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## AN EDUCATIONAL MODULE ON ISLAM: EVALUATING STUDENT KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION

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### **Abstract**

*There are numerous misconceptions regarding Islam in general and Muslim women in particular. As Muslim women seek education and a future with hope, they are fraught with prejudice and persecution. While some problems must be solved from within Muslim societies, others can be alleviated through educating non-Muslims about Islam. This research involved the development of an educational module specific to Islamic culture and the societal roles of Muslim women, which was taught as part of a geography course at a predominantly male university. A survey administered before and after the module suggests student knowledge can improve while perception remains entrenched.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) specializes in aviation and aerospace education. With residential campuses in Daytona Beach, Florida, and Prescott, Arizona, and more than 100 extended campus facilities, ERAU trains one in four of the pilots flying commercial aircraft in the United States. ERAU has an international student population of 7% and a female population of 17%. Obviously, the aviation/aerospace industry in the United States is still male dominated. The military presence at ERAU is sizable as many of the aeronautical science professors are retired military personnel. Additionally, the military has numerous high profile ROTC programs on campus. Considering these statistics in conjunction with the

persecution experienced by students of Middle Eastern appearance following the tragedy of September 11th, 2001, along with the present war in Iraq, it seemed necessary to include a strong multicultural component into an Introduction to Geography course. The module includes a broad overview of world religions, focusing on the world of Islam, and specifically addressing the role of women in Muslim cultures.

### EUROPEAN ISLAMIC DEMOGRAPHICS

Because the module was taught within the context of a geography course, an important component is the demographics of Islam. New Muslim communities are not confined to the peripheral nations of the Middle East. With a global population of 1.25 billion, there are presently millions of Islamic immigrants in Eastern and Western Europe. There was a spike in the immigration of Muslims during the 1970s for many reasons. The decolonization of numerous Asian, African, and Middle Eastern nations provided a "push factor" as people fled from their unstable homelands. Subsequently, there was an increase in labor needs within the Common Market, generating a "pull factor" for people looking for new homes and employment. Until the early 1970s, most of these immigrants were men who were unsure of the security of their new employment as they retained the expectation of returning home. Soon thereafter there was a reversal in the trend of these demographics. Once it became obvious that the economies of their homelands were continuing to deteriorate, the women and children of the families began to migrate to join their husbands and fathers (Talhami, 2004).

The immigration demographics also reveal a propensity for the people of different Islamic countries to settle in a certain host country. For example, in the Netherlands, the Muslim population is a mix of Indonesians, North Africans, and Turks. Germany is host to a Muslim population that is predominantly Turkish with some Yugoslavs. France is home to Muslims from North Africa, mainly Algerians, and Britain now hosts Muslim immigrants from former British colonies in South Asia, as well as from Somalia and Saudi Arabia. Also indicative of the growth of Muslim populations in the EU is the number of mosques. In Britain, for example, that number in 1960 was six, whereas in 1985 it was 395. Germany had no mosques in 1960 and now has more than 1000. These facts are not surprising since Europe has long enjoyed a reputation for embracing cultural diversity. As early as 1828, Francois Guizot in his *History of Civilization in Europe* described how the Europeans distinguished themselves for their tolerance of diversity. He provided examples of the combination of such political systems as monarchies, theocracies, and republics. These systems, however, shared the common veil of Christianity. Islam was then, and in many ways remains today, outside the prescribed parameters of diversity (Talhami, 2004).

Amid the myriad challenges of globalization is the goal of homogenization of peoples. Strengthening identities within individual Muslim communities in Europe poses a challenge to acculturation. This push toward assimilation is further complicated by generational differences. Many older Muslims overtly reject modernity and teach their children to hold fast to traditional practices while many younger Muslims desire to blend into the populations of their new homes and do so by downplaying tradition. Europe views its own culture as democratic, individualistic, and secular. The EU provides a world standard for liberalism and progressiveness, largely by advocating human rights (Kumar, 2002). Conversely, certain theorists purport that Islamic culture tends to legitimize regimes that are unusually authoritarian, that there is no distinction between church and state, and that there is priority of community over individuality (Munoz, 1999). These theorists and others who are likeminded argue that democracy and Islam are, therefore, fundamentally distinct. However, such theories are oversimplifications of the attitudes of 1.25 billion Muslims around the world.

While Islamic immigrants in the EU are forging a new identity for themselves, the EU is adjusting to global change with an emerging multicultural identity based on democracy, peaceful coexistence, and human rights (Hofmann, 2003). These dynamics further complicate integration of Muslims into their host countries. Those Islamic people who wish to become assimilated are trying to 'hit a moving target' so to speak. Further, the integration of Islamic peoples into the European society is suffering from exclusion partly caused by the long standing Muslim-Christian antagonism that historically helped define the borders of Europe. Also exacerbating the conflict is the lucid feature of Muslim culture as one that is religious-based. This element flies in the face of the Western notion of religion as a personal system and separate from political systems. Perhaps this attribute, above all others, has caused some of those outside the Islam faith to prejudice Muslims as fundamentalist, dangerous and backward (Esposito, 1999).

### THE ROLE OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Many misconceptions of Islam inevitably affect Muslim women. Certain prominent world leaders demonize their entire culture, and the status of women within Islamic culture can be denigrated. As early as 1930, Tunisian reformist and thinker, Tahir al Hadaad called for distinguishing between the divine commandments and the societal mores found within the *sharia*. The *sharia* describes the legal status of women in Muslim society and is deemed to be the most orthodox text on these beliefs. Subsequent reformers, such as Hussein Ahmad Amin of Saudi Arabia, went a step further explaining the degree to which the sharian laws have undergone gross human interpretation. Perspectives within the Muslim world, therefore, range from those of conservative groups, such as the Islamic Council of Europe and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, who call for a total rejection of modernity, innovation, and secularization to more moderate groups that advocate, to a certain degree, accommodating modernity (Borrmans, 1999).

Inextricably linked to the misconceptions of Muslims by non-Muslims is the status of women within the larger society. Moroccan feminist scholar, Fatima Mernissi, explains that Islam does indeed stress men's economic support of women and advocates the male leadership role in the family and community. However, in reality Muslim women have always worked outside the home, predominantly in agriculture. Today, amid increasing urbanization there also is an increase in the cost of living, which further pushes women to seek employment. The second generation Muslim women in Europe have had Western educational opportunities, exposure to feminist thought, and have chosen a certain degree of selective secularism (Roald, 2001).

One of the most divisive issues continuing to receive a great deal of media coverage and included in the Islamic module involves women's dress. The donning of the veil as headdress fuels the long-lived suspicion of an alien culture with the veil, to some, signifying female oppression and loyalty to confrontational philosophies (Roald, 2001). France and Britain report a commitment to upholding human rights, and both embrace the tenets of the European Convention, the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention Against Discrimination in Education. All these international bodies prohibit discrimination based on religion. However, in February 2004, a new law was passed in France forbidding the veil, or hejab, in public schools. Groups as disparate as the Green Party and the ultra-right Front National both opposed the bill, while the Parti Socialiste agreed with its passage (King, 2004). Ironically, Muslim women in Western Europe are pressured by fellow local immigrants to wear the *hejab* while the young women are expelled from school for doing so.

Meanwhile, back in Baghdad, women are afraid to leave their homes without their headscarves. Today in Iraq, both Muslim and Christian women must cover their heads on the streets of their homeland to feel safe. In the 1960s, many women in Baghdad wore short skirts and low necklines. However, their daughters face far fewer freedoms. A professor at Baghdad University explains that the current lack of security causes women to "want to hide or take shelter... the scarf is the best way to protect them" (Spinner, 2004, p.15). Prior to the occupation of Iraq, moderate Muslim women in Baghdad could choose whether to wear the veil, and Iraqi Christian women rarely covered their heads. But the recent insurgency both supporting and supported by fundamentalist hardliners has created an unstable and dangerous world, especially for women.

### MODULE EVALUATION

A survey was administered before and after the Islamic module was taught. Some rather objective questions asked whether the students had taken any higher education courses in multiculturalism, in world religions, or in the study of Islam. Other questions delve into student perceptions concerning the status of Muslim women and their participation in government. The results suggest that following the module, student knowledge of Muslim culture was enhanced. For example, when asked which country in Europe is predominantly Muslim, prior to the module 35% could not identify Albania, and after the module 7% missed this question. When asked which country has the largest number of Muslims, prior to the module, 80% did not identify Indonesia; however, after the module, only 7% did not know. And prior to the module, 77% incorrectly included polygamy as one of the Five Pillars of Islam. After the module, just 3% percent incorrectly included polygamy. Regarding the effect of the module on the personal attitude of students, the results do not appear nearly as significant. Sample questions and the before/after results are listed below and seem to suggest that despite a better understanding of the Muslim culture, personal attitudes toward Islam were not changed by the module.

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I am interested in studying other religions:

Strongly Agree 26%; Agree 35%; Neutral 35%; Disagree 0%; Strongly Disagree 4%  
Strongly Agree 31%; Agree 35%; Neutral 23%; Disagree 4%; Strongly Disagree 7%

I have the tendency to equate terrorism with the Muslim world:

Strongly Agree 4%; Agree 27%; Neutral 15%; Disagree 35%; Strongly Disagree 19%  
Strongly Agree 7%; Agree 21%; Neutral 23%; Disagree 28%; Strongly Disagree 21%

Muslim women have the same rights as women in other societies:

Strongly Agree 0%; Agree 0%; Neutral 8%; Disagree 46%; Strongly Disagree 46%  
Strongly Agree 7%; Agree 0%; Neutral 10%; Disagree 55%; Strongly Disagree 28%

Muslim women should be able to participate in the political process:

Strongly Agree 46%; Agree 31%; Neutral 7%; Disagree 12%; Strongly Disagree 4%  
Strongly Agree 44%; Agree 41%; Neutral 7%; Disagree 4%; Strongly Disagree 4%

## CONCLUSIONS

It is apparent that the Muslim women of the world face persecution both in their homelands and in the lands to which they have immigrated. Education is seen as the best tool both to allow these women freedom from oppression as well as to free them from the prejudices held by the non-Muslim world. Also necessary in Iraq in particular, is the participation of women in the future of their political systems. Otherwise, the regression occurring presently could realize the concerns of an anonymous student from Baghdad University who said, "I fear there will be a time when we cannot walk the street without head-to-toe *abaya* (the full black traditional dress) and a face cover. This will be the end of Iraq as a civilized country" (Spinner, 2004, p.15). It is apparent that this is a pivotal time in Muslim culture. In Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and South Asia, Muslim women need to help forge their futures. Additionally, non-Muslim people need a clearer perception of the role women play within Muslim culture. This

research was designed to provide students at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University a greater understanding of the world of Islam, its beliefs, and its people. The ERAU Office of Diversity Advancement awarded a grant to pursue this investigation. The grant assisted with the time needed to develop the module on Women in Islamic cultures, the creation and administration of the surveys, and presentation of the findings.

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