

Crossing Borders: How My International Experience Has Affected My Worldview

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Living in a different country offers limitless opportunities for learning, examining our own biases, and broadening our understanding of others. Obtaining this opportunity of living abroad did not come easy to me. I was raised in a conservative family in Saudi Arabia. Women in Saudi Arabia are not expected to travel or live alone. Thus, my family was opposed to the idea of letting me study in the United States before I got married. After three years of constant begging, I was finally given my official document of parental permission to study in the United States at age 25. Being exposed to a variety of cultures within the U.S for over six years, my view of the world has been tremendously influenced, as well as my own self-identity. Now when I am asked where I come from, I respond: "I'm from all over". To explain the influence of my international experience, I will share my influenced familial, educational, stereotypical, and political views.

Familial Views

Family structure in Saudi Arabia is interdependent. Failure to abide by the societal expectations is a failure of the family. One example from my own experience, my father was strongly resistant to the idea of me living abroad alone because he was anxious of what other people might think of his parenting. Letting your daughter live on her own is viewed as a failure of your parenting, even shameful.

Then, I come to the U.S where the family structure is based on independence. The first encounter was when I lived with an American family in Minnesota whose college-age daughter was not living in the same home. The daughter also owned and drove a car. This was a shocking and awakening experience. I learned that girls here were independent and were not chauffeured around like I was in Saudi Arabia. This experience alone pushed me even further to become

more independent. Four months later, I lived on my own, learned how to drive, owned and drove my first car.

Another astonishing aspect of family structure in the U.S is courtship and marriage. Unlike in Saudi where marriages are typically arranged by parents, the couple here makes the decision alone. Because most marriages here are based on love, and “love is blind”, interracial marriages are common. This fact has made me examine my own biases that no race is superior to the other. Our human beauty comes from our differences and that is how we complement each other. When I started to ruminate over these thoughts, I came to question why I would let someone else choose my significant other and whether he also had to be a Saudi. My acquired freedom and empowered self-determined identity have led me to marry someone who is different in race, culture, language, and religion.

Educational Views

The major influence of my international experience on my educational views is the teacher-student relationship. It continuously surprises me how professors in the U.S believe students’ excuses without the need to show proofs. In Saudi, a friend of mine had to show her father’s death certificate so the professor would allow her absence from class.

The other part of trust is manifested during exams. The presence of professor during exams in the U.S is to help clarify things as needed. In Saudi, the professor is expected to carefully watch students because the assumption is “students will always cheat”. Now, I believe students meet professors’ expectations; if they are treated as trustworthy adults, they will be trustworthy adults.

Stereotypical Views

Getting out of comfort zones by living in a foreign country shakes up assumptions and demolishes stereotypes that have rooted and cumulated over the years. Before coming to the U.S., I had never encountered a Jewish person. My knowledge of Jews came mainly from media that continuously soaked us in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The stereotype I had about Jews was that they all were intolerant towards Arabs, and that we could never get along even on an individual level.

This stereotype was completely abolished once I moved in with a Jewish family in Ohio. It is safe to say that this short-lived experience was the most significant experience in my life. From fearing Jews to living with and calling them a father and mother. Not only did they treat me as a daughter, they also challenged my assumptions, knowledge, and ideas by engaging me in dinner discussions and taking me on trips to churches and synagogues. From those discussions and trips, I reached a new level of awareness that believing in God, Allah, Jehovah, or Yahweh should bring us together even if the worship looks overtly different. The essence is love of God.

Political Views

In Saudi Arabia, the king is viewed as the father of people and that all people shall submit to his orders. Going out of the “father’s” wishes by protesting on the street or the social media could lead the protester to jail, exile, or even death.

My exposure to the political scene of the U.S. has opened my eyes to how people could bring about change. Protests subsequent to president Trump’s executive order, issued in 2017, in which immigration from certain Muslim countries was banned, exemplified the power of people. Watching people protest and lawyers work at airports gave me an instant feeling of security and unity. I realized how laws could change by the power of people who believe in the same cause. I also began to question why freedom of expression is not an inalienable right in every country.

Conclusion

I feel privileged for being exposed to other cultures and ways of life. Before coming to the U.S., I viewed life through a keyhole. After immersing in this experience, I view the world through an open door, where I see no single correct way of living. This experience has assigned me a social responsibility to raise awareness of cultural differences, showing people that there is beauty and strength in diversity.