

# “Don't Forget”: The Life and Role of Arab American Women in the Early 20th Century

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## Abstract

While Arab American women have often been excluded from the narrative of the Arab American community, they have had lasting influence on the nature and development of the American identity. As mothers, teachers, and supporters of the community, Arab American women have been active cultural influences, despite social restrictions and a lack of formal power.



## 1 INTRODUCTION

One of these children will tell a story that keeps her people alive. We don't know yet which one she is. —Naomi Shihab Nye<sup>1</sup>

In Arab American populations, the stories that are passed down from parent to child have been specially designed to create an assimilated but proud community, one which is tied to old family recipes and days spent in the church; one which is tied to a love of America and hope for a better future. When Arab immigrants first began their life in the United States, they learned that their survival would rest on their ability to assimilate. If they could look and act American, they would be American. As a result, this process of assimilation left aspects of the Arab identity behind.

As Arab American children came of age in the early 20th century, they began to create cultural community

centers which would help to institutionalize and regularize the Arab culture passed down to new generations. These centers, and the men who ran them, would be the recognized leaders of culture and teachers of history. However, social restrictions denied Arab American women access to leadership roles within these broader community centers. Arab American women learned to pass down their heritage by teaching their children and creating privatized philanthropic organizations with the ability to sponsor travel and housing for immigrant families, build communities, and fund the arts.

In the early 20th century, Arab American women were active members of the Arab American community. Despite the restrictions placed on their bodies and the gendered social expectations they were forced to abide by, they played a crucial role in the development of the Arab American identity. Arab American women were the first to teach their children aspects of Arab culture, the first point of contact for incoming Arab immigrant families, sponsors of the community, and the supporters of Arab American art and literature.

There have been ample discussions of Arab American identity as a result of immigration practices and American cultural norms, as is evidenced by the works of both Gregory Orfalea and Sarah Gualtieri. There have also been studies on the agency and actions of Arab American women conducted by Evelyn Shakir and Nadine Naber. But these discussions have not explored the effect of Arab American women's agency on their roles as cultural mentors within the community. It is this gap that I address in this work.

## 2 ARAB MIGRATION AND ITS ROLE IN IDENTITY

There cannot be an accurate discussion of Arab American women without a clear understanding of the terms being used in this paper. An Arab is described as any person of Middle Eastern descent whose native language is Arabic. Due to a very diverse set of customs, religions and legal systems, this definition is based on a commonly held belief that Arabs are unified largely by language. As such, Arab immigrants are those who migrated to the United States from an Arab nation (though many of the nations from which Arab Americans emigrated were not independent, nor officially Arab, at the time discussed in this paper) and Arab Americans are the descendants of these immigrants. Because of the nature of the first wave of Arab immigrants to the U.S., Arab, Arab immigrant, and Arab American are all largely referring to Lebanese and Syrian Christian populations.

The immigration of Arabs to the United States is often broken up into three distinct periods. The first wave consisted largely of Ottoman Christians leaving the Mount Lebanon area (modern day Lebanon and Syria) between the 1880s and 1910s<sup>2</sup>. The second wave extended from the end of World War One to the mid 1960s and comprised of Arab Christians and Muslims from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine<sup>3</sup>. This final wave has lasted from the mid 1960s to today and is largely comprised of Muslim populations from Palestine, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon<sup>4</sup>.

While the motivation of Lebanese and Syrian people to emigrate from the Ottoman territory of Syria (occupying modern Syria, Lebanon and Israel) to the U.S. is a topic of debate, the formation of the Arab American identity hinges on the collective memory of life in the region and the usefulness of that narrative in gaining American sympathies. While most historians agree that economic strife was a leading cause of emigration, there is debate about what social and religious factors played a role in the emigration of large Lebanese Christian populations.

Some argue that Lebanese Christians from the Mount Lebanon region left due to religious attacks made by their Druze neighbors and the Ottoman government<sup>5</sup>. This theory has since been disputed by contemporary scholars who have noted that the “myth” of religious persecution arose after many Lebanese immigrants arrived in the U.S. as a way to create cultural and religious connections to the European and American Christian populations<sup>6</sup>.

Another argument, championed by Kemal H. Karpat, asserts that the loosening of strict emigration laws led to the mass movement of Ottoman citizens to the U.S. in the 1900s, and that emigration prior to that period was primarily done illegally; thus U.S. immigration records present a skewed narrative of emigrants’ true ethnic and religious identities<sup>7</sup>. Regardless of the cause of migration, every scholar recognizes that this voyage to the U.S. was

costly and dangerous. Many would have to sell all of their property as well as borrow money in order to make the trip<sup>2</sup>. Beyond this, until the Ottoman government changed their laws regarding the emigration of Lebanese peoples in 1898, migrants would have to pay bribes to dock workers and smugglers in order to avoid arrest<sup>2</sup>. To make this trip, especially with women and children, was a commitment which was not taken lightly.

While the exact reasoning for the first wave of Arab migration to the U.S. is the subject of debate, the point must be made that those who left did so because they did not see a future in Ottoman Syria and felt it important to assimilate, at least partially, to their new home. The lack of economic opportunity, bouts of religious conflict, and loosening Ottoman restrictions created a group of emigrants who would leave Greater Syria, with little to no expectation of returning.

The belief that migration was a necessary component of survival had profound effects on Arab immigrants. There was a sudden political and cultural distancing of immigrants from their homelands. Now, living in foreign lands, they had to maneuver new cultures and political systems in order to achieve the economic and social success they worked so hard to have access to. This distancing and need to assimilate created a community with strong cultural ties to Lebanon and Syria, but that lacked political attachment. Instead, Arab immigrants would shift their political attachment to their new national home and would raise their children in ways that would foster the acknowledgement of Arab culture and American patriotism.

## 3 ARAB AMERICAN IDENTITY (1910-1967)

After arriving in the U.S. many Arab parents attempted to raise their children to be both Arab and American. Many parents tried to teach their children their culture, but they also attempted to emblazon the American identity into their children’s psyche. Juliet Ayoob, an Arab American woman born in 1909 in Boston, Massachusetts, recounted how she had always been attached to and proud of her Arab identity<sup>8</sup>. As a child, she and her family were the only Arabs living in Framingham, Massachusetts. She grew up surrounded by other American children and attended school with them. She expressed that “We didn’t feel any different. I mean we all felt that, you know, we’re American and we were in America. It didn’t make any difference who they were or what they were. We were neighbors and got along<sup>8</sup>.” But despite feeling like an American, Ayoob was never ashamed to be Arab. She noted that her Arab heritage was something she had always been proud of and that her only regret was not learning Arabic as a child<sup>8</sup>.

Similarly, Mary Williams, an Arab American woman born in 1910 in Peoria, Illinois, stressed that when she

was growing up, she and her Lebanese neighbors all held close ties to their parents' homeland. Unlike Ayoob, Williams lived in an area which was home to a significant Lebanese population, which resulted in Williams having a more visible attachment to Lebanon as a child<sup>9</sup>. Her family attended a Syrian cultural club (prior to 1920, Syrian and Lebanese were considered to be interchangeable since the Ottoman territory of Greater Syria included modern day Lebanon) and Williams recalled an almost “clannish” bond between the Lebanese families of Peoria<sup>9</sup>. As such, Williams remembered growing up immersed in Lebanese culture. However, much like Ayoob, she had exposure to the Arab language but was not taught how to read or speak it<sup>9</sup>.

While Williams had a greater immersion in Arab and Lebanese culture than Ayoob, she still makes an effort to describe how important becoming a citizen was for her father and family. She recalls helping her father study for his citizenship exam and the fact that he struggled to become naturalized until she was 13 or 14<sup>9</sup>. This struggle, coupled with her father's desire to move and raise his family in the United States, is indicative of a close attachment to the American identity.

It must be noted that all of the women discussed in this section thus far have come from lower to middle class Christian families. In contrast, Leila Diab is an Arab American Muslim woman born in 1949 in Chicago, Illinois. Her father was Palestinian and her mother was second generation Turkish. On weekends her parents would send the children to the Palestine Community Center where they would learn Arabic and study Islam. When Diab turned 10 her father took her and her siblings to Egypt for schooling. She and her sister ended up not knowing enough Arabic to remain in school, so her father then took them to the West Bank where they would stay for nearly three years. When asked about the experience Diab said, “. . . my father's main reasons for sending us [to Palestine] was to reconnect with our ancestral land, to understand the culture, the language<sup>10</sup>.” While her experience with the Arabic language is quite different from those previously illustrated, it is important to note that without further accounts from Muslim or upper-class women during this time, there is no way to determine if this experience was a result of class status, religion, or was an isolated experience.

#### **4 LIFE AS AN ARAB AMERICAN WOMAN IN THE U.S. (1910-1967)**

While many of the first wave Arab American families had left their homelands due to strife, it is clear that many still felt a deep attachment to their culture and traditions. Within this attachment was a desire to uphold the same family and gender roles as were practiced in Lebanon and Syria. As such social expectations dictated that Arab American women manage the home and maintain the

family honor, while their male counterparts operated in the public sphere as bread winners and societal builders. In their everyday life, Arab American women found themselves being strictly supervised by their male family members.<sup>11</sup> Ayoob notes that many Arab American families felt that regulating their daughters' actions was a matter of honor<sup>11;8</sup>. Similarly, Williams notes that in most households Lebanese women had to wait on their husbands, hand and foot, even more so than most white American women at the time<sup>9</sup>.

When young Arab American women came of age, marriage would become a salient issue within the home. Arab American women were expected to get married and there were very few cases of women abstaining from this practice<sup>11</sup>. A common practice among immigrant families was the arranging of marriages between daughters and cousins, either already in the U.S. or still in the Middle East. Like many women, Lillian Corbey's parents arranged an engagement between her and her cousin. While she was ultimately given the choice to marry someone else, it is important to note that the practice was common, though there was a degree of flexibility in America not often found in Lebanon<sup>11;9</sup>. Unlike Corbey, Diab's father placed a great deal of emphasis on her early marriage to a proper suitor. At 16, Diab's father told her she would be getting married to a man of his choosing. She was able to postpone the date of the wedding, but she was still forced into marriage at the age of 17<sup>10</sup>. If an Arab American girl was not to wed someone hand-picked by her parents the general expectation was that she would marry another Catholic Arab, as non-Arabs and non-Catholics were considered to be unsatisfactory matches<sup>11</sup>. Another old tradition that changed upon the adaptation to American culture was the presentation of a dowry. While the dowry was not officially an expected part of the wedding engagement, there are cases of mothers offering up to \$10,000 to any Arab girl willing to marry their sons<sup>8</sup>.

While many Arab American women from middle and upper-class homes were not expected to work, a significant number of women, especially widows or women from low income families, needed to work in order to sustain their families and themselves<sup>11</sup>. In the case of widows, the ability to work was a means of survival. Mary Williams' mother was widowed when she had six children and one baby on the way. She took to baking in order to ensure that her family would have food and housing. Prior to being widowed, Williams' mother would crochet doilies and sell them door to door. While her mother baked bread, Williams got a job in a local office to help make ends meet<sup>9</sup>. Similar stories echo throughout the narrative of many Arab American women.

Arab immigrant women in the early 20th century would often peddle embroidered pieces, a practice which was handed down to female children once they were old enough to work. Unlike their mothers, when Arab

American women came of age they would establish client based businesses, work in small textile shops, or find more conventional jobs in an office or business setting. Corbey noted that, because Arab American girls all went to school, they were able to find jobs that their immigrant mothers could not<sup>11</sup>.

It is important to note that the Arab American woman was slowly becoming an economic asset to the family<sup>12</sup>. Where it was not uncommon for Arab women to work in Lebanon in silk factories, their work was only necessary and accepted if the husband or father could not support the family entirely on his own<sup>2</sup>. In the U.S. however, many women noted that even if their family had the money to function without female income, they could have gotten jobs without it being an insult to the family. As such there was an increase in the economic opportunity of women and a decrease in the social implications of this work.

While many young girls were able to get a high school degree, there were very few women attending college prior to World War Two, and only a fraction of those girls were Arab American<sup>11</sup>. Ayoob recounted her desire to attend a university when she was younger. "I did want to go [to college] because at that time the girls were starting to go to college, and there were a lot of openings for teachers at the time<sup>8</sup>." Ayoob was able to attend school for one year before dropping out to help support her mother and siblings after her father died. Corbey was able to attend college for one year but after she got married she dropped out of school. Neither Ayoob nor Corbey ever got to return to college. Both Ayoob and Corbey's accounts illustrate that while Arab American women did receive a more consistent education than their mothers, there was still a prevailing belief that the university education of women was only acceptable if the woman could not be useful in another realm of her community.

In this first 57 years of identity formation, second generation Arab American women saw little change in the life they led. Regardless of birth year, women born between 1910 and 1967 were expected to primarily operate within the home and follow traditional marriage customs<sup>11;9;10</sup>. Third and fourth generation did gradually gain access to the professional job market and to a college education following World War Two, however, many third and fourth generation women were still expected to marry young and remain in the home<sup>13</sup>.

While early 20th century Arab American women faced many of the same restrictions to their daily activities as women in their parents' native countries, it is important to recognize the many freedoms they did have access to. In general, these women were expected to marry men their parents deemed acceptable, but they had the legal freedom to specify the terms of marriage and to leave marriages which were unhappy or abusive. They were expected to become house managers and tend to their

husbands and children with devotion, but many women were allowed to work because the practice became more acceptable as it began to reflect less on family honor and more on the status of women as economic assets. As such, it is clear that Arab American girls faced their own unique set of restrictions which were partially based in Arab tradition, and partially adapted to American legal and social codes.

## 5 THE ROLE OF ARAB AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY (1910-1967)

Arab American women were attached both to their Arab heritage and their American identity, but it was often difficult to express their identity in formalized settings. This was due to the fact that first, there were many restrictions placed on women's movements in public spaces and second, women could not hold formal leadership roles in the community. Despite these restrictions, women were often the first teachers of their children, key points of contact for incoming immigrants and struggling community members, and supporters of art and literature.

Due to a lack of access to the political realm, Arab American women were forced to cultivate cultural attachments to the Arab world. Unlike Arab American men, women are not credited with the creation of Arab American community centers or organizations. They were not the creators of the Arab American press. They were not even recognized as the formal head of the home. Instead, the role of Arab American women as teachers, community builders, and cultural supporters has been overlooked by the historical narrative.

Arab American women operated primarily within the private sphere and while increasing numbers of women were able to work outside the home, their primary position was that of mother and house manager. In the early 20th century Arab American women were the ones responsible for the efficiency of the home and the primary education that the children would receive regarding societal expectations. Women were to instill in their children the qualities necessary of a good citizen. As such, Arab American women were the first teachers Arab American children would encounter and they were the first people to instill cultural values and expectations into children making them key in determining which aspects of culture to keep and which to let fade away.

Beginning in 1880, mothers in Lebanon were the primary educators of children. It was the responsibility of the mother to teach their children how to successfully operate in society. They were to teach them manners, health, and culture<sup>6</sup>. This practice did not disappear as families moved to the U.S. and it flourished as Arab American women came of age and began raising their own children<sup>6</sup>.

Many mothers found it their responsibility to teach their children about their culture. Mothers would pass down family recipes and Arab songs, but they were also the ones who would push for a unified community built on Arab culture. Diab vowed to herself that she would make sure her children knew about their culture and history. She mentioned that she would often get involved in cultural issues and volunteer to help the community so that she could make sure her children got involved in the same cultural conversations. Beyond this, she would ensure that her children would attend cultural events and festivals. In one instance, she forced her son to sign up to be a part of the Palestinian Youth delegation which would go to Lebanon for five weeks so that he could learn about his culture<sup>10</sup>. In cases similar to Diab, mothers are the ones who indoctrinate their children within Arab culture because they are the ones who control their children’s movements and direct their early learning.

Diab’s story is exemplary in other ways as well. Like Diab, many women volunteered or joined philanthropic organizations in order to get involved in the community and the issues which threaten it. As a result, the primary example of Arab American women’s influence on culture can be found in the discussion of early 20th century philanthropic organizations such as the Syrian Ladies Aid Society.

Arab American women faced many obstacles when trying to operate in the social sphere. As a result, Arab American women created groups which they could control and operate within the bounds of their gender sphere. By capitalizing on the gendered belief that women were nurturers and teachers, Arab American women created philanthropic organizations through which they could acculturate incoming immigrants and support the cultural exploration of Arab American artists.

Within the emerging Philanthropic field of study, many scholars have noted trends in the formation of women’s philanthropic organizations. The first philanthropic organizations to be created in most immigrant communities were created and run by men shortly after arriving in the U.S<sup>14</sup>. Eventually women’s organizations would follow, though usually long after the initial organizations were established<sup>14</sup>. This gap in the creation of these sister organizations suggests that Arab American women were the ones to create philanthropic organizations, not Arab immigrant women, who were likely less educated, not fluent in English and less free to operate outside the home<sup>15</sup>.

While this paper primarily focusses on the actions of Christian-Lebanese Arab American women, it is again important to note that this was not the only demographic to arrive in the U.S. in the early 20th century. While the actions of separate demographics cannot completely predict the actions of Lebanese Christians, a case study of Yemenite Jewish women conducted by

Nitza Druyan effectively demonstrates the role of second generation Arab American women in the creation of philanthropic organizations.

In this case study Druyan found that the second-generation Yemenite women of New York had greater access to the public sphere than their mothers and that they were able to capitalize on this access to create the Yemenite Ladies’ Relief Society, a philanthropic organization which addressed several causes during its tenure (1930-1950), including financial support to Eretz Israel and the Jewish populations of Yemen<sup>15</sup>. Beyond this, the Yemenite women of New York “were at the vanguard of acculturation” as they worked to incorporate their community into the broader American Jewish community, a feat which they accomplished in their 20-year tenure<sup>15</sup>.

While this case is not perfectly applicable to the Christian-Lebanese women which dominate this work, it is important to note that there are key similarities which unify the groups. In both cases the Arab immigrant women were not the group which created the female philanthropic organizations. Much like the Christian-Lebanese groups, the Yemenite Ladies’ Relief Society was created following the establishment of a male dominated philanthropic group. However, the most important similarity is that these women’s role in the acculturation of immigrant families and the community building which would link them to similar populations in the U.S. cannot be understated.

In the Christian Arab community, the women led philanthropic organizations which arose often focused more on the acculturation of incoming immigrant families, community building efforts, and the arts than on sending money to Lebanon, though this was a goal of these organizations. A close study of the Syrian Ladies Aid Society, created in Boston in 1917, demonstrates the ability of these women led organizations to build and enrich the Arab American community through the development and dissemination of culture.

The Syrian Ladies Aid Society was well known for its ability to fund the immigration of Syrian and Lebanese families who were in dire situations. Upon their arrival in the U.S., the group would often provide funds for housing and gifts which would allow the families to set up long term housing which may not have been available to them otherwise<sup>16</sup>. The Syrian Ladies Aid Society was thus a source of community growth and cultural renewal as incoming immigrants were often well integrated into the local community and brought with them their experiences of the homeland which they could share with Arab American youth<sup>16</sup>.

Beyond the community growth which could be attributed to immigration, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society was dedicated to connecting Arab communities in the United States. In 1918, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society began to support a Muslim group, led by Mohammed

Mhaison, which was going to put on a play called Syrian Martyrs. In exchange for 25% of the proceeds, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society wrote a letter of support for the group helping to connect their large Christian constituency<sup>16</sup>. Similarly, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society often attempted to advertise their events and goals in several newspapers spanning across the north east in order to broaden their constituency beyond the confines of Boston<sup>16</sup>.

In one instance the Syrian Ladies Aid Society attempted to connect the entire Arab American population in order to locate the parents of a young Syrian girl who had been lost in Boston. The Syrian Ladies Aid Society paid to have her housed and taken care of for four months while they attempted to locate her parents. After months of searching, both in the U.S. and Syria, the father of the girl stepped forward and admitted to abandoning the young girl in Boston in the hopes of ridding the family of the financial burden she posed. After the girl's parents were found, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society published ads in multiple newspapers throughout the U.S. which detailed her story and advocated for the support of girls just like her<sup>16</sup>. At least for a brief period, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society was able to unify the entire Arab American population through this girl's story, demonstrating their philanthropic reach and their role as community unifiers.

Beyond the Syrian Ladies Aid Society's ability to unify the community through philanthropic fund raisers, the organization's headquarters became a central gathering place as it often hosted community events such as rummage sales, plays, social dinners, and holiday parties. The minutes from the organization's meetings from 1917 to 1932 mention several fundraising events which were hosted at their central headquarters and brought large numbers of community members together<sup>16</sup>. In their Treasury Report from 1924, the organization reported spending \$594.35 on Weekly Entertainments, \$764.43 on Plays and Special Entertainments, and \$1865.81 on Bazaars and Suppers<sup>17</sup>. All of this money was spent on events hosted by the Syrian Ladies Aid Society at their headquarters. This demonstrates that the group dedicated a great deal of money to local events which helped build the community and provide it with cultural events which would ensure a long-term attachment to the Arab American identity.

Finally, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society was an avid supporter of the arts. The organization often supported plays directed or written by Arab Americans; two examples include the play Syrian Martyr which they sponsored in 1918, and Madam X which they sponsored on 1930<sup>18</sup>. In addition to these, the organization also sponsored Arab and Arab American musicians demonstrated by their support for a concert in honor of Miss Najeeba Murad, a "Famous Arabic Nightingale," in 1938<sup>19</sup>.

Through their support of immigrants and community

members in need, community building efforts, and support of the cultural advancement through the arts, the Syrian Ladies Aid Society was able to ensure the survival of Arab culture and the Arab American identity. This group was only one of many which were created by Arab American women for the purpose of identity preservation and cultural dissemination. Through an examination of this group it is clear that Arab American women and the philanthropic organizations they created had a large role in the broader Arab American community and the preservation of its culture.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Arab American women have been a vital but overlooked component of the Arab American story. Early 20th century Arab American relied on women to hand down culture and support growth and development of the community. Despite gender norms and social pressure, Arab American women used their status as mothers and care givers to teach their children Arab culture. They also provided financial and cultural support to Arab American communities, immigrants, and the arts. Their actions as cultural mentors have been largely omitted from the narrative of Arab American history. This action justified general belief that Arab American women have always been oppressed and are thus irrelevant to cultural history. It is crucial to an understanding of the Arab American identity that women of the community be recognized for their part in the cultivation of a calculated identity, one which placed Arab Americans within the confines of an accepted immigrant population during a period when non-white foreigners were viewed with suspicion and contempt, and which shaped the context of Arab American social and political actions until the 1967 war.

The restrictions placed on Arab American women's movements, while prohibitive of leadership in the social sphere, were crucial in the development of their roles as mothers and philanthropic sponsors. By capitalizing on the social expectations of their gender these women were able to become teachers and community leaders. Despite the fact that these women have long been overlooked by history, their commitment to the preservation of their culture and to betterment of their fathers' people is proof that women who operate within their assigned gender sphere are no less capable of keeping their people alive.

## 7 EDITOR'S NOTES

This work was adapted from a senior thesis and has been condensed for publication. Contact DUURJ staff for the full publication.

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