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Arab women find help adjusting to America



Arab-American Action Network smooths out rocky transition for recent immigrants



Randa Ibrahim works at Noor Al-Islam School in Bridgeview. (Chris Salata, Photo for the Tribune / June 29, 2010)

By Jennifer Day, Special to the Tribune
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Randa Ibrahim was serving coffee to the guests in her Palos Hills living room when

her 17-year-old daughter distractedly breezed through the living room and out the back door without so much as a nod.

"She won't come say hi," Ibrahim said disapprovingly. "I don't like the way she just comes through."

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culture. Ibrahim, a 47-year-old Palestinian woman who grew up in Kuwait before coming to the United States in 1982 has tried to instill in her children the values she was raised with.

"I teach them the right ways. I take care of them," said Ibrahim, but American culture has taken root, too.

Arab women in the U.S. are often without the strong network of extended family that is traditional in Arab countries, and that can make dealing with the many cultural issues they face here very stressful. Many feel isolated and in some cases may suffer from depression, say officials at the Chicago-

based Arab-American Action Network, which a little more than three years ago organized a group to help them cope better.

The Arab-American Women's Committee brings together women who recently have come to the United States with more established immigrants to discuss problems and find better ways of coping with social challenges, said the organization's associate director, Rasmea Yousef. It aims to help women bridge cultural gaps while helping them become community leaders.

"We help them express feelings," said Yousef, who formed the group a little more than three years ago. "Traditionally, women didn't speak about private things. They thought it was shameful."

Abdalla Ali is a family therapist in Dearborn, Mich., home to the largest Arab U.S. population. (The Arab-American Action Network estimates there are 220,000 in the Chicago area). He said Arab-Americans face an array of challenges and estimates that of the 1,400 patients in his clinic, 600 to 800 have been diagnosed with depression or, in the case of war refugees, post-traumatic **stress** disorder.

Many lack the language skills and education levels that can help find jobs, leading to financial strain. For women, the issues that arise with raising children here can be very stressful, he said. As children start to Americanize to fit in with their peers at school, tension rises.

If mothers, usually the ones dealing with issues at school, don't speak English, they have trouble communicating with children's teachers and heading off problems. Language barriers may arise within the family, too.

"The most important thing here is communication," said Ali, who added that he was a translator during a counseling session for a mother who spoke only Arabic and her teenage son who spoke only English.

"It really depends on the family. When a father and mother can't follow their kids in school and go to the parents meetings and read what the school sends home, you have a very difficult burden to manage," he said. "Families often try to hide these problems, this shame."

One way women are encouraged to open up is by sharing what they are going through, said Faida Sahouri, a group member and one of the relatively few Arab-American women therapists in the Chicago area.

"When they talk about [issues they face], it makes it less of a burden. It makes them feel better after that," said Sahouri, who facilitates a creative writing project for the group.

The group is working on its second volume of collected stories as a result of the writing project. Several of the stories recounted ugly incidents involving ethnic or religious targeting, which also add to families' stress, she said.

When Ibrahim decided at age 30 to cover her head with a hijab and dress in an abaya — a robe traditionally worn by Muslim women — she was surprised by the reactions she received.

"When I started wearing a hijab, my neighbor, she doesn't know me," she said. "I saw her in school and said hi, and she turned her face. I thought maybe she didn't know me, but I had my kids with me. She knows my kids."

Ibrahim said that since joining the women's group, she has become a stronger, more independent woman. When her husband was overprotective, she didn't challenge him. She was always exhausted from taking care of the kids, making sure the house was perfect, and fielding phone calls from her mother-in-law, who she said would quiz her about what meals she was planning to cook for the day.

Now she teaches Arabic as a second language, works with her daughter as a DJ at weddings and sells Mary Kay cosmetics. When she decided to go back to school at **DePaul University** to become certified to teach Arabic, she said her husband "got crazy."

"He said, 'How will you go?' " Ibrahim recalled. "My friend said, 'It's OK, we'll find a way.' "

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But she said some topics, such as teen drug use, are still easier to write about in the group.

Ibrahim wrote a play about an Arab-American mother who was oblivious to her teenage son's drug use. She and her friends performed the play, which blended humor and education, for 150 women at an Arab-American Action Network event.

As Ibrahim relates the details of the play, Yousef beams: "When I first met Randa, I knew she (would) be a leader in her community."

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