fourth one is called zakat, and that's giving of charity. You must give…it's about two and a half percent of your saved money every year, after all of you expenses, to the poor. The fifth one is the pilgrimage to Mecca, which you must do in your lifetime, if you can afford it. Thank God I have done all those five things and still continue to do the ones that are required on a daily or a yearly basis."

Participant D narrated the following:

> "Well, I think the most important tenet of any religion is the, you know, treating your brother the way you want to be treated or your sister, so I think that's the most important thing of anything. Other than that, there are the Five Pillars which, of course, are all equally important, you know, the fasting, charity, prayer, Shahada. Oh, I did the Hajj. I did the Hajj. We did the Hajj years ago. So, I mean, those are all equally important, but if you look at the other things, I think really just treating other people the way you want to be treated. I think that's true all faiths of everything. I think that's that most important tenet in life."

The theme Islamic Tenet/Principle also revealed that participants, in particular, Participant J believed the Qur'an was the most important tenet/principle: "I think a main, I guess, for me is the Qur'an, really understanding what you're doing and why you're doing it is the main pillar for me, even though it's not like an official pillar of Salat, you know." Participant B described the following when narrating her most important tenet/principle in her life: "All of them are definitely important. I wouldn't be worshipping them if I didn't feel they were important.” She continued by saying, “But I must say to pray. Prayer is, is the biggest because you need prayer. Prayer gives you peace.”

Participant H:

> “Well, the most important principle is that there is only one God and that there’s no other god but Him. And believing that then and realizing that, that he has total control, that that I work and do whatever I’m doing keeping in mind knowing that one, no one can judge me; two, I need to be doing things that that God, Almighty God Allah wants me to do and that are favorable in his eyes so that kind of dictates, you know, no gossiping, you know, no backbiting and of course, no one is perfect so, you know, we all have our failings, but, you know, keeping that in the forefront of my mind and keeping a lot in the forefront during the course of the day, during the course of the year, the month, you know, that guides me as to what I should be doing. So that’s the most important.”

Participant F:

> “Um… I mean, the principle tenet of Islam is worshipping one God, but I think there’s a lot of facets to that that um, kind of seep into the other aspects of one’s life, so…um…One main tenet of that would be, you know, um, treating God’s creations with respect and kindness. Um, another aspect of that would be, like, I guess including yourself, so like, you know, treating yourself with respect and kindness, um, striving to become a better person. I think, I think the basic tenet of Islam is striving to become a better person to please God.”

Lastly, Participant I disclosed, “I am not a scholar, I don’t really know, but for me I think security is the most important principle concerning your faith and your dealings.”

She continued, “And of course to be consistent in what you do. One of the deep satisfactions of the love of Allah, the creator is the good you do consistently no matter how small they are.”

Gender Equality

The fourth theme that emerged from the data was how participants believed Islam promoted gender equality for Muslim women. Analysis from the data revealed the majority of the participants believed Islam promoted gender equality for women within Islam. Participant G narrated:

> “Um, I believe that Islam already does promote very important and very basic rights for women. Um, it does not necessarily see women as exactly the same as men and that is based, you know, on just basic biological differences. For example, that if anyone is going to give birth to a baby, it’s going to be a woman. If anyone’s going to nurse the baby, it’s going to be a woman. Many women want to stay with their babies for a while. I, I do. I live to be with my baby. I enjoy it so much, um, so that involves some protections for me. For example, that my husband has to be the one to provide, um, you know, the basic financial, um, requirements, you know, for us to live. I’m exempt from that. So, um, there are some difference, but most, in most aspects, um, you know, they’re treated as just individual human beings with the same basic rights.

Participant D:

> “I absolutely think it can. When I became Muslim, some of the things that I looked at were the gender issues, and it specifically lays out that women should keep their maiden names, which I didn’t, but it says that women should keep their

> maiden names. Women and men should equally be educated. Women have the right to own property, and these are things that were important to me because in the 1960s and ’70s women in this country fought for these rights, and these rights are actually laid out in the Qur’an and Sunnah for women. So, I think when you’re looking at it from a democratic perspective, a Western perspective, and you see those things in there, you recognize there is great potential for equality between the sexes in Islam.”

Participant C:

> “It depends on the company you keep. I’ll try to be more specific. When you say Islam…there are so many different factions to Islam. They use it as a soapbox. The Sunni and people of that nature. The Arabs, or people that claim to be Arabs, do have sects that remain very oppressive towards women. It’s just sickening, but that’s their culture. That’s what people in those countries, and even here, what they practice that, that’s what they do and that’s what’s accepted. The teachings of Muhammad, no that wouldn’t be the case. However, there are people within the Nation of Islam, men, that aren’t teaching as they claim they are. They have more of an Islam mentality, where they would try to oppress women. They do treat women like underclass citizens.”

Participant B understands the importance of gender equal within Islam:

> “In a sense there’s gender equality because we’re held, uh, as women, we’re held on a pedestal. We’re modest; we’re looked to, like we’re treated like, uh, like goddesses in a sense.”

Participant F:

> "I think it inherently does. I think it's, um, the people who practice it, they kind of, uh…misinterpret it or maybe they intentionally undermine those aspects of it. Islam is perfectly clear in its perspective on equality amongst all human beings. I think my identity as a Muslim nurtures my identity as a feminist. For example, the emphasis with regards to sexuality is primarily on lowering one's gaze. Meaning, thinking of people as people and not sexual objects. Being modest is important too, so that you are not a temptation for others. However, it is made very clear that it is the 'gazer' who is responsible for lowering their gaze. Women are not thought of as temptresses. Instead, it is the man's duty to come to terms with his own sexuality and view women as people. A woman is not responsible for a man's actions towards her."

She goes on to posit:

> "There are many other examples of female empowerment within Islam. The Prophet Muhammad once praised a group of girls for not being shy to gain an education. Most inspiring, in my opinion, is the Prophet Muhammad's marriage to Khadija. She was a widow, much older than him, who was also his employer! To say that Islam discourages women from working or being leaders is completely ignoring this important aspect of the Prophet Muhammad's life. How can we revere their marriage as an example of love and mercy and at the same time, condemn female leaders or women with successful careers? If the Prophet Muhammad fell in love with a woman who was older than himself and not a virgin, how can we justify reducing women to sexual objects?"

Participant A expressed doubt when describing her lived experiences regarding gender equality:

> "Well, that is a wait and see how it will happen. It's a challenge. I think when women are given all their rights, and when women are given equal participation in sitting around the table and debating and discussing, discussing interpretations of the Qur'an, I believe that it is possible, because after. . . in 1400 years ago, Islam came as a message to liberate women; it came into that time as a very, very modern message to stop the burial of newborn girls, and theologically, uhm, it, in theory it gave to Muslim women rights to ask for marriage, divorce, inheritance, uhm, all of this. . It's only through patriarchal societies that those rights have been taken away. If Islam gave these rights to women in its early days, certainly it can come back to that period."

Lastly, Participant J stated, "I think it can be if the right person is interpreting it and explaining it to the rest of the community or the rest of the world. Yes, with conditions."

Sub-theme: Muslim Women Interpreting Qur'anic Passages. Data also revealed participants believed that in order to acquire and/or achieve gender equality within Islam, Muslim women will need to be included in Islamic scholarship. The majority of participants posited the time had come for Muslim women to begin interpreting Qur'anic passages. Using the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha, participants described how Islam, in its infancy, revered Muslim women for their ability to give insight regarding Islam as a religion. It has been via patriarchy that Muslim women have been removed from the status of interpreting Qur'anic passages in the last fourteen hundred years. Currently, Muslim women are beginning to re-interpret Qur'anic passages and challenge the rigidity of what has come to be termed traditional Islam.

Participant C:

> "Yeah of course. Women are the subspecies of men to some men, they don't have to be Muslim me. We work for a male chauvinist. There are many of different place that have this on display or either harbor chauvinistic qualities. If you can read and you have basic comprehension skills then you should be able to interpret what you just read, regardless of your gender. I don't see why that would be egregious for you to do that. That's one of the most ridiculous things I've ever heard, that's not coming from you. What I'm saying is anyone to even just fathom that."

Participant D:

> "There's a long history of women interpreting Qur'anic passages, actually, and, in fact, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, Aisha, one of his wives, the last and the youngest, of course, that's most people talk about. She was one of the main people who we rely upon for how life is lived. So, for instance, it's called the Hadith, or the life of the Prophet and these are guidelines in addition to the Qur'an about how we live, and many Hadiths have come through her. So, there is nothing wrong. In fact, I have several friends in Philadelphia who went to training to be able to interpret the Qur'an. So, Islamic studies for women is actually promoted."

Participant B:

> "Um, yeah, I feel like they, I mean, hmmm, uh, through the eyes of America maybe as we are evolving, but as far as the relationship, uh, I mean as far as the

religion, I'm okay with its putting the man, like leaving, okay, it's making the man responsible for his role as a man. Um, basically why God put him here to be the leader, and um, you know, and I think that's a good thing, for men to recognize their role and be leaders instead of you know, uh, neglecting and letting women, I mean it's all right for women to be leaders, but it's time that they have a strong male role model in the world. I think it's just good."

Participant E:

"It's very difficult…You see, the language of revelation is Arabic, but the Qur'an has been translated into many different languages, but really, only in Arabic can one truly understand it. Now I can read somewhat Arabic but not for meaning, just for the recitations, so when I really want to know what something means, what I do is I have a friend of mine…that you might be interested in interviewing also…She's German convert to Islam, and she reads, writes, and speaks Arabic totally fluently, so when I have a question about an ayah in English, I call her up and then she reads the Arabic book for me. She reads the dissertations on that passage, and then I know that I'm getting the right answer. She would be a really good one for you to contact also."

Participant H:

"It is so important for women scholars to interpret Qur'anic passages because, um, whenever you have somebody interpreting a Qur'anic passage they're always gonna bring their point of view, their own personal thoughts and beliefs, so it's important that, that Qur'an be interpreted by men and women because the thoughts and beliefs of men are different from women and so, the interpretation will be…the words might be different. The basic meanings will be the same but whereas…you know, there's many different words for, you know, one thing. So a female, an interpretation of a female perspective will provide a different flavor in terms of what the person is reading, so I think that."

Participant G:

"Um, yes. It's very important and not just on topics specifically talking about women, but women should be involved in scholarship on the Qur'an and in every other area of academic life. And this does go back to the earliest examples. Um, the prophet's wife, Aisha, was a major source of information about Islam and its practice. And both men and women would come to hear her. So this is part of Islamic history and Islamic tradition and it, it needs to be revived."

Participant I:

"Interpretation, um, I think is something that requires a lot of, uh, academic background, a lot of, it's not just like you said, you read words and you, you find whatever you think it means. There are, we have in our religion, um scholars who have to study in depth like the meaning of, of words, um, because they're in Arabic, the words are, are rich and one word can mean so many things. So when we say interpret, what does that really mean, you know?"

Participant A:

"Oh, I think it is about time they did it. I think it's an excellent idea because the first translation that was done by a woman was a very different translation than the one done by men. Now you may or may not know that Arabic is a very

> complicated language, and every word, every sentence can have a different connotation, depending on uh, one who's translating it, and secondly what comes before, what goes after, the syntax, the grammar. So the translation by the woman is softer, gentler translation and I think that women defi-…educated, enlightened women like Margo Badran and Dr. Amina Wadud and, you know, many others are poised to interpret the Qur'an and they do. Not directly, not in the sense that they have it translated, but uh…I don't know if you've read the book *Gender Jihad* by Dr. Amina Wadud. If you're studying feminism in Islam, you definitely need to read her work."

The aforementioned narratives demonstrate the belief participants have in Islam as a catalyst for gender equality. All of the participants have had an experience similar to those described above at one time or another in their lifetime, even if the experiences varied in meaning. They further establish an understanding of the participants' understanding of the Qur'an's egalitarian message for both men and women, although Participant C cautioned, "It depends on the company you keep…There are so many different factions of Islam." The significance of these narratives shows how Islam's influence and egalitarian message allows Muslim women to demand gender equality via an Islamic framework, theology vs. theology. The following theme discusses Islamic covering for Muslim women and how it has served many purposes when demanding gender equality within Islam.

Islamic Covering

Analysis of data revealed participants' responses varied according to their individual practices, beliefs, traditions, and culture. All of the participants discussed modesty when describing personal experiences. Several participants discussed how they internalized their understanding of cover and its meaning not only for themselves, but for other Muslims as well. The significance is that the participants identified themselves as Muslim, regardless of how other Muslim women dressed.

Participant C:

> "A hijab I wear one on occasion, but usually if I do wear anything on my head it's a Muslim scarf, the design symbolizes Muhammad. I do have other hair pieces that I wear on occasion. Do I cover all the time? No, I don't. I used to years ago, but now I don't. Sometimes I just don't bother at all. I don't go around wearing hot pants, as we used to call them back in the day, or what they call booty cutters, as they call it today. I still go around modestly dressed." She continued by stating, "In Islam for instance, take there are a lot of walking around, mostly women, now walking around wearing lewd clothes I find drawing unnecessary attention to yourself…People that see your beauty while modestly dressed, when I say modest as far as you have to look like a Granny on Beverly Hillbillies, I don't mean that, I would say looking civilized. Appearing as a civilized person, not as a cave dweller for a lack of a better way of saying it. You don't have to unclothe and walk around partially nude to get the type of attention you're going to get is not what you were looking for, or what you were hoping to get. How your children perceive you as far as how you carry yourself."

Participant F:

> "Um, okay, so I definitely think that Islam endorses a principle of modesty as a principle, um, but I…I understand that modesty can mean different things to different people. Um, so I think it, it's up to men and women alike what, to decide

what modesty means to them and how much of it they're willing to um, take on in time. So like, for example, a sister maybe who doesn't wear the headscarf but thinks that it is necessary and would like to wear it, even that is a step-by-step thing, you know. Maybe, you gradually move into wearing looser clothing, Um, so there is different interpretations of what is necessary, and even within that, there's different steps of people trying to get there. For me, I believe that in the presence of non-Mahram men, only the face, hands, and feet should be visible, and what is covered should be covered loosely, not with tight clothing. However, this only applicable to me. Every Muslim woman has her own idea of what is ideal."

Participant I:

"I think that covering is an obligation mandated by God…And having said that, if God asked you to do something, he, he knows what. He knows why you should do it and why it's better for you, so the first and foremost that any woman, all women should cover. You know, everything in our religion is a test, you know, God gives you a set of do's and don'ts and whether or not you follow it is a test of your faith and your commitment to him. So no one's going to go around and like, you know, there's no police, but you know, we kind of like to choose our level of practice, our level of obedience and I think it should be that way."

Participant J:

"I think if the Muslim women wants to do it for themselves, then other people shouldn't be commenting on it, you know, about how long it is or how oppressive it is, because, for me, my headscarf is not oppressive. It is completely the

> opposite. I feel freer when I wear it. I feel like, you know, it's a part of my identity. When people see me, they are like, 'Oh, okay, she's Muslim.' So they treat me accordingly, you know. They don't go hug me or whatever, because Muslim women can't have contact or Muslims can't have contact between opposite genders, so like, it's just makes life a lot easier, like how people approach me or how people talk to me, stuff like that. And it's like a sense of freedom rather than sense of oppression to me, but it's different for every Muslim woman, and I think everyone has to look within their hearts and make that decision for themselves and make sure that, you know, they're doing it for the right reason, because, you know, they want to do it."

Participant G:

> "Um, I have no problem with it. I, I wear a scarf and, um, a cover, and I do believe that, again, it's because of the differences in our bodies and, um, you know, when we're in public we want to interact based on only our minds and our personalities and what we have to offer. We don't want to, to be, um, judged or evaluated by our bodies and that's my view of it. I don't want to be judged on my body whether it's good or bad, um, it's nobody business. It's just mine and my family's business."

Participant H:

> "Okay, so um this one first…first and foremost, there is no compulsion in Islam and so, as I said before, only Allah can judge me and only Allah can judge everybody else. So in terms of what a muslimah wears we abide by the belief that we should be modest. Now that's gonna be different in different societies and a

> woman should wear what she feels comfortable with and what she feels is modest. So if she's abiding by that then no one can judge her for what she's doing. However, what somebody feels as modest in their terms is not modesty in somebody else's terms and the basic thing is that we're not calling attention to ourselves. So if you have a society where everybody wears colorful things and you have women who then wears the Niqab and are all in black well, that's gonna drew attention to themselves. So while their dress is modest, they are drawing attention to themselves so, you know, the whole debate about what's permissible and what's not has to be left to that muslimah's discretion."

Participant A:

> "I'm uh...you know there is no such thing as an Islamic quote unquote Islamic dress, because when Islam first spread through the world, it…you know, Muslims went to many different countries and they embraced a lot of the cultural practices of those countries. In the Qur'an we are told to dress modestly, so to me this means not to dress sexually provocatively. I don't cover my hair because I have not been able to find in the Qur'an after many, many, many readings the word 'hair', to cover your hair. There is a ver…in a verse, which speaks about the wives of the Prophet drawing their cloaks around their chests, around their breasts. So I totally respected the idea of modesty, and it's there in the Qur'an for both men and women, by the way, so I dress modestly, but I wear Western dress, and I don't cover my hair."

Participant E:

> “They need to have their heads covered, and they need to have loose clothing. Can’t be tight, nothing real tight or showing shape of the body or any skin other than face and hands. However, if an individual woman chooses not to do that, that’s between her and Allah, and I’m not going to judge them, because there might be somebody that’s not covered that’s better than people that are covered.”

Participant D:

> “Well, I wear hijab. It’s hard sometimes, but even in Islam there’s no compulsion in religion, so I don’t think there’s anything wrong with women choosing not to wear it. I chose to wear it because coming from the path that I did, I think it was a way for me to define who I was when I decided to become Muslim. So, for me, I think it is a positive choice. I think it’s a good choice. I also looked at, you know, Hasidic Jewish women do this, nuns do this, Amish women cover, so it is in the script of the Old Testament, and I believe the New Testament, so it’s not a new idea for women to cover, it’s just the style of covering, and that changes from country to country, culture to culture, religion to religion, so it’s there for everybody. If everybody chooses not to do it, I think that’s fine too.”

The participants describe themselves as members of a religion that allows them to express themselves freely, as long as they exhibit modesty at all times. The diversity in Islamic covering demonstrates that participants experience Islam differently, yet all believe the Qur’an posits modesty in various forms.

Religious Activities

In this theme, analysis of data revealed participants were active in religious and social activities. Analysis also identified how participants differentiated between religious and social activities and their application in their daily lives. Participants engaged in religious and social activities according to time, location, family obligations, and accessibility to a mosque.

Participant A:

> "Well, it depends on what you mean by religious activities. There are personal religious activities and then there are social religious activities. Uh, the personal religious activities, which are the prayers and the chanting, or the reading of the Qur'an, I participate in those every day. I mean, I, I practice them every day. Uh, when you know, I can't fast in the month of Ramadan right now because I'm a diabetic, but when I was healthier I used to fast. I've been on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Uh, I pay charity which is…There are Five Pillars of the Faith. So, all of those I practice on a regular basis. In terms of the social phenomena of going to the mosque, uh, I go there whenever I can; because Friday is a working day in Canada, and uh …it's…you can't take the day off. So whenever we can, we go to the mosque. I would say maybe once a month."

Participant F:

> "So um, I pray the five prayers a day. Um, I go to Jumuah prayers when I can. Um, a lot of times, I have classes during that time so I can't go. Um, I fast during Ramadan. I go to religious discussions when I can. I um…I think…I mean, for me primarily, praying five times a day."

Participant G:

> "Individually at least five times a day I pray, and, um, as a group I would say several times a month. Yes, um, I have kids so at this point in my life a lot of my social activities revolve around them. Some of them are through the mosque, they go to scouts there, and I go and socialize with the people there during that time. They go to martial arts, um, and I, you know, may interact with people at that time. I, I don't, um, do a whole lot right now. I'm kind of lacking in hobbies (laughs), but, but I do take part and I'm happy there."

Participant H:

> "Well, in terms of religious activity, you know, it's every day because I'm praying at least five times a day. I go to Jumuah every week. Um, I always am um at the masjid for different events but I also do, you know, community works so social events. Um, yeah, I do, I do community work so I guess that will include social events in a Muslim community."

Participant E:

> "Every single day. Five prayers a day, every single day. Then for the month of Ramadan, which is coming up in about a week, we fast for thirty days from before sunrise until sundown, which in the summertime means like 8:30 at night. It's very, very, very difficult thing for me, but it's a sacrifice, and it is required. Each year God helps me get through it, even though each year I say, 'I don't know how I'm going to do it,' but I do it."

Participant D:

> "Well, I pray regularly every day. Of course, Ramadan is coming up, so we do that. As far as going to the mosque and masjid, I don't go very often. I used to go more to halaqas, which are study circles, when I first became Muslim. During the school year it gets busy, so I don't do much, and, in all honesty, I don't have kids, and we struggled for a long time, and I find that in many religious communities, if you're single at our age, it's a little harder to relate because everybody's playing with their kids. So, I refrain, but it's more my, it's not the way I felt treated there, it's that I felt excluded being childless."

Several participants described their pilgrimage to Mecca as enlightening, conflicting, and scary at the same time.

Participant E described her experiences as follows:

> "It was amazing to see the Kaaba, the place that we all turn in prayer to when we pray to see it for the first time. I remember crying my brains out, I was hysterical crying the first time I saw it. But Hajj is a very intense process where you must do certain rituals, so the amount of spirituality that you can actually feel is very debatable."

Participant D described her experience as:

> "When you go to Hajj, it's a beautiful thing because there are people from every single country and every single culture in the world. You see Asians, Africans, Europeans, everything. There's like every flag in the world at this place. People are praying side by side and when you are in Mecca, there is only male to the front, women to the back praying. Everybody is praying side by side, so that to me was what the beauty of Islam is. You're here with all these people that you

> don’t know and even though we can’t communicate in our languages, because I would be next to someone who spoke no English, we all know of the language of prayer, and, so, it’s like everybody from around the world is praying in one voice and, to me, that was the beautiful thing.”

Participant D goes on to describe what was most disheartening to her while in Mecca:

> “Racism extends everywhere and I’m a white Muslim and, apparently, that’s a pretty attractive thing. So when we were over there I remember coming into the airport and, of course, I’m the younger, thinner, cuter, right. So at the airport, I remember the guy said, ‘Are there more like you in America?’ and I said, ‘Well, I’m with a whole bunch of people’ and mind you, most of them were either foreign who are now American or African-American. We’re a whole bunch of Americans. We’re all here, and they’re like, ‘No, no’ and they wanted to know how many white Muslims were with me, and I thought that was a little disturbing because one of the things in Islam is that we’re not supposed to be looking at race, and we’re supposed to be open to the whole Umma, the whole community, and I’m in Hajj and you’re looking at the whole community, and you’re seeing people from every culture, helping each other, and it was a beautiful thing, and to have that kind of, it kind of bothered me a little, because I think that was my first real view that, ‘Wow’, even in the community where you would not expect it to be racist, it’s here. And that was a little sad.”

Participant C discussed why she does not partake in the hajj to Mecca in the following narrative:

> "What's going on with that is the pilgrimage per se, that's not something that I feel like that is something I need to do. That's over there in the Arab world and that's something that doesn't concern me, not at all. Those white Muslims I don't deal with them, they don't deal with me. In their community, they're serving alcohol, they sell drugs, they sell pork and things like that. They're compromising when it comes to the principles of Islam. So they ae no concern of mine. I don't have a concern or any desire to make a pilgrimage to Mecca or kiss a black stone because that's idol worshipping. That is something that I don't do."

She goes on to discuss prayer and its meaning in her life:

> "Prayer as far as that I see that as meditative. Something that you give yourself before, and if you are saying something in prayer, not just internalizing. Where you actually hear yourself in your prayer. That is more so for you, and whatever it is that you're saying, as far as in the prayer, that is something for you to manifest. No God is just going to bring down on you. No praying to somebody I don't know, somebody I can't see, somebody I can't touch, somebody I can't have a dialog with, somebody that may or may not hear what I'm saying and they are not in the room with me."

The aforementioned described lived experiences illustrate how participants' involvement in religious and social activities expanded and collapsed at times. Participants further demonstrated how the euphoria of Islam encapsulated their lives, yet that exhilaration was thwarted by conflicting ideologies within a religion Muslims believe is perfect. Islam, as a religion, is dynamic and ever-changing; however, participants revealed the Five Pillars of Faith are static and non-negotiable when it comes to their beliefs. The next theme discusses the many roles Muslim women partake in on a daily basis.

Muslim Women Roles

The majority of the participants in this phenomenological research study recognized that their lives revolved around the roles they occupied depending on culture, traditions, and role of religion. Participants discussed their varying roles and how these roles defined their daily lives as shown in the examples below:

Participant G:

> "I would describe my role as being a full person using my skill and my talents, my mind and my body to do useful things and also to be able to enjoy the world too."

Participant D:

> "I think our jobs as women, in general, are to be good role models for other women coming up. I feel in this country, in particular, in this culture, that we live in, I like to make sure I am representing a positive image of Muslim women, and I think by being an educator in the public school system, I have a chance to do that. I view myself as kind of a bridge between Islam and the Western world as far as that because I , wearing hijab, people stop me often times on the street no matter where I go, and I'm not afraid to go anywhere because I'm from here. I'm American. So, I've had conversations with people in West Virginia when we worked on the Appalachian Mountain ask me if I was one of those good Muslims or one of those crazy Muslims, and, you know. You get into these conversations with random people, so I view myself as kind of being a bridge to understanding."

Participant F:

> "I guess my role in society is to be the best citizen I can be. That would be the aspect of Islam that affects how I interact with people. So I guess Islam encourages me to, you know, like participate actively in um, social and political things, although I'm not really good at that. I'm not as uh, involved as I should be, but I think that's definitely a huge part of what a Muslim woman ought to be. Islam encourages all of its followers, including Muslim women to speak out on social justice issues and ways to um, better the circumstances of their society."

Participant A:

> "Well, I'm an activist. Uhm, I've been an activists all my life. I read a lot; I try to educate myself, uh, with knowledge both of my faith and other faiths and everything around me. Uhm, I would like to mentor young women to grow up with, uhm, very confident belief in faith, and, you know, I, I like to educate the younger Muslims that they need to take pride in what they believe, and they must uh examine and learn about the spiritual message of the faith, and what they see around them happening in the world is not necessarily the spiritual message of Islam, and that is the biggest challenge."

Participant H:

> "I'm a leader. I've been able to help the different communities that I've become a part of and I'm often asked to help individuals from a health perspective within this country when there's visitors from other countries. So, I'm also a mother which I really honor that role and it's a very important role for me, um, having a

> now twenty year old daughter. So, and, and on that community and I'm a faithful person, so."

Participant E:

> "Dressing as a Muslim woman but not in any extreme fashion, sort of blending in with society but still being known as a Muslim woman because of the head covering and looser clothes than most wear. I think that the obligation if for a woman who is Muslim to represent Islam decently by the way she dresses and by the way she talks…that by being friendly and outgoing and open to anybody who would ask questions in a respectful way. We're ambassadors to Islam."

Participant J:

> "I think my role as a Muslim woman is empowering other women, because I see a lot of people who don't understand or interpret Islam and Islam's rules the way that I do, and I try to show them that you can be a Muslim woman and acts of defiance, but I mean, you can be a Muslim and you can be like a biologist, you can be a researcher. You can do all these great things and still be a Muslim woman, because sadly a lot of people don't see it like that, and I try to show them, you can be religious and you can be I guess in the business world at the same time. You can be both. Islam isn't a restriction on your potential and rather like its empowerment of your potential. It forces me to even be a better person. It motivates me to be someone in that world I'm just like an educator and empowerer kind of… this is how I see myself in the Islamic world or in the Islamic women in the community."

Participant I:

> "I feel my role is that of helping all Muslim women in, um, raising our children and providing something, something special from their homes, like to make them feel, um, warm and good in their own home so that, you know, their husbands can go out, um, and be happy also."

These examples illustrate how the participants have navigated and defined their roles in society. Although elucidating defined roles from the participants helped to demonstrate diversity within society, it required a great deal of trust and self-disclosure on the part of the participants. The above examples also highlight how participants' social roles are influenced by the religion of Islam. In this section, participants provided an assortment of examples demonstrating their roles within society. For the participants, identifying their role in society helps to ensure Muslim women will continue to have role models to follow in years to come.

Public and Private Treatment

Analysis of data revealed the treatment of women, according to participants, depended on their occupation, geographical location, level of education, traditions, and culture. The participants described their lived experiences in terms of equality, while others described their experiences as exclusion:

Participant E:

> "I really. . . . Allhamidullilah, which means 'Thank God' in Arabic. . . . I really haven't experience a whole lot of prejudice. It could be because I'm American and I'm white, and as soon as I open my mouth, they identify with me as one of them." She also compared various times of her life when she dressed extreme

> (“Boy did I get looks”) versus when she started dressing moderately (“I encountered nothing but respect”).

Participant D experience revolved around her location and its diversity:

> “We are very lucky to live where we do on the East Coast because there’s so much diversity here. I feel that in the external environment, I’m treated pretty well. . . . and I’ve never had any problems.” However, she lamented that “within the Muslim community it can vary from location to location because the Muslim community still consists of many groups of people. Sometimes certain communities grow larger than others and then the mosques become areas that seem to be very ethnocentric.”

Participant J “definitely feels equal:

> “I feel like my parents are very, I don’t know, I don’t want to say ‘modern’, I feel like they understand the Islamic world as it was meant to be in the Prophet’s time, you know, women and men are equal.” She describes how “my brother is eleven years old and they’ll make him do cleaning and cooking just as much, probably more than they make me. . . . My dad will cook some days. . . . My dad will vacuum. So it’s like gender roles they don’t exist, just like I feel gender roles aren’t consistent with Islam.”

Participant G described her treatment in both her private and public sphere, paying particular attention to the traditional gender roles practiced by her in-laws:

> “In my private sphere, um, my husband treats me with respect although we don’t always agree on our roles in the house. He was not raised in America. His parents

> were raised in a small village in another country and they had very traditional gender roles." She continues, "Okay so in the public sphere I, I haven't always like the way women are excluded and pushed aside at some mosques…. Um, but I do really love the one I attend now. Women are very involved and they're active, and I feel that I'm treated with respect.

Participant H indicated:

> "Um it depends on whether I'm you know, viewed as a Muslim woman, a muslimah versus a female physician versus a mother. …The many different roles that I have versus a businesswoman." She continued, "Now in terms of treatment I received by male members that have varied based on their culture identity."

Participant A detailed treatment while living in a patriarchal society in Pakistan. Her experience included the exclusion of her mother and her exclusion from sports.

> "Well, I grew up uhm in Pakistan and these are patriarchal societies. All decisions are made by the men. I never saw my mother being taken into consultation about decisions. My brother would have more privileges than a girl." She also discussed her reasons for rebelling against patriarchy. "In fact that was my personal challenge growing up because I wanted to do all the things the boys did…. I've seen the patriarchy…that's why I rebelled against it. In her public life, Participant A disclosed, "Uhm, in my public life, because I'm an activist, I find that Muslim men are quite uptight about me. They don't easily accept the idea of a liberated, progressive, eloquent, outspoken Muslim woman."

After discussion of treatment within Islam, several participants spoke of their assimilation into Muslim communities upon converting to Islam. Participant D described how her conversion and transition to Islam met with contrasting emotions and acceptance within the community:

> "Initially it was not a hard adjustment because initially when I became a Muslim the group of people that I met and associated with were American Muslims who also had converted. I found when I started interacting more with Muslims, I become more like proud of being American….I became more staunch American. Now when I got married….My in-laws are Egyptians….They would use the word 'American' and 'Kuffar', or 'non-believer' simultaneously, and I found that very offensive because Islam is not against America, and so to associate those two terms was horrible to me. So, I would get into arguments."

Participant D felt experiences reflected the ever present strain in relationships between believers and non-believers of Islam. Participant D expressed a flood of emotions as she struggled to adjust within a religion she felt empowered her with all the natural rights a woman was entitled to enjoy. Participant I, a convert, also described her conversion to Islam. Unlike Participant D, she expressed:

> "There is no difference between us in who we are as Muslim. We practically have the same struggle. We want to raise our children correctly. We want to make our homes as best we can and support our husbands." She continued, "I feel like as a Muslim woman I am more respected. Men, they respect that, um, I'm a virtuous woman. And that, in that, I feel more comfortable."

The participants portrayed their conversions as major thresholds in their lives, although Participant D discussed part of her conversion as a negative experience with residual effects that had a lasting and profound effect on her life. Participant D, however, went on to disclose:

> "Luckily, Allah changed their viewpoint. So the Muslim community also is growing as more of their children become Muslim and more of their children marry converts or non-Muslims, they started recognizing that Americans can be Muslims. They're just not non-believers."

The following theme presents a discussion on treatment of Muslim women residing in Western society versus Muslim women residing in majority Islamic states and/or societies. This section also examines selections of participants in this research study and how they describe the perceived lived experiences of Muslim women living in patriarchal societies.

Western Muslim Women vs. Muslim Women in Majority Islamic Societies

The entire group of participants discussed the barriers they perceived hindered Muslim women in patriarchal societies from appreciating the freedoms most Muslim women enjoy in Western society. Although many of the participants discussed the barriers they experience in their daily lives in regards to equality, assess to Islamic scholarship and consultation, they disclosed they all felt they were given more freedom to practice their religion in non-enticing environs. They further discussed how being a Muslim women in Western society allowed them to practice their religion in diverse and culturally oriented mosques that treated them as equals. Participant G expressed: "I'm very grateful to be a Muslim woman in America where I get to exercise all my rights and, um, practice my religion and be able to do all the things I wanna do." She then gives an example of a friend who was living in Saudi Arabia:

> "She was a young married woman and one time one of your children got hurt. He, um, he spilled hot tea or something on himself, and she was so worried about what her husband would say, that he would get angry and, um, she didn't want to disturb him from what he was doing to, to talk about, you know what happened and get the child help, so she just spent hours trying to soothe the baby and make him feel better. And, you know, finally later on she talked to him and they took him to the doctor, but I was so shocked and horrified to hear this story. I would never hesitate to interrupt my husband. And my husband would never be upset at me for interrupting him. It's just such a whole different mindset that was very shocking to me."

Several participants described their Western society experiences in comparison to their experiences in patriarchal societies as shown in the examples below.

Participant A:

> "Oh, there's a huge difference. I mean, I come from Pakistan. If I did what I am doing in Canada in Pakistan, I would have been hanging from the gallows. Uh, there is no, you know, room for activism by Muslim women today, although I grew up in a society, when I was a young girl, in a very open society, but as fundamentalism and extremism have grown, uh, the voices of women have been stilled. So there is a huge difference, and in fact, the reforms, the education, the different interpretations of the Qur'an are always coming from the Western world, from North America, because here we have the freedom. You know, I came to

> North America because I wanted to have freedom of voice, freedom of choice. I wanted to embrace a liberal democracy where I, as an individual, have the freedom to make decisions for myself."

Participant H:

> "There's a difference um that…at how things happen. I know that for me I've always felt comfortable coming to the masjid. That's how I was…That's how I learned but when I visited various countries around the world, South Africa or you know, many other countries, I mean there wasn't any woman in the masjid and that was very foreign to me. So there are differences and there are differences in different countries and there are differences in different communities within those countries. Um but, you know, it's all about individual practicing and what is important, what you feel is most important thing and so while there may not be a lot of women that come to the masjid in those countries and for some parts a lot of women don't come…who are from those cultures don't come to the masjid when they moved to the United States. You know, there's room for differences and variances and so, you know, I don't feel that it's something…it's something of issue."

Participant J:

> "You know in America we have the opportunity to educate ourselves more. We have the opportunity to understand what's going on in the world more than in some other places, and I do think it offers a more, I guess, diverse or wider world view, other than someone who would be in another country, you know, who only grew up with the Islam that their parents taught them, or something like that. We

> actually have the opportunity to sit down and learn it for themselves. I feel like in America we have more opportunities to understand what we're doing rather than in Turkey."

Participant D:

> "Absolutely, again, there's not supposed to be compulsion in religion, and when you pick a society like Iraq or Iran, and you tell the people, 'You must be Muslim', then that's compulsion, and whenever there's compulsion in religion, people are doing it because they have to, and they never think about it. But I think the same is true here when any person is born into a religion, they never stop and think what it means, that it's never fully part of them."

Participants also discussed the challenges Muslim women in Western society may face from Westerners who may not understand or appreciate their religion. Although participants sympathized with Muslim women in patriarchal societies, they posited there are still many challenges they face on a daily basis as illustrated by Participant J:

> "You're constantly challenged by other people who aren't Muslims who ask you these questions that you never even thought of before. Then you go and research these questions and it kind of roots your belief even deeper because you understand your religion even more. In America, you know, or in a Western society, you're forced to question your own belief on an everyday basis. So if you're not researching, you're not understanding, then you're kind of not…you can't really."

Participants further discussed the challenge of exclusion in Western society mosques as described below.

Participant E:

> "Most mosques are culturally oriented, like there'll be a mosque where most of the people are Pakistani or Indian Muslims, there'll be other mosques where they're mostly Egyptians. There'll be African-American mosques. I have to tell you, though, I have a very good friend who's African American, and I would rather go to her mosque than to any of the Arabic mosques or Pakistanis, because those people, maybe it's because of language barriers…whatever…they have a tendency to be very cliché, and they don't like to include people from other cultures that much."

Participant D:

> "Sometimes certain communities grow larger than others and then the mosques become areas that seem to be very ethnocentric. So, for instance, there's a Turkish mosque now. There's another mosque that's predominately Pakistani, and so, sometimes you feel a little excluded because sometimes it ends up being overtaken by many foreign men who bring their cultural ideas to the mosque, as opposed to being more open. So, the larger mosques that I visited in New Jersey, for instance, they're very open, very welcoming, but these are led mostly by second generation people. So, they're led by basically American Muslims, so it's a very comfortable place to be." She continued, "Sometimes if it's a predominately Egyptian or Pakistani, they tend to be very culturally biased sometimes. Sometimes you feel a little excluded or they're a little strict on the interpretations that most American Muslims don't agree with. African-American mosques are very welcoming, of course, because they're primarily American."

Each of the aforementioned selections demonstrates how the experiences of Muslim women living in Western society influenced their perceptions of how Muslim women are treated in both Western society and majority Islamic societies. The participants deeply expressed their personal experiences which appeared to be authentic and genuine recollections of their beliefs, challenges, and sense of exclusion. The participants further discussed the emotional struggles they had to overcome to fully participate within their religion and make an identity for themselves. The above narratives also give excellent examples of how Muslim women are able to identify their differences, yet serve the same god, Allah.

Fundamentalism

Another theme to emerge from the data was how participants defined the term fundamentalism, which included several examples of extremism. The participants discussed their experiences with internalizing oppression and described how they addressed the psychological and emotional stress the term fundamentalism conjured in their psyche. The participants further discussed how their understanding of Islam, as a religion, and the ideals of those who have hijacked Islam collided. Participants cautioned against aligning Islam with fundamentalism, as the two, a religion and a version of religion, are two separate entities with distinct desired outcomes. The experiences of the some of the participants are expressed in the following examples.

Participant E:

> “I am very, very, very against all of it, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. I’m so happy that Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is now President. I don’t like any extremism in any king of anything, not Jewish extremism, not Born Again

> Christian fundamentalists, not the crazies over there in the Middle East, totally against it."

They expressed the difficulties of believing in a religion in which inhumane treatment of individuals has become an excepted practices of members within Islam.

Participant J:

> " I think it's wrong to term them as Islamic first of all, because they are so far from the Islamic view and I feel like, it's like calling one people when you refer to Islamic fundamentalist. My feeling is for any typed of religion that if they're doing something this terrible, they can only be doing it for themselves, for their own personal gain, because they're not helping anybody else."

Participant H:

> "It's sad, it's very sad when you have any individ--- any group of individuals or individuals per se who uses the name of any entity to exemplify what the person's belief is. So when you have the Islamic extremists who do various things such as Boko Haram or Al Qaeda, any…they're saying they're doing this in the name of Islam but they're really not and it's unfortunate that they get the publicity and then everybody else, all the other billions of Muslims in the world are just ignored. All the good the Muslims have done is just ignored and everybody focuses on the radicalism and the extremism of these individuals and yet then when you look the other way to let's say, the Christian extremists or the, or the Jews, the um the Zionist extremists, I mean they're not treated in the same way in the press and in the public sector that Muslims are. We are treated as second class

> citizens even though the numbers of terrorist attacks worldwide by non-Muslims supersede what has happened by Muslims."

Several participants discussed and described the awareness of repercussions of allowing fundamentalism to exist. They expressed the significance of disallowing their religion from being hijacked and stolen from men who are uneducated and know very little from theological stand point. Their narratives demonstrate how they need to ensure Muslim women and men are properly educated in the religion to foster a better sense of Islam's meaning and egalitarian message.

Participant A:

> "Well, you know that whenever there is a rise in fundamentalism across the board in any faith, the crux of it falls on the women, and unfortunately men pick and choose selective verses which makes, makes them believe that they have power and control over women. In the work that we're doing in activism, they're the ones who perpetuate a lot of injustices on women, so they need to be educated. Like nobody gives them the right to act like God or I mean not even act like God, I would say, act like the Devil. God does not uh, you know, treat people cruelly, but human beings do. So they've taken it upon themselves to be, you know, the powers and the controllers of women, which is not, to me, what God wanted."

Participants defined fundamentalism in various terms, and several participants examined the term succinctly and gave examples of why men have chosen to resist changes that have and will continue to occur within Islam.

Participant G:

> “I don’t like that term because if you look at the fundamentals of Islam there’s moderation there. There’s no extremism and people are thinking of extremism when they use that term. So I prefer you, extremism rather than fundamentalism. So, um, Muslims in general are reluctant to changes in religion because it’s believed to be revealed in its entirety by God. Christianity has a very, um, long and respected history of, of kind of evolving and changing, and Islam is not like that. It’s just like a packaged deal. So people are… they don’t want to change the religion.” She continued to express, “People are resistant to changes that are pushed by other people. A lot of people are uneducated or they’re poorly educated or they’re very deeply steeped in a culture that they believe is the same as religion. And culture runs very deep in people who haven’t been exposed to other cultures. It’s hard to understand, it’s hard to comprehend the idea of doing things in a different way and it seems scandalous. And, you know, some people are just jerks who don’t want to lose power and they don’t want to lose control.”

Participant F:

> “I don’t… I really, I don’t actually really like that phrase. I feel like it implies that Islam needs to be changed with time, and there needs to be like a, like a new Islam. Um, and, I, I don’t…I don’t think it does. I think we just need to understand Islam better, uh, the way it was originally taught-and I think the ‘Muslim fundamentalist’ is probably less close to uh, what Islam fundamentally was then people who probably, you know endorse things like feminism. Today the term fundamentalist is applied to someone who is violent or perhaps doesn’t care

> for women's rights. To me, that is the opposite of what Islam encouraged at its onset, so 'fundamentalist' is a huge misnomer to me."

In the above narratives, participants perceptions of fundamentalism expressed their disdain for a segment within Islam who has decided to forego the original teachings of Islam for personal gains. What participants' narratives exposed was a need for education for all adherents of Islam, as there has been hijacking of the religion by fanatics who use religion to justify maltreatment of Muslim women and men. The narratives also disclosed a magnitude of concern regarding the constructed image of Islam because of terrorist attacks.

Sub-theme: Islamic Law (Shari'a). The sub-theme, Islamic Law (Shari'a), will demonstrate how participants viewed its importance and meaning within their lives. Understanding shari'a is not divine, but man-made; participants discussed how individuals use it to justify continued subjugation of Islam's adherents—Muslim men and Muslim women.

Participant A:

> "Well, shari'a law is first of all not divine, you know; it's man-made law, and shari'a law…I mean, it's a very, very long discussion, which I've been having with media these days, but I'll give you the condensed version, and this is my opinion: that any law that is frozen in time can't be applicable to the 21st Century. It was frozen in time, it is very hostile to women. We see this today in Boko Haram, in Junai, in many Muslim countries. It's hostile towards women and minorities, and uhm, I don't…It's not humane, and anything that is not humane, an anarchic law, has no place in this century.'

She continues:

> "But there is another aspect of it, you know. In the Qur'an, shari'a is mentioned two or three times, and there is means modest moral and ethical guidance. Now of course, we live by moral and ethical guidance, so in some ways shari'a is part of our life, but a benign shari'a. You know, uh, how we as Muslims deal with birth and death and marriage and divorce. All this is part of shari'a, but this is not imposition on anyone else; this is personal law, personal guidance. I mean the Qur'an tells us that anything that we do must be reflected in the compassion and mercy of God, and if we believe God to be compassionate and merciful, we can't implement cruelty in his name on another human being."

Participant J:

> "I think in the past when there was a clear understanding of what Islam was and a lot of people and religion were stronger, I guess, there are things like that in the Ottoman Empire, I believe they have shari'a law and it worked very well for several hundred years, you know. Everyone in the community was happy, but a lot of people who now practice shari'a law or tried to implement shari'a law don't know what they're doing. They don't know the actual rules. They don't know the religion as well, and they, I feel, like they're exploiting some of the perks of Islamic religion, and that's why it's not working, you know. Shari'a law isn't there to just abuse people they don't like, you know. It is a law, so it is a type of…it is a way of life. Just like the constitution or whatever like the supreme court justice in America you know, and there are some advantages and there are some disadvantages and it depends on who's implementing it, how they're

implementing it, why they're implementing it, you know, all of these are important questions to consider. And if the right person is doing it for the right reason, is knowledgeable in the actual religion of Islam and the history of Islam and thing like that, and you know, the community wants it as well, but I think it can be a good thing. But other than that, then I feel like especially in today's society and in the context of how we see them in the news, it's definitely a bad thing, because the people who are trying to implement it aren't doing it for the right reasons. They don't have the appropriate knowledge of Islam or enough knowledge of Islam to be able to implement in an accurate way, that's beneficial to everybody in the society."

Participant F:

"Uh, I mean, I'm…not really. I…I… It's kind of something that was put together by scholars after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, so it's important to know that it's not the source of Islam. It's not Qur'an or hadith. It's interpretation. Um, but I do respect its place um, for those who wish to follow it. I think there's many ways of following. I think people can have different forms of shari'a law that make sense to them. Um, but within, within, uh, what is prescribed by Islam because there's definitely a lot of gray areas, um, and sometimes I think shari'a law fills those gaps, and I think that a lot of times it can be filled in a bunch of different ways. Um, so I think whatever shari'a law is for different people, that's what it is for them…um, as long as it's not outside of what is uh, I guess, the objective understanding of basic Islam. As in, it's never permissible for a woman

> to be married without her consent. That’s objective. It’s not a gray area. Uncertain things, can be determined by what a Muslim feels is right.”

Participant G:

> “Um, okay so I think that’s a natural extension, natural extension of believing in a religious world view that encompasses all aspects of life. It’s a broad code of law that aims to protect human rights and order in society, the same as any code of law. And I think its ultimate goals are justice for people and order in society, and again that’s the same as any other code of law. When you look at every aspect and you really examine it and you look at the content, I don’t find anything to be unfair. I haven’t yet. I find it all to be logical. I find it all to make sense.”

Participant H:

> “Well, you know, the thing about shari’a law that people ask about and they’re all worried about is how shari’a law has been presented in the press and what some entities in the Muslim community worldwide use that to justify what they’re doing. But if you go back to the beginning of when Islam was developed and the use of shari’a law, um, then you find out that how it was back then is not how it’s being utilized today. So if I, if I’m looking at what shari’a law is truly supposed to be about, I have no problems with that. But if I look at what the term shari’a law is used in current, you know, the 20th Century, uh, environment I have concerns as to how the different cultures are using it to justify what they’re doing.”

Participant E:

> "You know what! I can't stand the way America is so paranoid about that. All shari'a law means is that you apply the rules of Islam to your everyday life, but since we're not living in a Muslim society, and to be honest with you, there is not really any Islamic state anywhere in the world that is the way the Prophet wants it to be, including Saudi Arabia… they have their own craziness involved with it. If there really, truly was an Islamic state, which there isn't, it would just mean the implementation of the rules and regulations that the Prophet set down in his Hadiths, his sayings, and what God reveals in the Qur'an. But it's not possible to do it in a non-Islamic state."

Participant D:

> "It's interesting you brought that up because I was speaking with a friend just yesterday about it. I have a friend who's going through a divorce in New York and her husband doesn't want to leave. He loves her very much and did not see the problems coming, and she's done and she's moved out, and Islamically, you know, you go to the Iman, you talk to the Iman and you have a three-month waiting period and that's it, you should be done. And because of New York law, she's having some problems because children are involved and she doesn't want to leave, and so, it's dragging on and on, and her lawyer is telling her it's going to take another year. She was talking to a friend in England, and England allows shari'a in the Muslim community, so that if you had gone to the Iman and said, 'I want the divorce' and the three month time of them living separately was done, she would be divorced now. So, in some aspects, there are some things in shari'a

> that would be good. Now, I don’t know all the intricacies and details of every bit of shari’a, but some of the stuff in shari’a is actually pretty fair. When people talk about dividing up wills and making sure everybody gets a share, I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

The next section discusses who has the right to speak for and about Muslim women. The section also examines the expectations participants have for themselves and other Muslim women in society today. Participants had a great deal to say about how preconceived stereotypes of Muslim women being invisible has made their quest for gender equality hard to achieve in a religion which male-dominated and misogynistic interpretations have served to posit otherwise.

Voice and Expectations

The data provided two themes that allowed the participants to discuss and examine a platform on which Muslim women can attain gender equality via their voice and expectations. Participants further discussed the discrepancies in teaching within Islam and how these discrepancies have contributed to their invisibility in society. A majority of participants in this research study were adamant about speaking for themselves and how the relationship between Islam and its adherents have consequences for how Islam is understood. The following examples describe who the participants feel have a right to speak for and about Muslim women.

Participant F:

> “Um, I think first and foremost, Muslim women should be speaking for themselves, um, but with Muslim women, obviously, there is woman and there is Muslim, and certain issues that Muslim women face will be, you know, females

> issues, and I think obviously, and woman can speak to female issues, so they can speak to those, and Muslim men can also speak to Muslim issues, so um… and I do think that just because you're not a Muslim woman doesn't mean that you don't have insight into the issues surrounding Muslim women. Um, so to me, it doesn't matter whether or not you're a Muslim woman, I mean, if what you're saying is a valid thing to say." She continued, "Which is obviously really hard to, um, determine, you know, like, is… is this something that's actually true for Muslim women or not? Unless you actually ask a Muslim woman but, yeah, I…I feel like it, it's preferable that Muslim women would share their own experiences, but I don't think that there's anything wrong with um, somebody having insight on it for the Muslim women."

Participant J:

> "I think Muslim women first of all, should be able to speak for themselves, and this is again, like very Islamic, the Islamic view of things, you know, in the proper plan is, you know, something learned as children, implies that all to be free to speak for themselves, but this doesn't necessarily mean that men shouldn't be speaking for women at all whatsoever, because sometimes a man who is very knowledgeable can say something that's beneficial for his woman, but overall, women understand women better. They can better express themselves and what's likely best for the women in the community is better than a man probably can. So, in general, I think Muslim women should be speaking for each other, but if a man does who understands their situation well enough, than a man can also speak for Muslim women."

Participant D:

> “I think Muslim women should speak for Muslim women. I think always, always, whatever group is being discussed, they should represent themselves, and it bothers me greatly when any kind of man wants to talk about the importance of Hijab when they don’t have to wear it, or how women should behave when they don’t have to do something. So, I think women should speak for women.”

Participant H:

> “Muslimahs have the right to speak about and for Muslim women and those ae the entities Muslim men who support and honor their mothers and wives and women can help, can speak about them. But really, in terms of speaking for somebody you can only have that person speak for themselves so I believe that Muslim women should be the entities that speak for Muslim women but in terms of speaking about, anybody can do that but speaking about in a supportive nature. I would hope that Muslim men can do that and I would hope that non-Muslim men just like I hope that non-Muslim women could speak about Muslimahs in a positive way.”

Participant E:

> “Any practicing Muslim that wants to. There is no hierarchy in Islam, even for men. There is what’s called the allamah, which means ‘scholars’…There are scholars in Al-Azhar, in Egypt, in Saudi Arabia, but ultimately, nobody, not anybody has the right to speak for Muslim women except for Muslim women themselves.”

All of the participants expressed expectations for Muslim women and why those expectations are important in creating an identity for Muslim women. The influence of Islam has assisted the participants in their religious meaning and this, in turn, has allowed the participants to interpret their experiences and influence their actions. Participants gave salient discussions when describing their expectations for Muslim women as shown below.

Participant A:

> "I…my…first of all, you know, I'm not a scholar. My expectations for the women that I know is that they will educate themselves and enlighten themselves. I'm constantly telling them, 'Read. Don't let anybody tell you what the faith is.' Why should they…you know, this is why we don't have formalized priesthood in Islam, because every human being is endowed with the power to read and understand and implement the faith. They must empower themselves with knowledge so someone can't tell them that, you know, the Qur'an says that you can't ride a bicycle. They need to know, they need to know what the faith is and how it gives them freedom. So they need… the biggest, uh, value for women today is education, and not just secondary education, but education about their faith."

Participant C:

> "Get yourself educated, I expect that. I expect you to be educated. If you're not educated, you make a choice to become educated. Not to just except any old thing that anybody tells you. I'm a big fan of researching, there is nothing wrong with you knowing what you don't know."

Participant D:

> "Well, I'm not sure my expectations for Muslim women are very different from my expectations from women in general or people in general. To be fair, to represent themselves to the best of their ability, be kind to each other, to be supportive."

Participant G:

> "I would like to see Muslim women be full people to use their God-given gifts, and talents, and minds, to respect and love their religion and learn what it teaches, and to stand up for themselves and for what's right. And to enjoy the beauty of this world as we all, um, work for the one that we believe is to come."

Participant J:

> "I want to see Muslim women just, I don't know, like in school or like at work, you know. I feel like a lot of Muslim women and they either finish school and then they end up like staying at home and taking care of the children, which is great, but I would want to see more women in just like more…women in general as well as Muslim women in the professional world. Even in America, there's a lot, there is gender equality, but there is also a lot of gender inequality, even in America. It pushes women away from the idea, like from what they originally wanted to do or what they wish they could do. My expectations just for women to say 'No' to these men and just get out and do what they do, what they love to do, because they want to do it."

Participant I:

> "Muslim women to educate themselves, educate their families, get a better understanding of Islam so that they can practice better, so they can understand what Islam is and they practice it well and they teach their children well and be good representative of Islam."

Participant F:

> "Ah, it, it's hard because um, that's something you struggle with, because you expect Muslim women and Muslim men um, to act a certain way, and so you know, um, to be good Muslims in that sense. And we expect them to be, you know, um…You expect them to treat, you know, everyone with kindness and respect and, you know, not have a bad attitude. I think is kind of something that, at least for me personally, was part of my understanding of what a Muslim is growing up. And I think with time, you know, you learn that it's not possible for all Muslims to really be ideal Muslims all the time, you know. You have to learn that you can't expect, um, anyone to act a certain way really. Um, you can have a certain ideal of how Muslim women should act, but I don't think it's right to impose that on anyone but yourself…I think it's destructive to try and impose your own ideals on other people. What I expect of a Muslim woman applies only to me. Everyone else should be striving to be whatever their ideal is, but that isn't my business. That's between them and God."

In the narratives above participants discussed the expectation of obtaining education for Muslim women. As discussed by the participants, without education Muslim women will have a difficult time creating an identity that will enable them to overcome maltreatment within society. Participants realized attaining an education empowers, encourages, and supports the Muslim women's agenda. In order to alleviate the two step forward, one step backwards syndrome, Muslim women will need to remove the veil of invisibility and obscurity and find a platform to make their voices heard throughout society.

Conclusion

In chapter four the data analysis results and findings of this phenomenological research study were presented. A summary of the discussions, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for further study are presented in chapter five.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Discussion

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated a purposeful sample of ten Muslim women from various and diverse socio-economic backgrounds, nationality, sects, educational levels, and geographical locations. The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to examine and explore the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women and advance an understanding of how they believe Islam as a religion can promote gender equality. A comprehensive review of literature was necessary to reach an understanding of how Islam and its theoretical (Kalam) framework can be used to promote gender equality without separating religion from culture. In order to provide for the possibility that Muslim women via an Islamic theoretical (Kalam) framework could foster gender equality, it was important to develop an interview protocol with the potential for encompassing the totality of Muslim women's lived experiences. The phenomenological study used Microsoft Excel to categorize the collected data and the results demonstrated the emergence of eleven main themes. The research study's participants revealed in one-on-one semi-structured interviews the transpersonal lived experiences of becoming aware of their religious consciousness that contributed to their quest for gender equality via an Islamic theoretical (Kalam) framework.

Although Muslim women have become an invisible population whose voices have traditionally been omitted from the ideological and theoretical (Kalam) frameworks of Islam, this phenomenological research study reveals some practical steps that demonstrate the need to narrow the existing gap of knowledge and literature in understanding Islam and how it can promote gender equality for Muslim women. This phenomenological research study also reveals how the intersection of culture, tradition, patriarchy, and religion can be restrictive of Muslim women’s rights within Islam.

This phenomenological research study utilized the approaches of a literature review, pilot phase, observation, interviews, audio-recording, and transcription to collect data and answer the following primary research and sub-research questions.

With the development of this phenomenological research study, eleven salient themes emerged from the data helped examine and explore the meanings, structures, and essence of the diverse lived experiences of Muslim women in varied geographical locations. Theme one, Religious Consciousness, revealed Muslim women expressed a gap between understanding the religion of Islam and their realization that Islam was their preferred religion of choice. Although Muslim women were currently and actively practicing Islam on a daily basis, it was a personal lived experience that brought an awareness of the religion and its place in their lives. Personal lived experiences ranged from feeling disempowered with Christianity and Judaism to understanding the true meaning of Islam as a religion.

In theme two, Islam as a Religion, Muslim women defined Islam’s meaning and influence in their daily lives according to their level of understanding of the religion. Islam’s meaning was found to be dynamic and ever-changing, as Islam has been an evolutionary process that has given Muslim women an independent legal status for the past fourteen hundred years (Ahmad, 1967). Adapting to different cultures and contexts is what makes Islam dynamic and relevant to Muslim women. Islam, as a religion, is not homogeneous—all Muslims do not behave the same way and hold the same beliefs and ideologies. It is a diverse religion with followers in all corners of the world who understand Islam as a matter of personal practice and ethical and spiritual sustenance.

Theme three, Islamic Tenets/Principles, revealed participants' beliefs and ideologies regarding Islam took on varying degrees of significance and meaning in the lives of Muslim women. Although Islam, as a religion, is found to be dynamic, its tenets/principles have remained static and immutable. The testament of faith (Shahada), "There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God" is central and fundamental to all Muslims (El Fadl, 2005, p. 113), as the oneness of God is believed of all Muslim women and Muslim men.

Theme four, Gender Equality, revealed the majority of participants in this research study believed Islam promoted gender equality for Muslim women. According to Nasr (2003), "Islam is a living reality faced with multiple problems and challenges, but still deeply anchored in the Islamic tradition and the truths that have guided its destiny since the descent of the Qur'anic revelation more than fourteen centuries ago" (pp. 185-186); yet, Muslim women have not been treated as Muslim men's equals. Islamic clerics have imposed a system of inequality, which they have justified by their interpretations of Qur'anic passages and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, even though the Qur'an's egalitarian message guarantees Muslim women equality within Islam. The role of Muslim women has changed significantly in the centuries since Islam's revelation, thus motivating Muslim women to seek gender equality via Islamic theology (Kalam) in order to attain basic human rights.

Theme five, Islamic Covering, revealed participants covered according to their individual practices, beliefs, traditions, and culture. Participants posited the concept of modesty, although modesty varied geographically. Although Islam does not mandate Muslim women to wear Islamic covering, contemporary scholars have made it an obligation. The 'verse of the hijab' (33:53) asks all Muslims to abide by various rules when visiting the Prophet:

> O believers enter not the houses of the Prophet, except leave is given you for a meal, without watching for its hour. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have had the meal, disperse, neither lingering for idle talk; that is hurtful to the Prophet, and he is ashamed before you; but God is not ashamed before the truth. And when you ask his wives for any object, ask them from behind a curtain [hijab]; that is cleaner for your hearts and theirs. It is not for you to hurt God's messenger, neither to marry his wives after him ever, surely, that would be, in God's sight, a monstrous thing. (Arberry, 1996, pp. 127-128)

Consequently, according to Bucar (2012), the 'verse of the hijab', the 'mantle verse' (33:59) and verse 24:30-31 "contains tremendous diversity regarding Islamic covering, especially in regards to what the veil is, who has the duty to veil, and for what reasons" (p. 46). Literature suggests the veil, the emblem of Muslim women's oppression and marginalization, has been rejected by some and considered by others as a tool for emancipation (Cooke, 2000). However, it would be wrong to conclude that all hijab wearing Muslim women are oppressed (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2000).

Theme six, Religious Activities, revealed participants differentiated between religious and social activities and their application in their daily lives. Participation in religious and social activities differed among the participants according to time, location, family obligations, and accessibility to a mosque. Primarily an orthopraxic religion, in which one’s individual actions makes one an observant Muslim, Islam provides Muslim women and Muslim men with a framework for worship. The Five Pillars of Islam—Shahada, Salat, sawm, zakat, and hajj—are not only considered the backbone of the Islamic faith, but serve as a way to teach Muslims how to develop a relationship with God (Nasr, 2003).

Theme seven, Muslim Women Roles, revealed the roles participants in the study identified within society which they took depending on their culture, traditions, and the role of religion in their lives. Haddad and Esposito (1998) argue that for more than a hundred years, Muslim women have been engaged in public debate on their role in a rapidly changing society. Presently, the roles of Muslim women are constantly changing to meet the political, economic, and societal needs of evolving and changing societies.

Theme eight, Public and Private Treatment, revealed participants in this phenomenological research study experienced varying treatment depending on their geographical location, level of education, personal experiences, and occupation. Historically, the separation of public sphere from the private sphere has been sanctified by religion, reaffirmed by national ideology, and maintained by religious based family laws or personal status codes that privileged men and subordinated women (Berkovitch & Moghadam, 1999). Additionally, Muslim women have experienced discrimination and have been subjected to restrictions of their freedoms and rights in both their private and public spheres.

Theme nine, Western Muslim Women vs. Muslim Women Living in Majority Islamic Societies, revealed participants felt they were allowed more freedom to practice Islam without fear and repercussions although there were challenges. Coleman (2010) argues patriarchy and religious conservatives have conspired against women around the world and throughout the ages, and it runs particularly deep in modern Middle East. Religious attitudes toward Muslim women have helped to justify and enforce limited public roles for Muslim women, gender segregation, and harsh punishment for any perceived transgressions.

Theme ten, Islamic Fundamentalism, revealed participants placed a negative connotation to the term Islamic fundamentalism. Participants cautioned aligning Islam with fundamentalism, as the two are separate entities within an internal dispute. A cultural phenomenon, Islamic fundamentalism is not a homogeneous movement but an aggressive, principlist, expansionist, and uncompromising movement. Participants in this phenomenological research study are seeking gender equality via an Islamic theological (Kalam) framework; however, women's rights and conflict over the roles, rights, and privilege of Muslim men and Muslim women, as well as the structure and status of the family, are at the center of this struggle (Afary, 2004a) between Muslim women and Islamic fundamentalists. Moghadam (2003) asserts Islamic fundamentalism reflects the contradictions of modernization, and the conflict between traditional and modern norms, relations, and institutions.

Theme eleven, Voice and Expectations, revealed participants had varying expectations for Muslim women. Culture and tradition dictated the expectations of women in their various and diverse geographical locations. A majority of participants also revealed that they want equal rights to education, employment, social advancement, and political participation via gender equality. What is absent in Muslim societies is sensitivity to women's rights and needs, as meanings of oppression are socially constructed through patriarchal discourse and religious interpretations (Ayotte & Husain, 2005).Theme eleven also revealed a majority of the participants in this phenomenological research study are adamant about speaking for themselves. Muslim women are becoming the agents of possible transformation in societies in which their voices had traditional not been heard (Cooke, 2000). Participants postulated they are the best narrators to tell society about the meanings, structures and essence of their lived experiences.

As a religion of diversity, Islam allows Muslim women to challenge the patriarchal and male-dominated constructed gender roles of Muslim women. What is taking place now within Islam is an internal conflict between traditionalists—those whose main objectives are to keep Muslim women marginalized and subjugated—and Muslim women, whose aim is to bring about liberation of women via education, political participation, and economics (Aslan, 2005). In many Muslim societies, the greatest challenge is to find ways to empower Muslim women via an Islamic framework without pitting their rights against deeply held religious values.

Islam is an action oriented worldview that encompasses social, cultural, and political elements including religious and secular reasoning (Barazangi, 2009). Islam, as a religion, can be instrumental in helping to deconstruct and remove gender inequality posited by participants in the research study: “Islam does not necessarily see women as exactly the same as men and that is based, you know, on just basic biological difference”; however, she posits “I believe that Islam already does promote very important and very basic rights for women” (Participant I, 2014). Participants in this research study were aware of Shari’a and its implication in their lives and saw it as an extension of their religion. Participants in the research study turn to the fundamentals of Islamic thinking, the Qur’an, the Sunnah or traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and ijithad to challenge the ways in which Islam has been distorted by ultraconservative clerics.

Arkoun (1994) argues patriarchal monopoly is possible because "the Qur'an has been ripped from its historical, linguistic, literary and psychological contexts and then been continually re-contextualized in various cultures and according to the ideological needs of various actors" (p. 5). As there is nothing innately Islamic about misogyny, inequality, or patriarchy, gender inequality has been justified my clerics in the name of Islam. "Islam speaks about power and self-empowerment or worldly self-enhancement" (Mernissi, 1988, p. 9). Islam's message of equality does not endorse systems of social differentiation; as Islam as a religion posits "gender equality and egalitarianism, while at the same time guaranteeing women certain rights" (Haddad & Esposito, 1998). The advancement of gender equality within Islam has not been easy. Major trends are occurring as Muslim women are beginning to use Islamic theology (Kalam) to demand gender equality.

McGuire (2002) claims religion is not only one of the most powerful deeply felt and influential forces in human society, religion is the expression of social forces and social ideals that is concerned with sacred history and interpretations. Islam as a religion is totalistic (Armstrong, 2002b) and Muslim women understand that Islam is a religion that requires an individual to live in a certain way. Within the religion of Islam, its tenets and principles take on varying degrees of significance for individuals. Participants in this research study identified which tenet and/or principle within Islam took precedent in their living experiences.

Nasr (2003) posits, "The religion of Islam is the matrix and worldview within all human activities, efforts, creations and thoughts take place or should take place" (p. 26).

Verse 2:256 of the Qur'an posits, "There is no compulsion in religion"; therefore, Muslim women take comfort in Islam's message of equality, universalism, diversity, inclusiveness, peace, and submission (El Fadl, 205). Participants were asked to convey their thoughts on Muslim women and covering. Participants' responses varied according to their individual practices, beliefs, traditions, and culture. The salient theme that reverberated from this leading question was modesty in dress, though the concept of modesty also varied among the participants. Cooke (2000) posits, "Islam has been misconstrued as repressive of women's rights and aspirations" (p. 84). Muslim women have struggled for centuries to define their roles in society. Islam allows Muslim women to forge their way to becoming a part of the Islamic ulama. Islam's influence on Muslim women obligates them to contribute to their communities, obtain an education, and be a mentor to young Muslim girls. The role of Muslim women participating in this phenomenological research study took on different connotations depending on culture, traditions, and role of religion.

Literature and data from participants posit Muslim women have sought to read and reinterpret passages in the Qur'an differently by thinking about them in a modern context to find new meanings: reinterpretations fought by traditionalists. According to Wright (2011), in seeking to find new meanings via re-reading and re-interpretations, some Muslim women focus exclusively on the Qur'anic interpretations to successively uncover the Qur'an's egalitarian message. Amina Wadud argues Islam has to be flexible to accommodate all people, throughout all time, who want to believe (Wright, 2011). Literature also posits Islam's clerical class has continued to maintain its monopoly over religious and misogynistic interpretations simply by maintaining its monopoly over religious learning (Aslan, 2005).

Participants' responses in this research study drew attention to the need of Islamic scholarship for Muslim women in an effort to remove religious attitudes of those that have helped to justify and enforce limited roles for women, gender inequality, and harsh punishment of any perceived transgression. Jacinto (2006) argues Muslim women's interpretation of the classic text constitutes a sweeping challenge to the central assumptions and presumptions of patriarchal and misogynistic interpretations. Jacinto (2006) also posits Muslim women are more conscious that they have been deliberately excluded from the sacred, not because Islam prescribed it, but because Islam was revealed in a heavily patriarchal society that engraved a specific picture of women in the Muslim unconscious. Lastly, El Fadl (2005) argues that behind every single Qur'anic revelation regarding women was an effort seeking to protect women from exploitative situations and from situations in which they are treated unequally.

Many Muslim women posited that it is their duty and responsibility to go back to the Qur'an for reinterpretations of the verses, not the jurisprudence created by different people, times and contexts. Muslim women will only be able to claim their egalitarian position in society if they practice their right to find meaning in the Qur'an that supports their rights as autonomous individuals. The issue of gender inequality and treatment of Muslim women is an acute problem where women's lives are governed by laws and configured by customs and traditions.

Limitations of the Study

This phenomenological research study has several limitations that may affect its transferability. The research study was limited to fifteen Muslim women from various geographical locations with diverse backgrounds. The population was homogeneous, and included Muslim women over the age of eighteen. However, women who participated in this research cannot represent all the perspectives, beliefs, and lived experiences of all Muslim women practicing Islam globally, as only two participants have resided outside North America.

Additionally, qualitative research is subjective. When the researcher conducted this phenomenological research study, she attempted to address the issue of subjectivity, i.e., researcher's personal bias, assumptions, and predispositions sufficiently, in an effort to decrease the potential of polluting collected data. The research study site was determined by the individual Muslim women participants, thus may not represent the conditions encountered on a daily basis. This phenomenological research study can only illuminate the phenomenon in this specific case, at this particular time and place. When future researchers and scholars use these research results, they need to be aware of all these factors to maintain the objectivity of their studies. In addition, the researcher is a Black American doctoral student, whose cultural and religious background may affect the integrity of the research validity in terms of data collection and presentation.

Conclusions

As stated in chapter one, this phenomenological research study aimed at examining and exploring the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women while seeking to advance knowledge of how Islam, as a religion, can promote gender equality via an Islamic theological (Kalam) framework. The findings have indicated that there are different levels of understanding and ways of applying Islam to individual beliefs, ideologies, and practices. The research study also found that the participants were found to have specific positive and negative lived experiences that effected their understanding and acknowledgement of their Islamic religious consciousness and spirituality. Participants recognized the trend and this served to assist them in being devout Muslims whose adherence to Islam became the worldview in which they lived their lives. Also, the themes revealed in this phenomenological study have suggested the importance of gaining a better understanding of Islam, as a religion, as a means of informing Muslim, non-Muslims, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations of the benefits of gender equality within Islam as it pertains to improving the lives of Muslim women through educational, employment opportunities, and political participation.

The significance of the findings within this phenomenological research study have also shown participants who contributed to this study demonstrated varying degrees in understanding the concept of gender equality but were adamant gender equality is guaranteed within Islam. The participants' understanding of gender equality has influenced and motivated their determination for admission in Islam's ideological and theoretical (Kalam) scholarship to improve their lives. In addition, this phenomenological research study demonstrated that there is a disparity between the available literature and most of the participants' practical application of Islam as it relates to gender equality for Muslim women.

The findings within this phenomenological research study have shown the importance of understanding Islam as a religion of egalitarianism, as opposed to the distorted images postulated by media and representative of a small minute population that advocates a return to 7th Century Arabia. This research has indicated the importance of providing Muslim women with an Islamic theoretical (Kalam) framework in which gender equality can be acquired and/or achieved. If Muslim women are to be removed from the subaltern of misogynistic and traditional patriarchal religious interpretations posited by Islamic clerics, it will be essential for gender equality to be achieved and/or acquired within the religion of Islam.

Implication for Practice and Recommendations

This phenomenological research study examined and explored the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women from diverse Islamic religious sects, socio-economic status, educational backgrounds, age, nationality, years practicing Islam, and geographical locations. The finding of this phenomenological research study could help bring an awareness of Muslim women's endeavor to continue demanding gender equality via re-examining and reinterpreting religious Qur'anic passages via an Islamic theoretical (Kalam) framework. The findings in this phenomenological research study could also serve as catalysis for Islamic scholarship and education for Muslim women in all Western and Islamic majority societies. This phenomenological research study could serve as a connection to narrow the gap in literature regarding Muslim women and their plight to increase gender equality via Islam both the public and private spheres of their lives. An awareness of gender inequality may elicit attention from sympathizers of Muslim women, e.g., Muslim men, non-Muslims, charitable organizations, the United Nations, global financial institutions, governments, and non-governmental organizations.

This phenomenological research study offers a vivid and rich comprehensive description of the positive and negative lived experiences of Muslim women, as well as an insight into their Islamic beliefs, ideologies, and practices. The information gathered in this phenomenological research study may enable Muslim women to increase awareness and broaden an understanding to an area of study unfamiliar to scholars, academia, and researchers. Recommendations based upon the findings of this phenomenological research study may include, but are not limited to:

1. Understanding Muslim women will have varying degrees, in regards to understanding the concept of gender equality within Islam, as Muslim women will need to come to a consensus of what is gender equality within Islam. One way of accomplishing this endeavor is by working with the United Nations and grassroots organizations to identify the needs of Muslim women and implement a working definition of gender equality. By implementing a working definition, the needs of Muslim women in various and diverse geographical areas can be addressed within their respective context, place, and time.
2. Remove primary barriers to gender equality within Islam by including Muslim women in Islamic scholarship. Islamic clerics will need to open madrassas, in which Muslim women can learn to read the Qur'an in Arabic, cite the Qur'an in Arabic, understand the various transliteration of Arabic, and understand how each factor can help in the religious interpretations of Qur'anic passages.
3. Employ educational opportunities for Muslim women. State actors will need to ensure Muslim women and girls have equal access to a quality and free education at all levels. For Muslim women living in rural areas, local governments and/or tribal leaders will need to work with non-governmental or charitable organizations to ensure Muslim women and girls are afforded an education.
4. Ensure equal employment opportunities and equal pay for Muslim women. Job and vocational training will need to be made available for Muslim women to gain

the skills and competency needed to be successful in the work force. Payment for work rendered will need to be at a comparable rate as that of Muslim men to ensure economic sustainable for Muslim women.

5. Promote women's leadership within local and national levels in respective countries. It will be very important to provide relevant training and skills-building that enables Muslim women's participation in leadership roles, e.g., politicians. Leadership roles should build on, recognize, and connect Muslim women's existing knowledge and skills including attracting and empowering Muslim women activists and strengthening networks across the Islamic world.
6. Islamic clerics will need to practice transparency and accountability to ensure gender equality has an environment to prosper for Muslim women and Muslim men. Transparency will need to be reflected in both Islam, as a religion and Islam, as a culture to ensure gender equality action policies, e.g., religious interpretations, application of Shari'a law, and Islamic jurisprudence, are promoting Muslim women's inclusion.

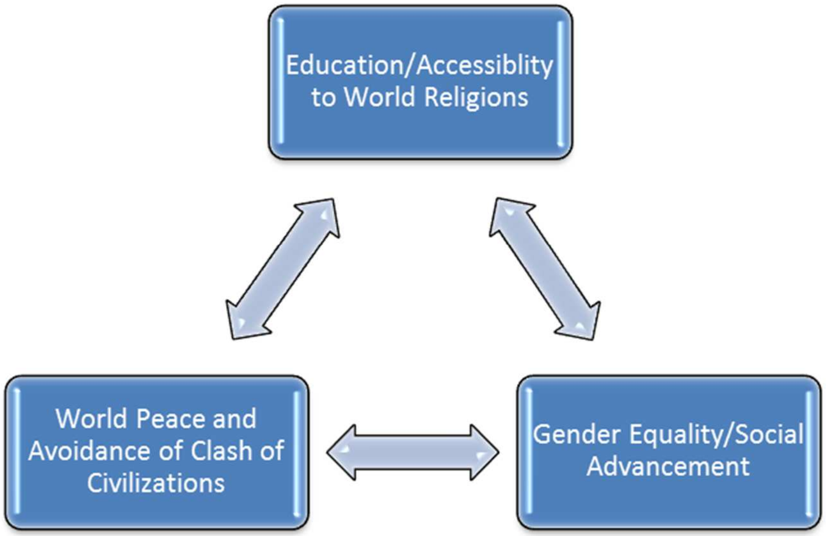
Education/Accessiblity to World Religions
World Peace and Avoidance of Clash of Civilizations
Gender Equality/Social Advancement

Figure 3. Implications for further study in gender equality via world religions.

Suggestions for Future Research

This phenomenological research study highlights a perspective of the meanings, structures, and essence of the lived experiences of Muslim women in various and diverse geographical locations. A more fully realistic view of these lived experiences needs a more expanded effort for examination, exploration, and understanding. This one limited qualitative study cannot explain all phenomena, as there is little research exploring the lived experiences of Muslim seeking gender equality via an Islamic framework, as few research studies have examined and/or explored this endeavor. This qualitative phenomenological research study suggests that future researchers examine and explore more deeply and widely on Islam as a religion, women and the reexamination and reinterpretations of Qur'anic religious passages, and cultural and traditional treatment of Muslim women. Research is also needed to remove the barriers prohibiting Muslim women from enjoying gender equality which is posited by the egalitarian spirit of the Qur'an in many global societies.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

Title of Research: The Impact of Islam, Women and Islamic Feminism on Gender Equality in Modern Day Islamic Societies.

Investigator: Sonia D. Galloway, Graduate Student, Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution

Before consenting to take part in this phenomenological research study, it is important that you carefully read the following explanation of this study. This explanation describes the reason/purpose, procedures, benefits, risks, discomforts and precautions of the program. Also detailed are any alternative procedures available to you, as well as, your right to withdraw from this study at any time. There are no guarantee or assurances can or will be made as to the results of the study.

Explanation of Procedures

This phenomenological research study is designed to explore the lived experiences of women in Islamic societies seeking gender equality. Sonia D. Galloway, a graduate student at Nova University, Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, is conducting this study to learn more about lived experiences of women in Islamic/Arab/Muslim majority societies seeking gender equality. Participation in the study will involve the completion of twenty to twenty-five open-ended interview questions, which will last approximately one and one half hours over a period of one day. The interview will be either audiotape or videotaped by the researcher and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The interview will be conducted at a setting that is mutually agreeable to the participant and the researcher.

Risk and Discomforts

There are foreseen risks or discomforts from your participation in the study. Examples of any potential risks or discomforts may include emotional feelings, such as anger, sadness or grief, when asked questions during the interview.

Benefits

The overall desired benefit for any participation is the opportunity to discuss any feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to the experience of discussing events in your life that are or have been meaningful to you.

Alternative Treatments

As this is a biographical research study, this study does not involve specific treatments or procedures that will cause bodily harm; therefore, there are no known alternative treatments to participating in this study.

Confidentiality

The information collected during this study will remain confidential. Only the researcher and Dr. Neil Katz, Nova Southeastern University, Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Fort Lauderdale, FL, will have immediate access to this study's data and information. As this information is confidential, no identifiable names or characteristics of the participant will be making available to anyone. Upon completion of this study, all tapes, transcripts, and notes will be destroyed. Please be aware that the results of this research will be published in the form of a graduate paper that may be disseminated among the professional community in fortune studies.

Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is on a voluntary basis and refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice. Furthermore, a participant's decision to voluntarily participate or not will, in no way, influence the level of professional and personal courtesy extended in the work environment.

New Findings

As this phenomenological research study progress, any new and significant findings developed during this study that may have an affect the participant's willingness to continue will be provided by Sonia D. Galloway, Graduate Student, Nova Southeastern University, Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution.

Cost and/or Payment to Subject for Participation in Research

Nova Southeastern University, Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution, Fort Lauderdale, FL, has made no provision for monetary compensation in the event of injury resulting from the research. If the need arises due to an injury, assistance will be provided to access health care services. The cost of health care services is the responsibility of the participant.

Questions

Any questions concerning the research project and/or the case of injury due to the project, participants can call Dr. Neil Katz at 954.262.3040 or by email at kneil@nova.edu; faculty advisor for this project.

Agreement

This agreement states that you have received a copy of this informed consent. Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in this study.

______________________________ ***Signature of Subject***	______________ ***Date***
______________________________ ***Subject Name (printed)***	______________
______________________________ ***Signature of Researcher***	______________ ***Date***

Adapted from Samford University (2010)

Appendix B: Letter to Participants

Date_______________________________________

Dear:_____________________________________,

Thank you for your interest in my dissertation on the lived experiences of women in Islamic/Arab/Muslim majority societies seeking gender equality. I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study and I am excited about the possibility of your participation in it. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate some of the things we have already discussed and to secure your signature on the participation release form you will find attached.

The research model I am using is a qualitative one through which I am seeking comprehensive depictions or descriptions of your experience. In this way I hope to illuminate or answer my question: “What is the experience of women practicing Islam in modern day society seeking gender equality?”

Through your participation as a participant, I hope to understand the essence of Islam as it reveals its egalitarian message in your lived experience. You will be asked to recall specific episodes, situations, or events you experience in practicing Islam and gender equality. I am seeking vivid, accurate and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for you: your thoughts, feelings and behaviors, as well as situation, events, places, and people connected to your experience.

I value your participation and thank you for the commitment of time, energy, and effort. If you have any further questions before signing the release form or if there is a problem with the date and time of our meeting, I can be reached at 302.607.9310.

Warm regards,

Sonia D. Galloway

Adapted from Moustakas (1994)

Appendix C: Participant Release Agreement

I agree to participate in a research study of "What Impact will Islam, Women and Islamic Feminism have on Gender Equality in Modern Day Islamic Societies?" I understand the purpose and nature of this study and I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a Ph.D. degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I understand that a brief synopsis of each participant, including myself, will be used and will include the following information: regional location of residence, religious sect; i.e. Sunni/Shia/Nation of Islam, educational level, political participation, socioeconomic factors, and any other pertinent information that will help the reader come to know and recall each participant. I grant permission for the above personal information to be used. I agree to meet at the following location ____ on the following date_____________________________ at _________ for an initial interview of 1 to 2 hours. If necessary, I will be available at a mutually agreed upon time and place for an additional 1 to 1 ½ hour interview. I also grant permission to tape-recording of the interview(s).

___________________________________ ______________________________

Research Participant/Date Primary Researcher/Date

Adapted from Moustakas (1994)

Appendix D: Pilot Phase Interview Questions

1. Please describe as detailed as possible a situation in which you experienced a phenomenon?
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experience of the phenomenon?
3. What does Islam mean to you?
4. How did you come to choosing Islam as your choice of religion?
5. What do you understand of your lived experiences within Islam?
6. How often do you participate in religious activities?
7. What are your thoughts on religious interpretations and women in Islam?
8. How can Islam promote gender equality for women?
9. When did you first realize Quranic verses were interpreted by males willing to subjugated women?
10. What are your thoughts on women interpreting Quranic verses?
11. Although you practice Islam, how familiar are you with its message of equality?
12. How would you describe your role in modern day Islamic society?
13. How are you treated by male members in both the public and private spheres of your life?
14. What can women practicing Islam do to bring about gender equality within modern day Islamic societies?
15. What do you feel is the most important tenet(s) of Islam?
16. How can you use Islam to promote gender equality within your community?
17. What is your expectation(s) of women practicing Islam today?

Appendix E: Revised Interview Protocol

Demographic Information:

Current Geographical Location: ___________________

Sect of Islam practiced: ___________________

Age: _____________ Nationality: ____________________

How long have you been practicing Islam? ________________

Socioeconomic background: _________________

Level of education obtained: ___________________

Questions:

1. When did you first realize Islam was the religion for you?
2. What does Islam mean to you?
3. How often do you participate in religious and/or social activities?
4. What are your thoughts on Quranic religious interpretations and women in Islam?
5. Do you think Islam promotes gender equality for women?
6. Has there ever been a time you thought/felt Quranic passages were interpreted by males to subjugate women?
7. What are your thoughts on women interpreting Quranic passages?
8. How would you describe your role in modern day Islamic society?
9. How are you treated by male members in both the public and private sphere?
10. What do you feel is the most important tenet(s) of Islam?
11. What are your thoughts of Islamic (Shari'a) law?
12. Do you think women are freer to practice Islam in America as opposed to women practicing in Islamic majority countries?

13. What are your thoughts on Muslim women and covering?
14. What do you think of the following: “Who has the right to speak about or for Muslim women?”
15. What are your expectation(s) of Muslim women today?

Appendix F: Thank You Letter to Participants

Date________________________________

Dear _______________________________,

Thank you for meeting with me in an extended interview and sharing your lived experiences while practicing Islam. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts, feelings, events and situations.

I have enclosed a transcript of your interview. Would you please review the entire document? Be sure to ask yourself if this interview has fully captured your experiences while practicing Islam. After reviewing the transcript of the interview, you may realize that an important experience(s) was neglected. Please feel free to add comments, with the enclosed red pen, that would further elaborate your experience(s), or if you prefer we can arrange to meet again and tape record your additions or corrections. Please do not edit for grammatical corrections. The way you told your story is what is critical.

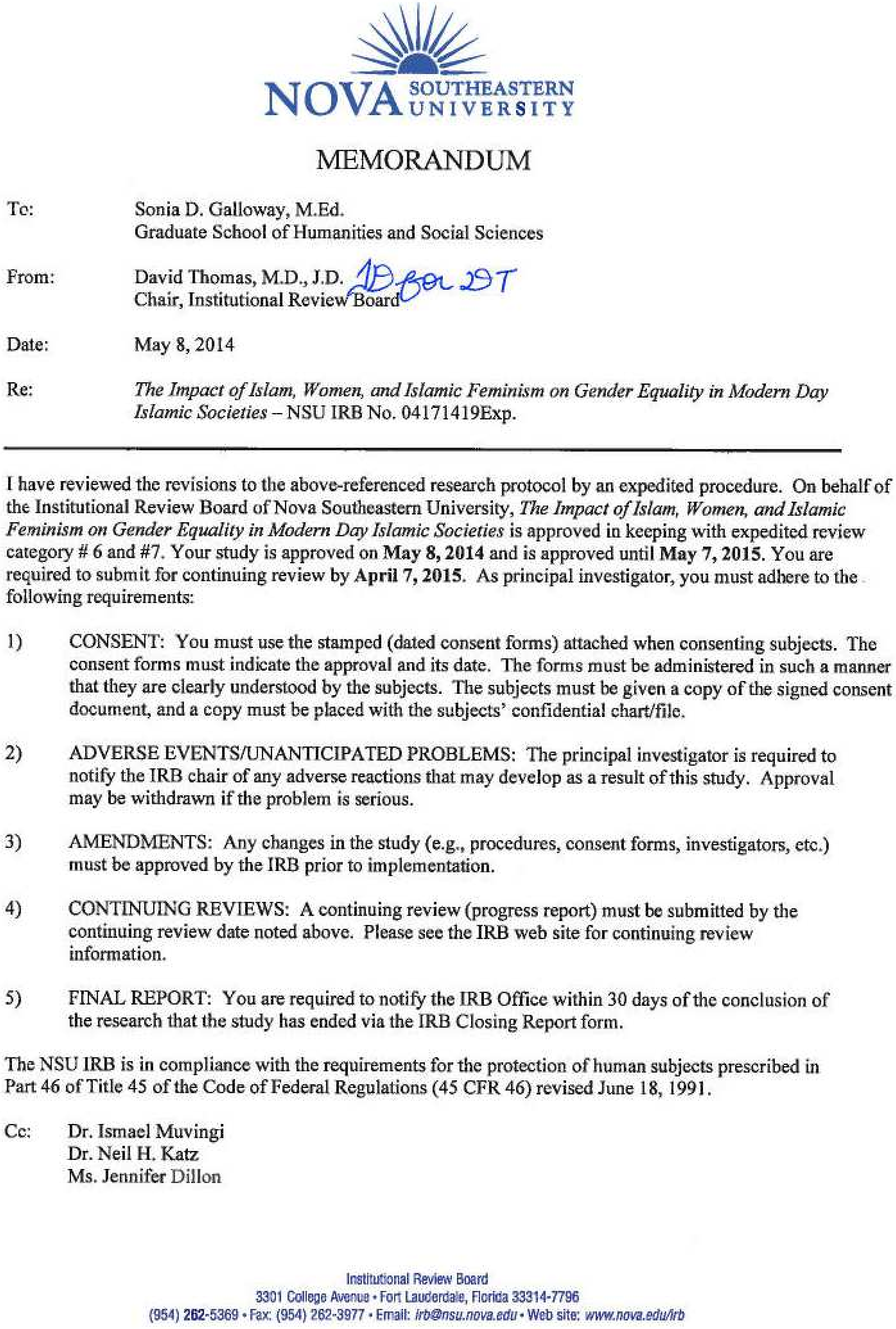
When you have reviewed the verbatim transcript and have had an opportunity to make changes and additions, please return the transcript in the stamped, addressed envelope. I have greatly valued your participation in this research study and your willingness to share your experience. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to call me.

Warm regards,

Sonia D. Galloway

Adapted from Moustakas (1994).

Appendix G: Memorandum of Consent to Conduct Study



NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

MEMORANDUM

To: Sonia D. Galloway, M.Ed.
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences

From: David Thomas, M.D., J.D. JD for DT
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Date: May 8, 2014

Re: *The Impact of Islam, Women, and Islamic Feminism on Gender Equality in Modern Day Islamic Societies* – NSU IRB No. 04171419Exp.

I have reviewed the revisions to the above-referenced research protocol by an expedited procedure. On behalf of the Institutional Review Board of Nova Southeastern University, *The Impact of Islam, Women, and Islamic Feminism on Gender Equality in Modern Day Islamic Societies* is approved in keeping with expedited review category # 6 and #7. Your study is approved on **May 8, 2014** and is approved until **May 7, 2015.** You are required to submit for continuing review by **April 7, 2015.** As principal investigator, you must adhere to the following requirements:

1) CONSENT: You must use the stamped (dated consent forms) attached when consenting subjects. The consent forms must indicate the approval and its date. The forms must be administered in such a manner that they are clearly understood by the subjects. The subjects must be given a copy of the signed consent document, and a copy must be placed with the subjects' confidential chart/file.

2) ADVERSE EVENTS/UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS: The principal investigator is required to notify the IRB chair of any adverse reactions that may develop as a result of this study. Approval may be withdrawn if the problem is serious.

3) AMENDMENTS: Any changes in the study (e.g., procedures, consent forms, investigators, etc.) must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

4) CONTINUING REVIEWS: A continuing review (progress report) must be submitted by the continuing review date noted above. Please see the IRB web site for continuing review information.

5) FINAL REPORT: You are required to notify the IRB Office within 30 days of the conclusion of the research that the study has ended via the IRB Closing Report form.

The NSU IRB is in compliance with the requirements for the protection of human subjects prescribed in Part 46 of Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46) revised June 18, 1991.

Cc: Dr. Ismael Muvingi
Dr. Neil H. Katz
Ms. Jennifer Dillon

Institutional Review Board
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