

## Muslim Mothering and Migration

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### Abstract

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*The purpose of this article is to review literature that provides insight on how immigrant Muslim mothers raise their children. In this article we acknowledge Muslim mothers' struggle to maintain and transmit their religious values and cultural traditions to their children. We begin the article with an overview of parenthood practices as they are illustrated in the religious writings of Islam, from the Qur'an and the Hadith. We then discuss how mothers' traditional values, specifically regarding parenting practices, are shaped by their culture of origin and by Islam as religion and a way of life. Finally, we discuss how these values together (the religious and cultural) with the acculturation or the effect of the dominant new culture may shape the parenting practices of immigrant Muslim mothers in the United States. A conceptual model using these constructs and their relationship to parenting practices of immigrant Muslim mothers is presented in appendix A.*

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**Key Words:** parenting, motherhood, values, Islam, culture, acculturation, migration

### Introduction

Motherhood is perhaps one of the most important roles in a woman's life. Although not all women become mothers, those who do have children are faced with a daunting amount of responsibility. What is perhaps even more difficult than raising one's children, is the task of raising children in a foreign culture. The authors of this article have multiple perspectives on this issue both as parents and children raised by immigrant parents. Doctors Al-Jayyousi and Al-Salim, are originally from Palestine and are raising their two American born daughters in the United States. Doctor Nazarinia-Roy, originally from Iran, immigrated to Canada with her family when she was five and is currently residing in the United States with her husband and daughter. This article was conceptualized after several discussions between the authors on the lack of literature on the diversity that exist in parenting practices amongst immigrant Muslim mothers in the United States. The authors believe that much of the diversity in parenting can be understood by evaluating the diversity in values held by immigrant Muslim mothers.

The purpose of this article is to review literature that helps understand parenting practices of immigrant Muslim mothers. Given the socially constructed nature of parenthood (Adamsons, 2010, p. 137) and the fact that religious faith and practice are influenced by social context (Predelli, 2004, p. 474), we believe Muslim mothering cannot be evaluated in isolation from the dominant new culture. We start this article with an overview of motherhood practices as they are illustrated in the religious writings of Islam, from the Qur'an and the Hadith. We then discuss how mothers' traditional values, specifically regarding parenting practices, are shaped by their culture of origin and by Islam as religion and a way of life. Finally, we discuss how these values together (the religious and cultural) with the acculturation or the effect of the dominant new culture may shape the parenting practices of immigrant Muslim mothers in the United States. A conceptual model using these constructs and their relationship to parenting practices of immigrant Muslim mothers is presented in appendix A.

Parenting practices can be defined as "a series of actions and interactions on the part of parents to promote the development of children" (Brooks, 2004, p. 5). Mothers are not homogenous in their parenting practices and we believe that in order to understand the diversity in parenting we first need to address the context of mothers' values. Values are the "standards of right and wrong" or "the general goals of an individual" (Padilla-Walker, 2007, p. 675- 677). Mothers differ in their values on parenting (LeVine, 1980, p. 25-26) because these values are embedded in different cultural contexts. We believe that immigrant Muslim mother's values are shaped and influenced by three contexts: religion (Islam), culture of origin, and acculturation.

Religion (Islam), Muslim Mother's Values and Maternal Practices

Muslim mothers' values regarding parenting are influenced by religion (Maiter & George, 2003, p. 423). Religion, for some individuals, is part of the identity which gives an explanation for what is happening in one's life and for his/her behaviors (Hjarpe, 1997, p. 267). We can define religion as religious beliefs "meanings and perspectives that are faith-based", and practices that are "the expressions of faith" (Marks, 2006, p. 604). In order to understand the influence of Islam as a religion on the Muslim mother's values and on motherhood practices, we decided first to return to the religious writings of Islam, including the Qur'an and Hadith.<sup>1</sup>

Motherhood Practices in Qur'an & Hadith

In Islam, mothers have a very special place. They are respected and recognized in the family. They face the difficulty of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and struggle in child rearing as the Qur'an illustrates: "And we have commanded that it is essential for man to be kind to his parents: In pain did his mother bear him, and in pain she give him birth. The carrying of the child to get him to eat food away from the mothers milk is a period of thirty months" (46:15). Hadith states the major and important role that Muslim mothers play in the daily life of her family members by protecting and taking care of them,

"Narrated Abdullah Ibn Umar: Each of you is a guardian and is responsible for his ward. The ruler is a guardian and the man is a guardian of the members of his household, and the woman is a guardian and is responsible for her husband's house and his offspring, and so each of you is a guardian and is responsible for his ward" (Al-Bukhari, 1997).

This Hadith shows the two characteristics of motherhood in Islam. First: A Muslim mother will be responsible to take care of her family. Second: she will have the natural gifts from Allah such as pregnancy, birth and emotions toward her children (Schleifer, 1986, p. 47).

A mother has many responsibilities in Islam, including the care of her children physically, mentally, and spiritually (Oh, 2010, p. 643). She is responsible to breastfeed her infant for two years "his weaning is in two years" (Qur'an 31:14) and Allah will reward her as Hadith mentions,

"Narrated Anas Ibn Malik: Sallah, the nurse of Prophet's son Ibrahim, said to the Prophet: O messenger of Allah, you brought tidings of all the good things to men but not to women... He said: does it not please any one of you that she receives, for every mouthful and for every suck, the reward of one good deed. And if she is kept awake by her child at night, she receives the reward of one who frees seventy slaves for the sake of Allah" (Muslim, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an: The Holy book for Muslims

Hadith: The sayings and acts of Prophet Mohammad

This Hadith demonstrates that Muslim mothers who breast feed their children will please God and be rewarded for their great efforts as those who are acting and following behaviors that will make them closer to God demands.

A Muslim mother is not only responsible for reproduction and generational continuity, but she also is responsible to educate her children about Islamic values. The Qur'an reports, "At length when he reaches the age of full strength and attains forty years, he says: "O my Lord! Grant me the gratitude that I may be thankful for Your favor which You have given to me, and upon both my parents, and that I may work rightful deeds such as those that You may approve; And be gracious to me in my offspring" (46:15). This part of the verse, as interpreted by Al-Qurtubi (1967), provides a guide for mothers in raising their children by teaching them to follow religious traditions and behaviors that will please God and make them successful in their life (Schleifer, 1986, p. 55).

The Hadith explains the task of the mother in providing her children with Islamic knowledge, faith, good behavior and morality,

"Narrated Ibn 'Umar: What does a parent leave as an inheritance for his child (that is) better than good morals?" (Ibn' Asakir, 1954).

A Muslim mother is responsible to educate her children about their religion by teaching them to read the Qur'an, recite it, and perform religious practices based on the five pillars of Islam (the declaration of the faith, praying five times a day, almsgiving, fasting the month of Ramadan, and making a pilgrimage to Makkah):

"From the Hadith of 'Amr Ibn Shu'aib on the authority of his father, on the authority of his grandfather, he said: The Messenger of Allah said: Order your children to pray at seven...." (Abu Dawud, 2000).

Hadith demonstrates how a Muslim mother must discipline her children and teach them how to listen and respect adults' opinion and advice, and especially the wisdom and knowledge of elders. This act will be rewarded by God as if the mother is providing aid to needy people,

"Narrated Jabir Ibn Samrah: That one of you disciplines his child is better for him than if he gives charity everyday half a sa (cubic measure) to a poor person." (At-Tabarani, 2008).

"Narrated Abu Hurairah: Set you children's eyes on piety; whoever wants to can purge disobedience from his child." (At-Tabarani, 2008).

On the other hand, she should be a close friend to them by listening and understanding their needs. In Islam mothers are viewed as the source of "affection and generosity" for their children and the nonstop source of love and support. Schleifer (1986) defined "the generosity" of the Muslim mother as a "willingness to give one's time to one's children or to share knowledge or to give assistance when needed. This may even include financial aid." (48):

"Narrated Anas: Be generous to your children, and excel in teaching them the best of conduct." (Ibn Majah, 2007).

All these struggle and efforts accomplished by the mother put her in a high position in family and society, and open the doors of paradise for her as mentioned by Prophet Mohammad: "Paradise is at the foot of the mother" (Al- Bukhari, 1997). The Qur'an states that Muslims should treat their parents in a good and respectful way and emphasized the parents' rights: "Worship none save Allah (only), and be good to parents" (2:83). In another verse Allah highlights the importance of honoring the mother because of the suffering she faced during pregnancy, birth and nursing,

"And we have commanded that it is essential for man to be kind to his parents: In pain did his mother bear him, and in pain she give him birth. The carrying of the child to get him to eat food away from the mothers milk is a period of thirty months" (Qur'an, 46:15).

In this verse Allah orders Muslims to respect, and treat their parents in a good way. Then Allah mentioned the reasons why a Muslim should be thankful to her/his mother: she will be pregnant and tolerate all the difficulty of pregnancy, she will be weak and face the pain when giving birth for her child(ren), and she will put lot of efforts when breastfeeding her infant for two years. The verse points also that the time from pregnancy till the mother can wean (stop breast feeding) her child is around thirty months.

The Hadith provides many examples of how Islam honored mothers and how their children should treat them

“Narrated Abu Hurairah: A man came to Prophet Muhammad and asked, ‘O Messenger of Allah! Who is more entitled to be treated with the best companionship by me?’ The Prophet said, ‘Your mother.’ The man said, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said, ‘Your mother.’ The man further said, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said, ‘Your mother.’ The man said again, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said, ‘Then your father’ ” (Muslim, 2007).

Because of this honor, Muslim mothers would view motherhood as a big responsibility and a difficult task and therefore have high expectations and goals regarding parenting their children.

Immigrant Muslim mothers in the United States are greatly influenced by these Islamic beliefs and practices regarding parenting; yet, there is diversity in the values of Muslim mothers. Part of this diversity comes from the way these mothers practice Islam which can influence their mothering values and their practices. For example, a mother who used to attend the mosque in country of origin for praying and receiving religious teaching may believe that to share these Islamic beliefs with her children she needs to send them to the mosque frequently and let them be involved in religious group activities. Other mothers who used to pray in their homes and rarely go to the mosque in their culture of origin may believe that they can teach these Islamic beliefs to their children at home and thus there is no need to send them to the mosque. Therefore, the mother’s culture of origin can influence her religious values and practices.

### **Culture of Origin, Muslim Mother’s Values and Maternal Practices**

Islam is not only a religion; it is a way of life for Muslims. In Islamic countries, it is hard to separate and differentiate religious values from cultural ones. But there is diversity from one culture to another in these religious values which is reflected in different practices of Islam. This cultural diversity comes from the different interpretations of Qur’an and Hadith. On one hand, Muslims have sharia, which are the general laws taken from both the Qur’an and Hadith. These laws are fixed and cannot change. On the other hand, there is fiqh which are the laws “deduced” from sharia, these are specific and changeable according to circumstances in which they are applied (Philips, 1988, p. 2). In Islam, there are different schools of fiqh, and each one has its own way of interpreting the Qur’an and Hadith. In addition, there are fatwas, “religious rulings and statements that are collectively agreed upon by the authorized religious leaders of the Muslim country” (Islam & Johnson, 2003, p. 321). They are issued to deal with behaviors that have not been specifically mentioned in the Qur’an or Hadith and are to be followed by all Muslims.

However, Islamic countries are different in what school of fiqh and fatwa they follow and how they practice Islam which is influenced by the political forces in the Middle East. As a result, A Muslim mother from South Asia may follow a school of fiqh that is different from the school followed by another Muslim mother from Palestine and so they will be different in their practices of Islam and in their values regarding parenting and teaching their children about Islam. One of the contributing authors (Aljayyousi) is currently conducting research on mother-daughter relationship and maternal practices of immigrant Muslim mothers from multiple Islamic countries (Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Iraq) residing in the Midwest of the United States and reports how country of origin can have a big influence on the immigrant Muslim mother’s parenting values. I have seen a Muslim mother ask her daughter to wear a head cover (hijab) during early adolescents or before because this mother herself wore the hijab around this age back home. Another Muslim mother from a different country may go as far as making this a personal choice for her daughter so that she can wear the hijab whenever she wants. In addition, I have seen other Muslim mothers who do not wear the hijab and will not ask their daughters to put wear itone.

A Culture of origin can have multiple definitions. It can be defined as “a set of characteristics, behaviors, rituals, and beliefs that are used to describe a group of people who: (a) live within (or originated from) a specific country or geographical region, (b) share a religious affiliation, (c) claim common ancestry and heritage, or (d) are grouped together for other reasons” (Myers-Walls, Myers-Bowman, & Posada, 2006, p. 148). According to this definition individuals usually make commitments and adhere to values that are accepted by their culture and society as a whole and so a mother’s values in parenting her children are greatly influenced by what is approved by her culture. This definition for culture may ignore the role of the mother in deciding her parenting values and suggest that mothers are products of their cultures. It has also been suggested that this definition is “static” and does not reflect the dynamicity of the culture surrounding individuals (Strauss & Quinn, 1997).

According to Strauss and Quinn (1997) a more dynamic definition of culture is one that accounts for the commonality in actions and shared meaning among a group of individuals. This reflects the dynamic nature of culture and implies that a culture includes a variety of contexts rather than one and therefore is not limited to a specific culture of origin. As a result mothers can share their experiences and create meanings with other mothers who share same characteristics and expectations for parenting their children.

For example, although respecting elders is emphasized by all Muslim cultures, in some cultures Muslim mothers are expected to teach their children to highly respect elders, not to answer them back, bend and kiss their hands, and to listen and stay quiet in old and elder people gatherings. Yet, not all immigrant Muslim mothers follow these maternal practices. Other mothers may teach their children to respect elders, but at the same time teach them how to communicate politely with them and how to express and share their opinions. These mothers may feel that this is the right way of making their children benefit from the elders' experiences and wisdom.

Immigrant Muslim mothers depend largely on what they perceive as their religious and cultural values in their parenting practices (Maiter & George, 2003, p. 420-423). They will struggle to pass the cultural and religious values to their children despite the challenges they may face. However, we cannot understand the influence of these values on the maternal practices in isolation from the new culture; that is, we cannot understand these emerging maternal practices without analyzing the US context in which they occur. In order to explain the immigrant Muslim mother's parenting practices, one should be aware of the three contexts that it is embedded in: religion, culture of origin, and the dominant "new" culture. We acknowledge this in the *Factors Influencing Parenting Practices of Immigrant Muslim Mothers* (See Appendix A) by identifying acculturation as a concept that can influence the relationship between a "mother's values" and "parenting practices."

#### Acculturation, Muslim Mother's values and Maternal Practices

Acculturation among immigrant families can be defined as the process by which an individual adapts to the traditions, values and behaviors of the new host culture (Ebin et al., 2001). It is a process that starts with adopting the traditional cultural values, then trying to have a balance between two cultures (biculturalism), and finally being involved more than before in the new host culture. Research suggests there is diversity within the parenting practices of Muslim families living in Great Britain and this diversity is linked to the extent of acculturation to the new host country (Basit, 1997).

For example, some immigrant families may emphasize "holding on" to their cultures of origin and strongly encourage their children to speak their native languages and practice their religious and cultural traditions such as, wearing the hijab and celebrating the Muslim feasts. Others may seek assimilation in the host society, placing less emphasis on their culture of origin, discouraging their children from speaking their native language or practicing cultural traditions. In addition, we may find parents who support biculturalism by encourage their children to have strong ties with their Muslim community and at the same time they are active members in the new host community. Ramirz and Cox (1980) noted that children with bicultural identity appear to show better intellectual abilities and higher self-esteem than those who are either isolated from the new host and still adhere to the traditions of culture of origin, or others who adapted to the new host.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States (Haddad, 1997) with 7 million Muslims from different ethnic origins (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2003). The majority of these Muslims are immigrants from other countries (Smith, 2003). Immigrant Muslim mothers in the United States face many challenges in parenting their children: (1) They are far from the culture of origin that would provide multiple levels of support (family, friends, and neighbors) needed to pass the religious and cultural values to their children, (2) they are in a culture which is not only non Islamic but contains values that can be contradictive of the values taught in Islam and (3) they are in a culture that has stereotypes about Islam and Muslims with the most common one being that all Muslims are terrorists, especially after September, 11, 2001.

#### Loss of Social Support and Diversity in Parenting Practices

Immigrant Muslim mothers teach their children about Islam and about their cultures of origin. They do this while lacking the needed social support from their extended family members, relatives and neighbors which makes parenting an emotionally and mentally draining task.

Research has shown South Asian Muslim mothers in Canada find that part of their parenting goals and practices are to transmit their cultural values to their children which include “respect for elders, modesty, humility, hard work, persistence, perseverance, and having a disciplined life” (Maiter & George, 2003, p. 420). These mothers report that the best way to internalize these values in their children is to follow and practice Islam.

In order to promote an Islamic lifestyle for their children and compensate for the loss of support, many Muslim mothers in the United States may pray frequently with their children, take them to religious education classes and celebrations in the mosques, and participate in activities and programs of their countries of origin communities (Ross-Sheriff, Tirmazi, & Walsh, 2007, p. 203). In addition, mothers may choose Islamic schools for their children and encourage them to have Muslim friends instead of non-Muslim ones. Some Muslim mothers believe that this will help their children have the sense of belonging to a group, develop religious and cultural identity and so enhance healthy development.

Yet this is not the case for all Muslim mothers; there are differences in the adjustments they make regarding their parenting values in new cultures. When it comes to practicing religion in the United States, Maloof and Ross-Sheriff (2003, p. 4) found that American Muslims may vary from liberal to conservative in their political tendencies. Mothers in the new culture may recognize the need to make changes in the way they used to practice Islam in order to ensure that their children know about their religion and know how to practice it. Some immigrant Muslim mothers may feel the need to adhere more firmly to religious customs in the new culture than they did in their country of origin. On the other hand, others may feel that they need to be flexible in teaching their children about religion or they may lose their children if they pressure practicing Islam on them (Maiter & George, 2003, p. 423).

### **Value Conflict and Diversity in Parenting Practices**

A new culture will impose a new social context on the mothers’ parenting practices with values and traditions that are in contrast with the ones accepted and approved by Islam and their cultures of origin (Ross-Sheriff & Husain, 2004, p. 167). For example, immigrant Muslim mothers may find that American culture values individuality and encourages autonomy and independence as part of the identity formation for their children while Islam values and respects the group values and encourages children to take into consideration the parents’ desires and opinions whenever they need to make decisions regarding different issues in their lives. Immigrant Muslim mothers interviewed in the Midwest of the United States mentioned that they will give their opinion, give advices and share values with their children to be sure that they are following the “family rules” which are shaped by religion, culture of origin and the dominant new culture (Al Jayyousi, 2013). Although these mothers set rules and establish boundaries in order to protect their children they also recognize that their children have a right to make their own decisions that will fit with their needs and desires.

Inman et al. described the “cultural value conflict” as an experience of cognitive conflicts results from the competition between the values that are adopted from the culture of origin and those that are forced by the new culture (18). The Immigrant Muslim woman will have, on one hand, an identity attached to religion (and the Qur’an and the Hadith) and country of origin, and on the other hand, an identity shaped by the new culture (Roald, 2001, p. 13). As a result, immigrant Muslim mothers may face a challenge and a need to define their values regarding parenting, whether Islamic, American or a mixture, according to their priorities and to their children’s needs.

Within this new environment, Muslim mothers may show variety and flexibility in what values they can accept from the new culture and in parenting their children. Some immigrant Muslim mothers may believe that they can accept some values from the new culture unless they are prohibited by Islam or unless such practices are contradictive of Islamic values. Naidoo and Davis (1988) found that immigrant South Asian mothers may accept American values that are related to issues of education and work, but not those related to marriage, religion, and gender roles (311-327). In addition, Muslim mothers may try new ways of parenting and different strategies to understand their children’s needs (Maiter & George, 2003); they may try to be good role models for them in practicing Islam and cultural customs, be involved in their lives (education and activities), and keep healthy communication with them (Ross-Sheriff, Tirmazi, & Walsh, 2007, p. 202).

Muslim mothers may recognize that they are part of this new society and that their children cannot be isolated from the new culture.

Some mothers may be flexible about their children's school and selection of friends because they believe that this is necessary for raising healthy children. Although they would prefer sending their children to Islamic schools and having Muslim friends to emphasize their Islamic and cultural values, these mothers may let their children enter American schools and have American friends but will monitor their activities and behaviors. They do so because they do not want their children to feel isolated, and they want them to be active members in the new culture.

One of the basic goals of immigrant Muslim mothers in parenting their children is their academic achievement. They want their children to be successful in school, get a high degree in education, and have a job with a good income. If these mothers choose American schools for their children, they may struggle with choosing the classes (e.g. sex education) their children can attend. Some mothers may accept their children attending sex education classes at school because they believe that a Muslim person should not be shy when seeking knowledge. Others may think that it is a personal and sensitive issue that parents can discuss this with their children at home (Maiter & George, 2003, p. 420). We believe there is diversity in how Muslim mothers chose to educate their children on sex.

### **September, 11, 2001 and Racial Stereotypes**

Since the attacks of September, 11, 2001, Muslim families in the United States have had to deal with stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009). Americans started to view all Muslims as terrorists and several discrimination and harassment events against Muslims have been recorded (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr). Muslim mothers became worried about their children and contemplated how they can raise them in a culture that is, they feel, "very anti-Muslim" (Ross-Sheriff, Tirmazi, & Walsh, 2007, p. 207). In a study on South Asian Muslim mothers it is mentioned that they sometimes hide that they are Muslims and some even avoid wearing their traditional outfits (Ross-Sheriff, Tirmazi, & Walsh). They feel that they do not have the freedom in expressing their faith or practicing their cultural traditions.

As a result, this event has influenced Muslim mother's parenting values and practices. Some mothers limit their visits to the mosques with their children and prefer to practice religion at home because they are afraid of targeting and harassment. Muslim mothers tried to be closer to their children more than before, talk to them, and listen to their concerns and questions (Ross-Sheriff, Tirmazi, & Walsh, 2007). Others may place restrictions on their children's behaviors. For example, some mothers may prevent their daughters from going to shop unless they go in groups or with their brothers (Ross-Sheriff, Tirmazi, & Walsh). And others may go as far as preventing their daughters from wearing hijab because they would be a "target of harassment and even severe violent action" (Ross-Sheriff, Tirmazi, & Walsh, 2007, p. 208).

### **A Conceptual Model: Implications and Limitations**

The suggested conceptual model, *Factors Influencing Parenting Practices of Immigrant Muslim Mothers*, helps explore the factors that shape and influence immigrant Muslim mothers' values regarding parenting and thus their parenting practices. Our model explains the diversity in immigrant Muslim mothers' values and maternal practices by addressing the three contexts that are needed to understand these practices in the new dominant culture: religion (as beliefs and practices), culture of origin, and acculturation or the new culture.

This model can be used by family life educators, family therapists, or social workers who work with immigrant Muslim mothers to help them understand the diversity of this population and thus help these mothers raise their children in the new culture. Our model gives explanation for some missing points in the literature, such as the influence of religious values on mothering practices and motherhood.

Yet our model has some limitations: first, there is paucity in the literature regarding the influence of religious values on Muslim mothering specifically. Second, research conducted on Muslim cultures and Muslim families in the United States is limited and thus we have limited sources to draw upon. Third, most of the research reviewed about Muslim mothers was limited to South Asian immigrant Muslim mothers reducing the generalizability of our model to all Muslim mothers.

### **Conclusion**

Muslim mother's traditional values regarding parenting are influenced by religion and culture of origin and these values play a major role in shaping mothering practices. But there is diversity in the values and practices of Muslim mothers which is caused by diversity in practicing Islam and the country of origin.

Being an immigrant mother in the United States imposes a new context on these maternal values and practices which may require making adjustments or even changes of some values and practices of these Muslim mothers.

Immigrant Muslim mothers in the United States cannot be studied as a single entity. Research should take into consideration the diversity in Muslim mothers' values regarding parenting and as a result the diversity in their mothering practices. More research, quantitative and qualitative, is needed on this population to help understand this diversity and these practices.

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## Appendix A

Figure 1.0. A Conceptual Model Represents Factors Influencing Parenting Practices of Immigrant Muslim Mothers

