

Young Arab Women in Pune City, India

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This short article or report is a preliminary documentation of reactions and suggestions of Arab students in Pune City, India.

The larger study, which was started sometime in February 2006, is yet to be completed. The study, entitled "Decision Making and Social Support Systems of Young Arab Women Living in Pune City", aims at understanding the decision-making process of young Arab women, how they circumvent patriarchy to make informed choices, and how the existing social support system can heal their hearts and minds, helping them overcome isolation in a foreign land. The sample of the study consisted of fifty married women who have dependent children and another twenty women who are young students. About twenty Arab men also later became part of the study. Most of the study's data was recorded, based on focus group discussions and telephone interviews. An inventory is being constructed which will delve into issues women face as wives, young mothers, and students residing in a democratic country like India.

The women were interviewed at their weekly women-only parties and at gatherings in their homes or on the

university or college campuses. Most women interviewed were Muslims, and only one Egyptian student belonged to the Christian religion.

Against the backdrop of the larger Indian women's struggle that has advocated and established laws ending female foeticide and at the same time supporting survivors of domestic violence, Christian women in India have been supporting housing rights, while there have been campaigns by Muslim women for establishing a mosque in the city of Chennai, and for modifying the marriage laws in order to achieve more empowerment for themselves. These movements are being supported by other communities that are ushering in a sense of secular sisterhood within the Indian women's movement. India is one of the largest democracies in the world, and claims to be secular even though there are gross human rights violations, justified by religion. In addition, the study aims at understanding whether young Arab women feel empowered by living in a democratic and secular nation or rather that their experiences left them disillusioned.

Life for Arab Women in Pune

It is a regular Friday evening and one hears the laughter

of a large group of women interjected by the screams and cries of little children. You get closer, noticing the beautiful and vibrant colors of the women's clothes, and realize how different they look without their traditional *hijab*. This is a typical Friday evening party where all the Arab women in one part of Pune City are meeting. Many have little children and many are raising children on their own.

One young Yemeni research student with her four daughters has been away from her family and husband for nearly ten years managing her studies, the children's education, and helping other Arab women friends through their times of transition from their homeland to India. "It is a lot easier here, there is more freedom and everything is accessible," she says, "my husband is working in the Gulf and I want the girls not to have a break in their education so I decided to stay back in Pune to complete my PhD."

She has been through a series of mishaps, from a broken leg to a difficult delivery of her youngest child, but she says her Arab friends and Indian neighbors have stood by her, making it unnecessary to seek help from home.

The City of Pune

Pune City is of great historical importance to Indian women and to the Indian struggle for freedom from British colonial rule. Enconced in the western hills of the state of Maharashtra, the city is about three hours away from Mumbai, the commercial capital of both India and the Arabian Sea.

Pune has witnessed a number of social reforms that changed the lives of women in and around India. As early as 1882, Tarabai Shide, a woman philosopher, wrote *Stree Purush Tulana*, which talked about egalitarian values for both men and women. The first school for girls in India was started here in the mid-nineteenth century by Jyotiba Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule.

Pandita Ramabai, an upper-caste Hindu woman, converted to Christianity in this city. Shakuntala Paranjpe initiated the very first drive for family planning and contraception in the early twentieth century. The city also encouraged widows to remarry, and women openly participated in the struggle for freedom against British colonial rule. The city also has a rich tradition of spiritual awareness, where several indigenous men and women have promoted spirituality and have left significant spiritual texts for posterity.

Today, Pune houses nearly 250 colleges, and one university, offering professional courses for undergraduates and graduates as well as promoting research in the natural and social sciences. According to the latest data by

the national newspaper, *The Times of India*, nearly 1,500 students from UAE alone live and study in Pune, followed by significant numbers from Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. The University of Pune remains the first choice of many Arab students instigating their higher education in India.

Indian Culture

When a female Arab student was initially approached for this study on Diaspora Arab Women, her instant reaction was one of disbelief because she assumed that no one was interested in knowing about Arab women, or for that matter, Arab men. She was curious to know why an Indian was writing about them. In response, I shared with her my meeting with feminist Nawal Al-Saadawi in Egypt and my participation in the conference on dissident women organized by her and her organization — The Arab Women's Solidarity Association — last year, where I had also presented a paper on Mirabai and the relevance of her life as a "rebel saint" in the contemporary global world.

Wanting genuinely to understand their roots and Islam better after coming to India is a very critical psycho-religious process that Arab women share. In the face of the extreme cultural diversity that typifies India, the women felt shocked and shaken to the core of their beings especially by Hinduism (which is very different from Abrahamic religions) with its many symbols and rituals. After the initial disbelief of seeing a religion that was steeped heavily in idol worship, along with various kinds of celebrations, many women resorted to understanding the essence of their own religion. Many women felt that the religious and cultural diversity of India left them shocked, but they gradually learned to enjoy many of the celebrations, and actually looked forward to some of them, like the *Ganesh* festival dedicated to the elephant god *Ganesh*, or the *Navratri*, a nine day long celebration of the female Goddess "*Shakti*" depicted as *Durga Kali* and *Saraswati*. These celebrations are replete with dancing and plenty of shopping. The real India, they said, was quite different from what they had seen in the Bollywood films.

Most women had learned from their Indian friends to make their bread at home. They learned to cook vegetarian food and respect the vegetarian way of life. They said their disgust at the filth and poverty in India had changed into a more compassionate concern. Many Arab women were surprised to know that India had so many types of Muslims, divided according to region and class lines.

The women said that they had resorted to understanding the Quran better in case Indians, especially Hindus, asked them theological questions.

The Indian saree left many women in wonderment. They thought Indian women were very bold wearing attire that exposed a part of the body (the belly), which was between two very important parts of the female anatomy.

Among the many difficult decisions to take was the one of learning to ride the scooter that according to many Arab women was unfeminine. Many said that they would drive a car, but riding a scooter was blasé and making the decision to finally ride one had left them stressed. They expressed how happy they felt to be on their own and mobile once they had overcome their shyness.

The Journey- Away from Home

The women said that they made this rather difficult decision of coming to India after consulting several friends, family, and other students already living in India. One of the reasons that makes this decision so complex for women who wish to study in India is the challenges they face concerning the educational system.

One of the most difficult experiences Arab women and other foreign students face in India is college admission. The poor language skills, especially among the Arab students, make the entire process of seeking admission very stressful.

Many young Arab women felt that coming to India and handling the excessive paperwork and the long wait to get into a good college or be accepted by a research supervisor of their choice, had left them feeling exhausted. However, it had also made them very resilient. The admission system of the universities in most Indian cities

is extremely tedious and drawn out, with a large amount of corruption, which leaves women who are unfamiliar with it tired and exasperated, especially if they are from foreign countries. Most Arab women students will seek the assistance of other experienced students or agents, either Indian or Arab, who will help them with the arduous paperwork.

They felt the need for a strong counseling program in both countries, and for more student representatives who could make life easier. Many women felt that the study of diaspora Arab women in India should focus on how women make decisions about their choices of college, entertainment, marriage, children, and career.

On the one hand, many women felt that their own Arab network of friends took care of their entertainment and fellowship needs, although on the other hand they felt that this dependency adversely affected their desire to become better acquainted with Indians. However, several women said they made special efforts to befriend other Indian women, which was not the case with some of the men who had participated in the discussion.

The women within the study said they felt more confident about being in a culture where there were many vicissitudes, and that perhaps the philosophy of the land influences a person living in it, making one more resilient, patient, and compassionate.

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New Section in *Al-Raida*

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