**ChallengesYouth face in U.S.**

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**Challenges during early period of schooling**

Growing up in a land with multi-religious, multi- cultural, multi-racial and multi-lingual people is a difficult endeavor for the Muslim youth in America. Most of their parents (immigrants and refugees) who grew up in a relatively homogenized community seldom experienced these challenges. In addition to this, the anti-Muslim sentiments and discrimination against Muslims have increased over the past two decades and Muslim youth are not immune to this. **Language** and **Cultural differences** Young Muslim children face conflicts as soon as they start school. At home they speak a different language than in school. At home they learn and continue to speak Urdu, Hindi, Arabic or Punjabi, but as soon as they go to school they speak English. As soon as they come home, they change their western clothes and wear their desi or native clothes- Shilwar, Pajama or Jilbab. At school, the students talk about TV shows like DISNEY,MTV, CNN or Fox news and Muslim children talk about ARY, ZTV and Indian, Pakistani or Arabic shows. Children soon become aware that they are different. Fortunately they are intelligent, adapt well to these changes and adjust well in both environments.

Many youths have reported that their immigrant parents usually have culture clashes with the new society. Immigrant children struggle to assimilate into the society their parents chose for them. Many parents question if their kids have too many American friends and they are afraid that they will learn bad habits. The problem is not so much overcoming poverty and educational deficits, but adapting to a society whose value is sharply at odds with the Muslim religious heritage. (Therefore some parents choose to send their children to Islamic schools and some opted for home schooling).**Challenges in educational institution** Most of the Muslim youth were adjusting and coping well until the school environment changed drastically after 9/11 and more so now during the Trump presidential era. Anti-Muslim sentiment and discrimination targeting Muslims are on the rise and school communities are not immune. School systems strive to prepare students for responsible social and civic participation by promoting a respect for diversity. However, due to massive anti-Muslim propaganda and Trump administration policies, educators often struggle to determine whether Muslims’ beliefs conflict with Western values. Nobody questions or debates the issue about “What are the major conflicts between Western and Islamic values”. The books and curriculum used in schools often contain biased opinions and misinformation. Students are embarrassed to speak in their native language in public and they often feel marginalized. They are regarded as outsiders even if they are born in the US. Following my lecture on bullying in one of the local Islamic centers, a little 9 year girl old told me that after the massacre in Orlando night club in 2016, her best friend told her that her mother prohibited her to be a friend with Pakistani girls and that she should “go back home”, even though she was born here and has not made any trips out of the country trip since she was born.

**Muslim youth feel alienated and Muslim girls’ experiences difficulty in blending with the rest of the community**. Wearing of Hijab also became an invitation for curiosity, inquiries, and sometimes physical or verbal assaults from other students. Muslim youths are careful when talking about their religion due to the negative perception. There is a rise in bullying incidents affecting Muslim students all over the country. Many students also reported discrimination from the teachers.

Often Muslim youth are called extremist when they decline to eat pork, drink alcohol or participate in dancing and parties. Some are even labeled as uncivilized and rejected by their peers.

Young people are often confronted with questions about terrorism, ISIS, Sunni/ Shia Islam or what’s happening in Iraq or Syria and why Muslim are killing Muslims. They often regard Muslim youths and Muslims in general as being violent and dangerous.

**PEER PRESSURE ON MUSLIM YOUTH**. During adolescence, peer pressure can make Muslims deviate from their values and beliefs. Alcohol, drug use and sexual promiscuity is increasing among Muslim youth. Some participate in school dances and dating to feel a sense of belonging and other students attempt to protect themselves by isolating themselves from the society. In social media networks, pornographic materials and nudity are frequently displayed.

**Intra and inter-faith marriages.** Young Muslims often question their parents’ insistence that they marry within their cultural and ethnic group even though the Muslim faith allows one to marry a Muslim or Muslima of a different ethnic and cultural group. Men are allowed to marry non-Muslim women but women are prohibited from doing so. Many Muslim girls are now raising the question about this ruling and the rationale behind this.

**Changing attitude.** In the 70s and 80s “the evils of Western cultural elements” such as the celebration of birthdays, Halloween and prom night was voiced by Imams but are now being encouraged by youth in the mainstream Muslim organizations in America. Before 9/11, Muslim leaders explicitly urged their people to avoid assimilating into the American mainstream and to withdraw into Islamic community centers and Islamic schools and colleges. Since 9/11, Muslim leaders have shown a willingness to adapt to America. They have attempted to adapt to the realities of American life and have been reconstructing a version of Islam that conforms to the American values as long as is not too deviated.

Muslim-Americans are now reassured that it is permissible, ​even desirable​, ​to have non-Muslim friends and it is okay to attend business lunches with non-Muslim colleagues where alcoholic drinks are served as long as Muslims do not drink.

Since the beginning of this century, all Muslim Scholars and Imams are not only permitting but encouraging Muslims to get involved in civic and political affairs. Now it is a common occurrence to see scores of political candidates in mosques during the election period and many Muslim candidates are running for political offices in local, state and national positions.

**Rituals vs. behavioral and civic responsibilities**. Islam is an active religion and Muslims believe that they are required to have strong faith and are accountable for their behavior and civic responsibilities. However many Imams focus only on strong beliefs and the importance of rituals while ignoring the behavioral responsibilities and the aspect of civic and political actions. A lack of authentic Islamic education still remains a great challenge to many Muslim youths. **Radicalization**. Theological differences between Shia, Sunni and other sects were exaggerated by religious leaders and power hungry politicians that resulted in severe fights and bloodshed. It is shame to say that Islam promotes the peace but the followers of Islam are behaving exactly the opposite of what Islam stands for. Today more Muslims are killed by Muslims in many Muslim majority countries. Muslim youth are vulnerable and easily influenced by parents and religious leaders. Sectarian division has become a source of subconscious beliefs that promote hatred and anger towards the “others” in the community and become a source of extremist ideologies. **When young people see any type of violence that is being glorified rather than condemned by religious scholars or family members, they become prone to become radical.** It is believed that sectarian violence is predominantly affecting the Muslim majority countries but in reality it is influencing the Muslim youth all over the world. The number of Muslim youth joining ISIS from the UK, Australia and USA to fight Shias is a clear evidence of this spread of radicalization. Muslim leaders must unite and put an end to the sectarian violence which has been dividing us for centuries, and spreading terrorism all over the world.

**Role of parents**. It is the parents’ job to ensure that their children are well-adjusted in the school and society. They should discuss openly all questions that their children are confronted with and reach out to the scholars to provide good guidance when needed. They can also volunteer at the schools and participate in school activities, make presentations to teachers and students on ISLAM and correct the misinformation. This will have a positive influence on Muslim children in school.

Parents and family values, not media or peers, are still the strongest influence on your child. Teach your child that good sportsmanship starts with small gestures, like shaking hands with their opponent

**What it is Like to Be Young and Muslim in America.** For Muslim immigrants, adjusting to American society can be a huge challenge. There are misconceptions which are creating the links between Islam and terrorism that don't exist. Whenever a Muslim does something like that, it's all over the media, identifying the perpetrator as a Muslim terrorist. But if a Westerner does the same thing, they are not called a Christian terrorist, rather regarded as mentally ill.

**The American Muslim Youth are courageous in facing constant challenges and adverse conditions.** Fortunately Muslim Youth in US are strong, self-confident, perform well academically and are committed to keep the Muslim identity and survive in this country. They have to challenge the misperception about Muslims as terrorists, culturally backwards and anti-Western. Muslim women also need to change the misperception that they are oppressed, submissive, and uneducated. By showing positive attitude, behavior and self-confidence, they will overcome the negative perception and will be able to cope with the challenges. We are fortunate to live in a country that is culturally and religiously the most diverse on earth. We enjoy freedom of speech and have the freedom to practice our religion and cultural traditions without fear of persecution. We are also free to pursue our ambitions and dreams. **In spite of its short comings this is a great country which gives our youth the opportunity to actualize their dreams**.

About Author

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