



Lesson: Religion in Culture & Politics

Women's empowerment in Syria

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will explore the role of religion in society and politics in Syria. They will watch a series of video clips showing Muslim women in Syria who are committed to living according to Islam without giving up their autonomy. Students will compare the ideas and actions of these women with their personal idea of women's empowerment. They will then look at three quotes from the clips and explain in an essay what the women in the clips see as the role that religion plays in culture and politics.

The video clips featured in this lesson (in Arabic with English subtitles) are from the film, *The Light in Her Eyes*, a documentary that features a summer Qur'an school for girls in Damascus, Syria. Photography for the film was completed in November 2010, four months before the uprising in Syria began.

POV documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a lending library of DVD's and VHS tapes that you can borrow anytime during the school year — FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Develop a personal definition of an “empowered woman.”
- Compare and contrast the ideas and actions of a group of Muslim women in Syria (as seen in a series of video clips) with the student's personal definition of women's empowerment.
- Consider women's empowerment within the parameters of different cultures and experiences.
- Respond in an essay to how religion plays into culture and politics, incorporating their personal definition of what an “empowered woman” is and evidence from the film.

GRADE LEVELS

9-12, college

SUBJECT AREAS

Current Events, Geography, Global Studies, Social Studies, Women's Studies, Modern World History, World Religions

MATERIALS

- Internet access and equipment to show the class online video
- A map showing the location of Syria

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period, plus time outside of class to complete student essays

FILM CLIPS

Clip 1: “The Biggest Challenge for Muslim Women” (length 2:46)

The clip begins at 21:25 with a Muslim cleric on TV. It ends at 24:11 when Enas says, “...those cultural behaviors.”

Clip 2: “Hijab: A Symbol and an Identity” (length 3:28)

The clip begins at 29:10 with the statement, “How many of you...” It ends at 32:38 with a shot of a girl in the hijab smiling and crying.

Clip 3: “The Right to Learn” (length 4:20)

The clip begins at 33:18 when Enas says, “I’m studying International Relations...”

The clip ends at 37:38 when Houda says, “Who am I working for?”

Clip 4: “Young Muslim Women at Lunch” (length 1:20)

The clip begins at 39:32 with a group of young women entering a restaurant. It ends at 40:52 with the line, “I can’t handle that at all.”

Clip 5: “End of Term Speech” (length 1:19)

The clip begins at 45:58 with the on-screen text, “Graduation Day.” It ends at 47:17 when Houda says, “Don’t give up your right to choose.”

ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to bring in quotes that reflect their ideas about women’s empowerment and discuss them in small groups. Then, have each student create a personal definition of an “empowered woman”. Is the definition of empowerment universal or does it change depending on the culture?
2. Explain that students are going to watch and discuss a series of video clips from the documentary film, “*The Light in Her Eyes*.” The students will then consider whether the women in the film match their personal definition of an “empowered woman.”
3. Point out where Syria is on a map. Explain that in Syria’s capital city of Damascus, the Al-Zahra mosque was the site of an intensive summer program where girls went to memorize the Quran and study other aspects of Islam. They also talk about how to be religiously devout as they pursue education, work, and other opportunities.
4. Show the class the series of video clips for this lesson. Discuss the following questions:

Clip 1: “The Biggest Challenge for Muslim Women” (length 2:46)

- One woman says, “A woman is a school. If you teach her, you teach an entire generation.” What do you think she means? What impact could such a belief have on the role of women in her community?
- A woman says it is important for girls to memorize the Quran to “protect yourself.” From whom might girls need protection? How might knowledge of the Quran offer protection?
- In terms of gender roles, how do the women distinguish Islam from their customs and traditions?

Clip 2: “Hijab: A Symbol and an Identity” (length 3:28)

- What meaning did the women in the film associate with wearing hijab?
- Is wearing hijab an act of empowerment? Why or why not?

Clip 3: “The Right to Learn” (length 4:20)

- What connection does the woman see between her studies and Islam?

Clip 4: “Young Muslim Women at Lunch” (length 1:20)

- Summarize in your own words how these young women feel about marriage and family.

Clip 5: “End of Term Speech” (length 1:19)

- What role do women play in how gender roles are defined?
- What type of role for women is encouraged through the video?

5. Give students the option to respond to one of two questions in a short essay:

- 1) One woman describes “customs and traditions” (as opposed to what is actually in the Quran) as being like “a cage that imprisons us all.” Are there types of customs and traditions in your own community that “imprison” people? What provides an escape from that prison? For Houda, a conservative Muslim preacher, and her community, how does religion provide an escape from the cage?
- 2) Respond to the two quotes. What are Houda and her daughter Enas suggesting should be the role of religion in society and politics?

Houda: "Muslims themselves have deprived women of everything, even the right to learn, teach, and enter the mosque. This is ignorance which has nothing to do with religion."

Enas: "In the Eastern culture, it's very common for the man to have the full authority on, on his wife, on his household. The problem is with associating Islam with those cultural behaviors."

EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS

1. Learn more about how the Islamic school for girls featured in "*The Light in Her Eyes*" is part of a global movement in which women are claiming space within the mosque, a place historically dominated by men, to study Islam in a more formalized way. Muslim women are also discussing how to live a life that is committed to both Islamic teachings and to pursuing educational and professional opportunities. Have students read more about this trend in an interview with anthropologist and author, Saba Mahmood (<http://thelightinhereyesmovie.com/resources/interview-saba-mahmood/>). Then, ask students to research evidence of this movement in countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and/or the United States. How might the secular or religious nature of the governments of these countries affect the religious activities of the women who live there? If the "piety movement" continues, what do students think Muslim communities will look like 20 years from now?

2. Investigate the turmoil that has taken place in Syria since filming for "*The Light in Her Eyes*" wrapped in 2010. Have students conduct research and use the online tool Timeline (<http://timeline.verite.co/>) to curate online content from sources like Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Google Maps, and others to summarize the major developments in the country's struggle. Discuss how Syria and its people featured in "*The Light in Her Eyes*" compares with media images of Syria and its people captured after the uprising began. What might account for these differences? What role does religion play in Syria's turmoil? What can and should the United States and the international community do, if anything, to address the Syrian uprising? How does the United States' role in other Arab Spring uprisings (like Egypt and Syria) compare to its role in Syria?

3. Explore additional POV and PBS films related to Muslims, feminism, spirituality, or the Middle East. Each film provides video, background information, and classroom activities online.

- *New Muslim Cool* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/newmuslimcool/>) follows the day-to-day life of a Muslim family living in Pittsburgh, Pa.
- *The Oath* (<http://www.pbs.org/pov/oath/>) tells the story of two brothers, one who used to be a bodyguard for Osama Bin Laden and another who is a terrorist suspect detained in Guantanamo.
- *Islam: Empire of Faith* (<http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/>) is a documentary that explains the basics of Islam, including its history, basic beliefs, culture, key leaders, and more.
- *Bhutto* (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/bhutto/>) is a portrait of Benazir Bhutto, the first Muslim woman elected to lead an Islamic nation.
- *Shadya* (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/shadya/>) tells the story of a 17-year-old female karate world champion striving to succeed on her own terms within her traditional Muslim village in northern Israel.

- *The Calling* (<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/calling/>) follows seven Muslims, Catholics, Evangelical Christians, and Jews on a dramatic journey as they train to become professional clergy.

4. Study different perspectives on wearing hijab. Have students read, "[Bridging the Disconnect: Unveiling the Hijab and Islamic Feminism](http://www.youngchicagoauthors.org/girlspeak/features/bridging-the-disconnect-unveiling-the-hijab-and-islamic-feminism-by-diamond-sharp.htm)" (<http://www.youngchicagoauthors.org/girlspeak/features/bridging-the-disconnect-unveiling-the-hijab-and-islamic-feminism-by-diamond-sharp.htm>) or the young adult novel "[Does My Head Look Big In This](http://www.amazon.com/Does-Head-Look-Big-This/dp/0439919479/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1340916547&sr=8-1&keywords=young+adult+novel+about+hijab)" (http://www.amazon.com/Does-Head-Look-Big-This/dp/0439919479/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1340916547&sr=8-1&keywords=young+adult+novel+about+hijab) and outline the various points of view about wearing hijab described in the essay. Discuss which viewpoint is closest to student opinions about this practice. Then, imagine a scenario where your school's administration is considering a ban on religious headwear, as has happened in a number of Western countries. Have students conduct additional research on the issue and write mock letters to the school principal that justify why such a ban should or should not be established.

5. Explore Arab women's perspectives on rights, religion and rebuilding after the recent uprisings. A Gallup report released in June 2012 found that Arab women are as likely as Arab men to support Islamic law in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. The polls also revealed that religious Arab men are more likely to support certain women's rights than men who are less devout. Review the full report [After the Arab Uprisings: Women on Rights, Religion, and Rebuilding](http://www.gallup.com/poll/155306/Arab-Uprisings-Women-Rights-Religion-Rebuilding.aspx) (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/155306/Arab-Uprisings-Women-Rights-Religion-Rebuilding.aspx>) and/or read a [summary of the findings in the Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/25/arab-women-islamic-law_n_1625570.html) (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/25/arab-women-islamic-law_n_1625570.html). Discuss how the poll reflects on Houda's statements about Islam.

RESOURCES

Global Connections: Roles of Women in Islamic Society

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/women/index.html>

The article addresses what the Quran says about the status and rights of women, women as political and religious leaders, and the role of women in Muslim history.

Independent Lens: Muslim Feminism

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/shadya/muslimfeminism.html>

This page describes the difference between "Muslim Women's Movements" and "Islamic Feminism."

POV Background: *The Light In Her Eyes*

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/thelightinhereyes/>

This resource gives background on Syria, basic Islamic beliefs and practices, and Islamic feminism.

U.S. Department of State: Syria

<http://www.state.gov/p/nea/ci/sy/index.htm>

This country profile includes a map, geographic details, and an historical overview.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

SL, 9-10, 11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grade-appropriate] topics, text, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

W.9-10, 11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.9-10, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.1 Writes arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

WHST. 9-10, 11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Content Knowledge: (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Behavioral Studies, Standard 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior.

Behavioral Studies, Standard 4: Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions.

Geography, Standard 4: Understands the physical and human characteristics of place.

Geography, Standard 10: Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics.

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

World History, Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability and peace in an interdependent world.

World History, Standard 45: Understands major global trends since World War II.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's Director of Education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource Web site (now PBS Teachers), and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.