

A Female South Asian Experience in Jordan

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Who is the intended audience(s) for your Perspective Piece?: Females in the Middle East, South Asians in Jordan

My experience abroad in Jordan, overall, was the most challenging thing I have ever experienced. I found that it was not at all what I was expecting in that what had challenged me was not what I expected to be challenging for me. When signing up for the program and putting my deposit down, I thought to myself that the academics and the language barrier would be by far the hardest obstacle to face me during my four months in Amman. However, in the end, it was the cultural/societal differences that took the most out of me – let me explain.

Firstly, being Sri Lankan – South Asian in general, was hard in Jordan for both myself and my South Asian peers. Having people approach you and abruptly ask “are you Indian?” with no prompting or greeting otherwise was a daily occurrence, if it did not happen to me one day, I found that a peer had dealt with it. This, despite not being an offensive question, was difficult to handle in that Jordanians would be legitimately confused with the response I would give. I’d say, “no, I am American” or “no, I am from New York,” and they seemed to laugh and disregard it by following up with “where are you actually from?” If I had faced such a thing in the States it would be blatantly racist, and I would have a lot more to say than simply providing a patient explanation as I did to Jordanians. The way that you would have to understand this predicament I came to realize both through experience and discussing it with one of my professors, was to understand where Jordanians are coming from. Jordan is built up of a tribal society, a society that identifies with societal sect before the state, thus it is not considered rude to ask where someone is really from in that when Jordanians ask each other where they are from, they normally respond with their family/tribe’s name. But, in the States, this is not something we are accustomed to at all as we live in an extremely patriotic society that identifies with America before all else.

The second obstacle I found was the power females have in Jordanian society – or lack thereof. The clothing restrictions first and foremost, when it comes to this topic, is what troubled me the most. I was unable to express myself as I do in the States in that I was constantly required to wear bottoms that went past my knees even in the sweltering heat of Amman, and I was unable to expose my shoulders and such. Furthermore, even when I did cover up – somehow attention was still called to my female peers and I and the catcalling was endless as Jordanian males are consistently on somewhat of a power trip due to the patriarchal society that exists. The worst that I personally experienced was to be called a prostitute in Arabic. However, to overcome such instances one must simply look at the man/men in the eyes and loudly tell them to “shut up” or “stop it” in Arabic or English – either one works. Responding or simply glaring works as Jordanian men are unaccustomed to have the woman respond to their behavior, they are surprised when we are able to stand up and defend ourselves and thus are immediately embarrassed as public attention is called to them and what they just did.

However, as my time in Amman progressed, I found that there is a Feminist movement taking place in Jordan and that Jordan has its own version of Feminism and that Feminism forms uniquely to the society that it is in. I have learned this from venturing out of Jubeiha (where the CET apartments and the University of Jordan are) and traveling out to Weibdeh and such modernized areas of Amman. These are the places that provide an escape from the overwhelming nature of Jubeiha and lessens the nature of the cultural and societal differences one will definitely encounter in Jordan. This is because by traveling around, you meet foreigners from around the world that are experiencing or have experienced the same shocks you are, and they will teach you what they had learned firsthand. I have met many people during my time in Jordan by pushing my boundaries and venturing around Amman during night and day and in my opinion, this is what made me feel at home - by meeting new people I now admire and love so much that by the end of the program I realized Amman had become my home.