Women, Islam and Western Liberalism
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Faisal al Yafai (editor)
Faz Hakim
Sarah Joseph
Gina Khan
Alveena Malik
Zohra Moosa
Saeeda Shah

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Authors

**Faz Hakim** is the Managing Director of Faz Hakim Ltd., which works as a consultancy business in public affairs, equality and diversity, communications issues and research. She previously worked as Political Adviser to the Chair and Chief Executive at the Equality and Human Rights Commission and served as Director of Corporate and Government Relations at the Commission for Racial Equality.

Faz Hakim has also served as a senior Political Adviser to the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair from 1994 - 2000. She has been a Vice-President at JP Morgan Investment Bank where she was head of their media relations for the EMEA region. She is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Runnymede Trust and was named as one of the 20 most powerful Muslim women in the UK in the Power List in 2008. She holds a BA in sociology from Stirling University and an advanced certificate in executive coaching from the Bristol Business School.

**Sarah Joseph** is the CEO and Editor-in-Chief of *emel*, the Muslim lifestyle magazine. Launched in 2003, the magazine has distribution in the UK, USA, Middle East and South East Asia, and subscribers in over 60 countries. She embraced Islam in 1988 and has lectured on Islam across the world since then. Sarah Joseph has made numerous media appearances including for the BBC, CNN and Al-Jazeera. She has written for newspapers including *The Times*, the *Guardian* and Abu
Dhabi’s *The National*, and scripted and recorded for a variety of BBC and independent TV and radio productions.

Sarah Joseph was a member of the Downing Street delegation in the aftermath of the July 2005 bombings and was a member of the Home Office Task Force on extremism. She has acted as a consultant on Islamic affairs to both private and public bodies.

Sarah Joseph was awarded an OBE in the June 2004 Queen’s Birthday Honour’s List for services to interfaith dialogue and the promotion of women’s rights. She was listed as one of the UK’s most powerful Muslims in the Muslim Power 100 by Carter Andersen, and is listed as one of the World’s 500 most influential Muslims by The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Jordan and Georgetown University.

**Gina Khan** is a Birmingham-based activist on Muslim issues. She has spoken widely about tensions within the Muslim community and her views have been reported in print and online media. She has been involved in the ‘One Law for All’ campaign against the introduction of sharia law in Britain. Gina Khan’s experiences are portrayed here by Eleanor Rogerson, Director of the Civitas Saturday schools project.

**Alveena Malik** is a Principal Associate at iCoCo with lead responsibility on Education and Cohesion policy as well as Intercultural Dialogue. She has overseen the development of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) Community Cohesion Schools Toolkit, British Council Intercultural Dialogue
resource guide, CDF/CLG Take Part Directory and has conducted a number of national and local reviews into education and cohesion issues.

Alveena Malik was formerly CRE Head of Communities and Integration Policy and was responsible for promulgating new thinking around the Integration agenda and mainstreaming this into Whitehall policy making. She led the development of CRE policy on issues of migration, segregation, extremism, interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution and mediation.

As Deputy Convenor of the Government’s Preventing Extremism Together (PET) Task Group in 2005, she presented a number of proposals to the Home Secretary to consider in tackling deprivation, disaffection and disengagement amongst Muslim communities in Britain. In 2007 she was appointed as Special Adviser to the Communities and Local Government (CLG) Select Committee on Migration and Cohesion and on Prevent. In 2008 Alveena joined the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) for six months as Policy Adviser to the Chair, Trevor Phillips. In 2009 Alveena Malik became Adviser to the Young Foundation and in 2010 she has been appointed as a Faith Adviser to the Secretary of State for Communities Faith Expert Panel.

Zohra Moosa is currently Women’s Rights Adviser at Action Aid. Prior to this role, Moosa was Senior Policy & Campaigns Officer at the Fawcett Society where she ran Seeing Double, a national programme on the needs and priorities of ethnic minority women in the UK.
AUTHORS

Her publications include *Lifts and Ladders: resolving ethnic minority women’s exclusion from power* and *Poverty Pathways: ethnic minority women’s livelihoods*. She joined Fawcett from her role as Senior Policy Adviser to the Director of Strategy and Communications at the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE).

**Dr Saeeda Shah** is currently teaching on Educational Leadership and Management programmes in the School of Education, University of Leicester, and is programme leader for MSc Educational Leadership and MBA Educational Management. Previously, she has taught for many years in higher education in Pakistan, holding senior management posts—her last position being professor/Dean at the University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan. She was awarded the Best University Teacher Award (Millennium Award 2000) by the University Grants Commission, Pakistan. She is also Visiting Professor of Education at the University of Derby.

She has published widely in the areas of educational leadership/management, gender, diversity, faith identity, and Islam and society. She has also participated in the United Nations Human Rights Commissions’ sessions in Geneva in relation to her work for human rights, with particular focus on women and youth.

**Faisal al Yafai** is a journalist, columnist and travel writer. A former staffer for the BBC and the *Guardian*, he has lived and worked in London, Washington DC, Beirut, Damascus and Cairo, and has reported from
countries across Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Russia.

He is a regular commentator for the Guardian and The National, writing from both London and the Middle East, covering politics, social affairs and international relations. He has spoken widely about the Middle East and Muslim issues, in print, in person and on television and has written about the emergence of new types of feminism across the Islamic world.

He is a Winston Churchill Fellow for 2009/2010, exploring feminism and liberalism in the Arab and Islamic worlds. As part of the fellowship he will undertake a major journey across the length of the Islamic world, from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia. His book about this journey will be published in 2011 by IB Tauris.

He has received a number of awards for his journalism, most recently Journalist of the Year at the Muslim Writer’s Awards in 2009, and the Ibn Battuta Award for Excellence in Media in 2010.
Introduction
Faisal al Yafai

Few policy topics arouse as much contention as those at the nexus of women, Islam and western liberalism. Contemporary public debate postulates its own set of beliefs about what constitutes liberalism and what Islam represents. For policy makers and researchers, who need to define terms more carefully, both these sets of ideas come with particular challenges: how do you define Islam when both its theory and practice vary across countries and communities? How do you define liberalism when the parts most passionately defended vary with the political climate?

Therefore this collection of essays has a hard task from the outset. In bringing together some of the leading thinkers among British Muslim women to look at the convergences and challenges between liberalism and Islam on the topic of women, the collection opens itself to criticism from all directions. Given that this topic arouses such passion, is amorphous, prone to misunderstanding and entrenched positions, it is rarely a good topic for sober assessment, let alone straightforward answers.

At the least this collection, a year in the making, does not aim at the latter. Rather the collection aims to stimulate analysis of the topic, allowing British Muslim women to speak for themselves on the issues that appear most pressing.

*     *     *     *
Islam in Britain has been under scrutiny for some years. Pressing political issues provided the initial spark, but Muslims and Islam have become the touchstone around which a host of concerns and complaints, relating to immigration, multiculturalism and identity have coalesced.

On a micro level, Muslims in Britain, like all individuals, have differing relationships with their communities, their country and their faith. These relationships shift over time, moving with both personal and political circumstances. Yet when played out via the media—which, in a country where Muslims are still a small minority, is the main exposure most people have to the community—such complexities are suppressed and an imagined whole is created from fragments of facts.

Such an imagined community of British Muslims becomes something of a caricature, with dramatic fragments—those fragments of violence or extreme views—being taken for an essential whole. Policy makers therefore have a difficult task, in trying to understand both these extreme manifestations and the beliefs and behaviour of the much wider whole.

In the charged atmosphere of recent years, the perception of Muslims in Britain as existing outside the mainstream has increased. It has become possible to talk about the community in ‘them’ terms, implicitly creating an ‘us’ category long missing from British political discourse. Politicians and commentators who have not been able to articulate a shared version of Britishness have framed their contribution to the
debate as defending British values, ostensibly of liberalism, but with very little content provided.

Within this debate, the status of women in British Muslim communities has become a key indicator of difference. Localised issues in specific UK communities have been merged with issues from other Muslim communities around the world—such as the legal status of women in Saudi Arabia and the wearing of the burqa in Afghanistan, two nations with very different cultures—into an imagined whole, giving the discussion the tenor of a global, interlinked dilemma. A focus on the status of women also appears to make concrete a set of beliefs (both about liberalism and about Islam) that in reality are fairly nebulous.

Yet there is a religious component. Although many of the most difficult challenges facing the British Muslim community—such as growing instances of polygamy and honour violence—are cultural rather than religious, because they are justified in the name of religion, and because the predominantly South Asian community increasingly identifies itself through religion, they take on the tenor of a religious issue.

* * *

The simplest way to understand the situation is through a specific context. The majority of British Muslims draw their religious (and ethnic) heritage from the traditions of South Asia, particularly Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Over time, those traditions have changed—Pakistan today does not have the same relationship with faith that it had a generation ago—while Muslims in Britain have also been influenced by
other Islamic intellectual currents, such as those from parts of the Arab world, from internet teachings that cross borders, and by attempts to forge a European Islam. These currents provide the specific religious tradition of British Muslims.

It is equally helpful to understand western liberalism in a specific context. To recognise the specificity of British liberalism: a capitalism-driven liberalism, affected by the traditions of Europe’s civilisation, formed by Enlightenment thinking, focused by dark European wars, but ultimately a peculiarly British conception of liberty.

Liberal tradition recognises a host of important values, the most important of which is liberty, the freedom to choose how to live. Yet freedom, as traditionally understood by liberals, means freedom from coercion by the state rather than by other people. It is the freedom ‘from’ that is so important. It is the freedom from coercion that most often, in the popular imagination, gets tangled with notions of religious compulsion.

Here a second form of liberty is important. Freedom also means personal freedom, especially in Britain where the homogenising tendency sometimes seen in Continental Europe is largely absent. Personal freedom is the freedom to choose how to think and how to behave. The strength of character to be eccentric, as John Stuart Mill had it.

Yet it is here that the rituals of religion, any religion, set up tensions, because organised religion sets the scope of people’s freedom to act, allowing some things and disallowing others. Concomitant liberal values of
tolerance and rationality may also find themselves rubbing up against organised religion.

Thus the currents of British Islam and the context of British liberalism form the backdrop to the present-day situation. For Muslim women, these are not abstract theories but living questions, the details of which the contributors to this collection deal with. Too often these questions are discussed by people speaking for Muslim women. This collection attempts to partially redress that, by allowing Muslim women to speak about the challenges, as they see them, of living in a liberal society.

* * * *

In her essay, which starts the collection, Sarah Joseph tackles the question head on: are liberalism and Islam fundamentally opposed to one another? She points out that neither side of the debate has a monopoly on liberation: there is ‘forced marriage, polygamy… female genital mutilation’ on one side and ‘wife beating, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy’ on the other. There is a tendency to see localised issues in Muslim communities as indicative of the religion as a whole, while minimising the issues of liberalism as not central to western life.

Joseph, while not diminishing the challenges facing Muslim women in a western context, emphasises that, as liberalism has a narrative and a tradition of liberation of women, so Islamic traditions have a narrative that can be used to explain and argue for liberal rights. Joseph implies a mutual respect and dialogue is possible between these two. Using the metaphor of her
own conversion to Islam, she argues that as much as a dialogue was necessary in her own family to accept her choice, so should there be a dialogue with British society to respect such a choice.

Faz Hakim turns her attention to two questions about Muslim women in public life: representation in politics and Muslim women in employment. Hakim points out some of the issues Asian women who seek to enter public life face from their own community (‘jealous elders viewing younger Muslim women as having taken their place, individuals suddenly finding themselves up against a barrage of abuse and rumours about their private lives the moment they decide to put their head above the parapet’).

As a political insider, Hakim is also able to identify other challenges within power structures: ‘What you learn very quickly inside political parties is that you have to tame that anger and mould it into a way of speaking that is acceptable to those political insiders who have been around for years.’ Hakim asks whether Islamic values are in any way incompatible with Muslim women’s involvement in western public life. To answer this, she draws on her understanding of the specific south Asian context of British Muslim identity and makes a serious attempt to delineate between generations.

Where Hakim tackles public roles, Alveena Malik turns her attention to public faith. Religious symbols, in particular the Muslim headscarf and veil, have themselves come to symbolise the fault-lines between western liberalism and the status of Muslim women. Malik looks at these symbols in context, not as markers
in an abstract debate but as part of a growing number of cases across different religions that have reached the UK courts. She looks at these religious symbols as part of an individual’s identity and assesses them in the context of public life.

She argues forcefully that as a society Britain needs to be more comfortable with public faith and proposes a new test for religious symbols in the public sphere: ‘Does the wearing of a symbol hinder a citizen’s ability to perform their public civic duties?’

Turning to the private lives of Muslim women, Saeeda Shah attempts to outline the challenges facing Muslim women in the West and does so by starting with how the text of the Quran has been interpreted and used by societies over the years. To read Shah’s essay is to glimpse the depth and complexity of the currents of Muslim scholarship on these issues, to get a sense of the debates on the text of the Quran and its impact on policies and practices in Muslim communities.

Shah carefully threads her way from the text of the Quran and its interpretation, to how the mainly Asian community in Britain has used religion as an assertion of identity. She is sensitive to the trends of identity politics and how the lack of access to public space by the Muslim community resulted in its redefinition of itself from a beleaguered community of various Asian groups ‘thus shifting from marginalised minority to an overarching powerful identity recognised as Muslim’.

She asks: ‘The question that arises is how does this identity construction impact on participation of Muslim women in the mainstream life in a liberal western
society in the present scenario of mistrust and rejection?’

Shah takes a serious approach to this rise in faith-identity and does not suggest minimising its importance or attempting to reverse the trend. Instead, Shah suggests concrete steps to better utilise that identity marker in creating a more cohesive society. She writes: ‘Recognising and valuing the right to different identities not only helps to resolve conflict but contributes to negotiation, sharing, and co-existence.’

Where Shah talks about the cultural norms and practices within the Muslim community that discriminate against women, Gina Khan shows us in personal detail how those things affected her. In her intensely personal essay, as told to Eleanor Rogerson, Khan outlines some of the difficulties she encountered as an Asian Muslim woman in Britain. Seen through her experiences, liberation becomes a dilemma, one that has allowed some immigrant communities to become attached to their community traditions.

For Khan, the notion that liberalism and Islam are easily compatible stumbles against the lived experience of some Muslim communities. Many of the issues Khan highlights—forced marriage, polygamy, domestic abuse, the appropriation of power by community leaders—are live questions for the British Muslim community, in tandem with the rest of society, to solve. Her testimony is important for the way it overturns some of the conventional thinking around British Muslim issues. Forced marriage, for example, often thought as something that only affects women—and indeed affected Khan herself—also affected her
husband, who was pressured into marrying a family member. She says: ‘He wouldn’t use the word “forced”—it’s embarrassing for a man—but he had no choice.’

The collection is completed with a nuanced essay by Zohra Moosa, who unpicks how the two conceptions of ‘Islam’ and ‘western liberalism’ have been created into inaccurate monoliths, presupposing a conflict and then reading social challenges within that framework. As Moosa writes: ‘“Muslim women” are then used as markers in the debate, becoming a metaphorical category rather than a group of diverse women who themselves have individual and complex relationships with Islam, the West and liberalism.’

Moosa highlights how the debate and conversation is often about Muslim women, rather than including them. She further questions the focus on the way Muslim women in Britain dress as opposed to what they say. Using the example of the French parliament’s debate on the wearing of the niqab, she points out how the framework of the discussion is about the assumption of difference based on clothing rather than more substantive views. The wearing of an item of clothing is seen as an indication of a political viewpoint, without reference to the actual views of women.

Moosa pushes us to reconsider the view that Islam is not ‘of’ the West by mentioning converts, most of whom are, naturally, born and bred in Britain. In this way, Moosa explains, not only are differences in the culture effaced, but even the way of being illiberal is homogenised. ‘Challenges by minority groups to the
state to be more liberal—for example by allowing greater freedom of religious expression through clothing—are generally not seen as a liberalising force.’

She poses a quandary that goes to the heart of liberalism’s experiences with different ways of life: ‘The right to liberty is meant to be a natural right, due to a person through their humanity. If a person’s right to liberty depends on whether they appear to be liberal, then the space is opened for the state to deny some people liberty based on their nonconformity.’

*   *   *   *

No one collection can answer all questions in a complex discussion. But they can sharpen the questions, focusing them into a form that can lead to more informed debate. That is the goal of this collection.
Are Liberalism and Islam Compatible?

Sarah Joseph

Having lectured on Islam for over 20 years I have been faced with all manner of questions from audiences, but my favourite question came from an American Evangelical Christian woman. The woman was part of a tour receiving cultural and religious awareness education in the UK. She looked at me straight in the face and asked, ‘What’s it like to have chosen to become a second class citizen?’ I burst out laughing, which confused the woman, for her question had been asked in earnest. Composing myself, I gently explained that her question was heavily loaded with pre-judgements. Despite the question, I liked the woman. She was not being prejudiced or Islamophobic in any aggressive sense of the words. Rather I would describe her as being naively honest. Her question got to the heart of what many audiences I have faced normally skirt around; a belief that Islam is intrinsically detrimental to women and at odds with western liberalism and modernity. Interestingly, there is a mirror view amongst some Muslims that western liberalism and modernity are intrinsically detrimental to Islam. I would argue that both positions are wrong.

There is no space in this essay to discuss in detail the many issues that are brought up to ‘prove’ that
Islam is detrimental to women. Women’s dress, forced marriage, polygamy, beating, female genital mutilation, and inheritance are just some of the topics used as ‘proof’. From the mirror perspective, wife beating, sexually transmitted diseases, juvenile delinquency, divorce/illegitimacy-abortion rates, teenage pregnancy, the sexualisation of women and children, nudity, and size zero are just some of the topics used to ‘prove’ that western liberalism and modernity are intrinsically detrimental to Islam and women. Neither side would recognise the list of ‘proofs’ from the other as being substantive parts of themselves, yet such stereotypes and prejudices persist.

Why they persist is a topic for another essay. One could point to the media portrayal of Muslim women, as well as the media sensationalism of aspects of western society, neither of which is necessarily accurate. However, when the vast majority of Britons have never engaged with Muslims—73 per cent say they know ‘not very much’ or ‘nothing’ about Britain’s Muslim community, and 66 per cent get their information from the TV and newspapers and a further eight per cent have no access to information—it is easy to see why and how such stereotypes persist on both sides. Suffice it to say that prejudice is born of pre-judgement. Pre-judgement arises when no real engagement takes place, leaving only rumour and superficial observation to form judgements.

From my readings of the traditional textual sources of Islam, namely the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet, I find that the society that the Prophet was attempting to build was one which was inclusive of
women and stood in stark contrast to the treatment of women in the Arabian Peninsula pre-Islam. Before Islam, women were the chattels of men. They could be bought and sold by men; upon the death of a father or a husband, women could be inherited by other men. For a woman to die as a result of what we would today call ‘domestic violence’ was not uncommon, nor was it punishable. Female infanticide was normal.

The Quranic and Prophetic call was one where men and women were to stand side by side to create a more just social framework. It stood against female infanticide and the ownership and inheritance of women by men. Instead of women being inherited, it allowed them to inherit. Women were to be educated not as a right but as a duty. And women duly participated within society giving freely their allegiance to the Prophet, as did Nusaybah bint Ka’ab and her sister in the historic Second Pledge of Aqaba. Nusaybah, along with other women, also participated in military campaigns when the fledgling Islamic society was threatened. The early Medinan model followed the Quranic dictum that men and women are ‘protecting friends of one another’.

The Quranic description of the relationship between men and women, ‘They are a garment for you and you are a garment to them’ establishes a strong metaphor of mutual protection. A garment shields you from adverse elements, a garment beautifies, a garment covers up faults and flaws. The description also parallels the Quranic verse ‘the best garment is the garment of God-consciousness’. As such the relationship between men and women is one of mutual
protection and a call to aspire towards mutual God-consciousness.

The Quranic paradigm changed and impacted Arabia and beyond, enabling women and allowing them to participate in society. Modern scholarship shows this. Sheikh Mohammad Akram Nadwi, a research fellow at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, went in search of women scholars of the early era hoping to find ‘30 or 40’; he found more than 8,000 biographical accounts. Dr Amira Sonbol, of Georgetown University in Washington, has identified dozens of ancient Islamic court documents that present Muslim women in a wholly different light from the negative perceptions of Muslim women today. And a Saudi lawyer has recently unearthed hundreds of historic papers showing women were once jurists, property owners, business people and scholars within Saudi Arabia itself.

Inspired by this model, many modern Muslim women are drawing on their faith and heritage to find a reality that calls on women to engage in their society on a par with men. Such a call has been described by some as the emergence of an Islamic feminism.

The term ‘Islamic feminism’ is not without controversy. Some feminists, unsupportive of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab, and generally wary of Islam; along with some Muslims, wary of feminism and its perceived contribution to the decline of social mores, may not like to see the conjunction of these two words. Yet there is no denying the need for culturally specific and relevant feminisms. If you are trying to find food or water for your family, gain access to
maternity provision or protect yourself and your family from the impact of war, then your issues will be different to those of women who are trying to become top executives in their companies. There is no one single way for women to be liberated, to suggest that there is, reeks of cultural imperialism; although obviously there are prima facie basic rights which need to be established and no amount of political correctness or cultural sensitivity should stand in the way of the establishment of justice.

Whether the term Islamic feminism is accepted or not, does not detract from the fact that traditional Islamic sources can provide an authentic narrative which propels women into the public sphere. As such, the concept of an intrinsic clash between Islam and female emancipation can be negated; although this is not to say that feminists would necessarily accept all aspects of perceived liberation in the Islamic framework, and not all Muslims would necessarily accept all aspects of perceived liberation and progress within the modern framework. What is needed is a sustained dialogue around the issues.

When I donned the hijab almost 22 years ago, as the daughter of a model agent, it was difficult for people to comprehend. It was perceived as a rejection of the liberation of women that others had fought for. However, I perceived the hijab to be a feminist statement which stood in opposition to the beauty fascism of the modelling industry which I had been witness to. A sustained dialogue based upon mutual respect allowed myself and my family to come to a place of understanding.
A family has bonds of love and an inherent closeness to make the sustained and often difficult dialogue possible and bearable. There is a certain self-interest within the familial framework which means that individuals continue their efforts; and there is often a certain knowledge of other family members which smooths over misconceptions between the parties. Whilst this is laudable at a personal level, how can sustained dialogue take place at a societal level where the familial bonds are not there, but where the need for dialogue is perhaps even greater?

There has been much talk of social cohesion and shared values within the realms of policy. Since the atrocities of September 11 2001 and the 7 July 2005 London bombings, the issues around radicalisation have permeated almost all discourse pertaining to Muslims and have coloured our perceptions. For me, the worst questions vis-à-vis radicalisation are those around loyalty and belonging: ‘Are you loyal to Islam or loyal to Britain?’ ‘Are you a Muslim first or a Briton first?’ Such questions pre-suppose a hierarchy of loyalty or the need for individuals to make a choice. There is little room for nuance. Even less room for dissent. Similar questions surround the issues of Muslim women: ‘Will you choose Islam or liberty, the hijab or integration, empowerment or faith?’ Such questions are loaded, rather like that of my American Evangelical Christian. They are asked in earnest, but initiate a negative response as such questions force people to choose; when ultimately Islam and liberty, hijab and integration, empowerment and faith are not mutually exclusive, polar opposites.
Muslims are not one monolithic mass. Western liberalism is not one monolithic mass. Modernity does not take one single shape. The debate is not black and white. Discourse has to take into consideration nuance and shades of grey. There also has to be room in the debate to realise that not every decision revolves around faith. For example, some Muslim women may choose not to join the labour market preferring instead to raise children during their child-bearing years. Such women would not be so different from mainstream British society where only 12 per cent of mothers want to work full time, 31 per cent do not want to work at all and 99 per cent of mothers with children under five believe that women should not work when the fathers work.

The issues facing Muslim women are not so very different to those facing women more generally. But the perception of Muslim women as ‘the other’, discourse pertaining to the Muslim women’s dress as women choosing to ‘other themselves’ and the portrayal of Islam and modernity being at loggerheads does nothing to help the engagement of Muslim women within wider society. I would contend that there is no obvious disconnect between Islam and modernity vis-à-vis women; and there is a case that if Muslim women seek to engage with society within an Islamic framework this should be encouraged.

Faith can be used against women, and there is no doubt that Islam is sometimes used to uphold discrimination against Muslim women. Such discrimination should not be seen as inevitable or Islamic by wider society, or by Muslim women themselves. It would be
a great injustice to Muslim women if wider society accepted the notion that Islam was the defining problem for Muslim women, forcing her to choose between faith or freedom. For it is possible that faith can inspire freedom and such liberty should not be viewed as an imported thing, a western intrusion; it is there, authentically, within the Islamic traditions.

The defining discourse of the next decade should not present Muslim women as vulnerable and passive victims of a patriarchal faith, asking the question: ‘Does Islam allow women to contribute to society?’ Rather, if faith is to remain as part of the discourse, then it should be in the spirit of faith-based social engagement and advocacy. There should be the presumption that Islam demands that men and women contribute to society, and thus the debate should be around how best people are going to contribute to society for the common good of all.
A Discussion of the Underlying Conflict that Exists between the Public and Private Lives of Muslim Women in Britain

Faz Hakim

Introduction

If you only used the British media as your guide, you would soon come to the conclusion that Muslim women are oppressed, forced to cover their faces and are generally downtrodden and abused by their autocratic and misogynistic men folk. There is a long-standing and widespread belief that Muslim women are often treated as little better than servants in their own homes and are utterly subservient to men. We hear stories of domestic abuse and forced marriages as though these are the norm, with Muslim women cast in the role of silent victims.

There can be little or no doubt that some of these stories are true and that there is an urgent need for those women who need support to be given it. However, what I argue in this essay is that this almost complete obsession with the ‘private’ lives of Muslim women has led us to ignore some real issues of importance that concern their ‘public’ lives and indeed the extent to which they can have one.¹
WOMEN, ISLAM AND WESTERN LIBERALISM

When talking about the public sphere I will look at two areas that I think deserve particular attention. First, I will look at the political dimension in terms of the representation of Muslim women within politics, the place where decisions can be made and voices heard, and, secondly, at the issue of the representation of Muslim women within employment and their rate of unemployment compared to other religious groups. I will explore whether some of the discrepancies we find can be explained by discrimination, perception on both sides, bad policies or choice. Finally, I will look at some potential policy recommendations which may help to make a difference.

1. Political

There is no greater indication that Muslim women face a serious problem with public life than the fact that until 2010 there were no Muslim women elected representatives in parliament and only a very few local councillors. It is a welcome breakthrough that the 2010 General Election gave us three Muslim women MPs but still shocking that it took so long to achieve this. Until now, the handful of Muslim women seen on our TV screens were either from community groups, think tanks or appointed to the House of Lords.

This lack of representation within the elected political sphere has sent out a clear message that Muslim women are unelectable.

If the belief exists within our political parties that Muslim women are vote losers, this can only reinforce the perception in the wider public of Muslim women
as hidden and downtrodden with an inherent lack of assertiveness and an inability to participate in the rough and tumble of politics. The counterpart to this argument, often heard, is that the Islamic faith holds Muslim women back and does not permit their inclusion in public life. Muslim men are thereby portrayed as backward looking misogynists.

There is a range of anecdotal evidence of the challenges and experiences faced by Muslim women who attempt to enter the political arena; jealous elders viewing younger Muslim women as having taken their place, individuals suddenly finding themselves up against a barrage of abuse and rumours about their private lives the moment they decide to put their head above the parapet and, in complete contrast to this, and at the other end of the spectrum, there are also many examples of those who have found a supportive and proud community standing encouragingly behind them.

What is clear is that public life is still an unexplored arena for many Muslim women because there is still a fear that other Muslims will not approve of their involvement in politics because it is not compatible with Muslim values. There is still a fear of shaming ones family, and this spotlight on the private responsibilities of Muslim women may be one of the most important reasons why so many find it difficult to break through the barriers into public life.

The reality of how British party politics works can be as equally debilitating to Muslim women as this perceived clash of values. The need to fit in and adjust to political traditions, selection contests and ways of
behaving can prove to be insurmountable. Most people get involved with politics because they are angry about an issue. What you learn very quickly inside political parties is that you have to tame that anger and mold it into a way of speaking that is acceptable to those political insiders who have been around for years. I constantly meet Muslim women who have been encouraged to get involved in politics only to be shunned once they speak their mind. It seems to me that it is politics and not the women who seek to enter it that needs to change.

2. Employment

The figures relating to Muslim women in employment are equally stark as for those in politics. Sixty-eight per cent of Muslim women are defined as inactive in the labour market and only 29 per cent are in employment. This figure is lower than for any other religious group. Nor does this apply, as might be assumed, to only first generation women; 51 per cent of second generation Muslim women are economically inactive compared to only 17 per cent of Hindu women. Furthermore, 13 per cent of second generation British Muslim women are unemployed, compared to four per cent of second generation Hindu and Sikh women, and three per cent of white women.²

Two studies conducted in the past year, one by the Young Foundation, and one by the think tank Quilliam have looked at the issue of Muslim women and work.³ Both have concluded that Muslim women do want to work, that they do have the support of their families in
going out to work but that other people’s expectations of them may be getting in the way. Both studies discuss perceptions that Muslim women don’t want to work or are held back by Muslim men and both studies agree that this is not borne out by the research. The studies looked at both first generation and second generation women and found that the general patterns of unemployment are similar, giving rise to the idea that there is an ‘ethnic penalty’ at play here that prevents Muslim women from gaining the same level of work as their counterparts in other ethnic groups.

Other factors considered important were language; an inability to speak English will clearly make it more difficult for an individual to find employment and childcare; the number of Muslim women taking up formal external childcare is very low, suggesting a concern amongst these women with the provision of childcare that is currently on offer.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

Is the very idea of a Muslim woman having a career in public life in a western society incompatible with Islamic values? To the majority of people the very fact that this question needs to be asked will be seen as proof that Islam is against equality for women. My personal experience is that the situation is far more complex.

To understand the real barrier for Muslim women it is necessary to understand the concept of ‘izzat’ (honour) in a south Asian context. A woman’s ‘izzat’ is seen as her most valued treasure and to lose it brings
shame on her family. Keeping one’s ‘izzat’ is about preserving those very private practices and attributes—chastity, modesty, honesty and humility that relate to private behaviour and it is perhaps these values and attributes that are seen as incompatible with the public life of politics, which has been tainted with speculation about corruption, arrogance, a culture of late nights and heavy drinking and with the odd extra marital affair thrown in! Whilst it should be argued that none of these practices are as endemic in politics or the political system as is perceived by the general public or that even if they were, no particular individual is necessarily forced to take part in them and thereby bring shame on her family, it is these very perceptions and fears—on both sides—that may be holding Muslim women back.

I strongly resist the argument that the values of Islam are incompatible with the values of public life or politics or that Muslim women cannot play a full part in them. What we do need to see, however, is a change in practices and more support for those Muslim women who come under attack for even daring to enter what is seen to be a man’s world and who face speculation about all the ‘bad’ things that could happen to them rather than being judged for their achievements.

Some of these issues are different for the different generations of Muslim women. For example, the issue of language has mainly been a barrier for an older generation, many of whom did not work. It is, however, also a constant issue for new generations as the number of marriages from abroad continues at a steady
rate. I would argue that language training, properly constituted for those not used to learning, is still needed as the ability to communicate with those around you is an important first step to breaking down barriers. However, it should not primarily be about passing tests but about being able to fully interact with others.

For many women the prime issue may be about how to balance a family life with work or public life. The low uptake of formal childcare by Muslim women indicates dissatisfaction with what is available, which may be linked to a cultural view that it is best for family to bring up a child. Again, this may change over time or may be reflective of a broader societal need to balance work and home life. The answer here may be in more flexible work patterns or payment for family members who care for young children linked to a carers allowance.

We are beginning to see the emergence of a new generation of young Muslim women who are both articulate and vocal and who are starting to get involved in a whole host of initiatives with both national and local government. Many of these women have become involved in government initiatives as a result of the ‘Prevent Agenda’ following the 7 July 2005 bombings in London. By targeting Muslims—understandably—we may have ended up pigeon-holing them as only being concerned with ‘Muslim issues’. What we are seeing is a rise in the number of ‘professional Muslims’, many of whom are learning valuable skills and gaining valuable experience. But perhaps we now need to move onto the next step—
involving these women in the mainstream policy making process. Rather then talking about issues as a Muslim, maybe they need to speak as part of a local community or as a teacher, doctor or mother. It is not an easy balance to achieve, being a Muslim woman brings a certain experience and perspective that is missing in British politics at the moment, but in order to be involved in the mainstream these women need to stop viewing every issue through the eyes of faith and start to be concerned with, and able to represent, the needs and views of Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

Perhaps this last sentence gives us a clue towards the solution. Muslim women are constantly singled out as delicate victims who need supporting. Perhaps, rather than allowing others to single us out, we need to make sure that we become part of the mainstream ourselves.
Religious Symbols and the Notion of Public Faith in Britain Today

Alveena Malik

Introduction

Worldwide debate on religion and public life has centred on religious symbols and the question that has been challenging politicians, policy makers, employers and the general public nationally and internationally is ‘Do religious symbols belong in the public sphere or should they be confined to the comfort of an individual’s own home?’

There has been intense focus on the visible symbols of faith, such as the kirpan, turban, yarmulke and crucifix but the most hotly contested issue in almost every country has been the veil.

In this essay, reference to the veil includes the hijab (headscarf), jilbab (long, loose coat) and the niqab (covers hands, face and feet). The reason for putting these together is quite simple, I do not believe we should treat the three approaches to the veil differently as in my opinion the degree to which a woman chooses to cover up is not the issue. If any judgement is to be made it should be made on her performance and ability to carry out her civic duties.

The veil is associated with sectarianism, backwardness and a rejection of post-modern values in many countries. Yet for many women who choose to wear
the veil in these countries it is associated with liberation from cultural norms, assertion of a political identity, enabling active participation and engagement in the public sphere, and encouraging integration into mainstream society.

This essay will not explore the virtues of the veil or its theological validity, which is a separate debate altogether. This essay will however focus on why we in Britain need to take a different direction on this issue to others in Europe and to accept the veil as part of a modern British way of life. In order to do this I will look at the roles and responsibilities of the individual and the majority population in accommodating the wearing of the veil whilst at the same time reducing the hostility it invokes. I will be arguing that it is not the veil itself that is the source of the conflict but the attitudes and behaviours of some of those who choose to wear it and those that oppose it which need to be challenged. Importantly too, this essay will argue for the need for Britain to boldly establish the notion of public faith providing a much needed anchor to calm the contentious, and at times volatile, debate on the place of faith in Britain today.

For many of us symbolism is an important aspect for our identity. The main problem that arises from this is how these symbols are read and perceived by others. Misreading these symbols is the main source of conflict and, therefore, it is these misperceptions and attitudes and not the symbols themselves that need to be addressed.
The Debate

In 2010 within the European Union two countries, France and Belgium, have successfully voted for a ban of the full veil (niqab) and are currently drafting laws which will ban the wearing of the niqab. Other European countries are watching closely and with keen interest as to how this unfolds before pursuing similar policies in their own countries.

Religious symbolism is in theory accommodated in Britain, with the courts making decisions on individual cases. However the recent cases (all featuring females), over religious symbols such as the crucifix, chastity ring, the kara, niqab, and the jilbab, have seriously called into question Britain’s ‘liberal and open approach’ to issues of religiosity.

A constitutional proportionality test that looks at the balance between, on the one side, an individual’s right to freedom of religion, against, the rights of the majority to safety, security and stability has dictated much of the recent decisions made on religious symbols in Britain.

The British anti-veil movement has justified its preference for a secularist approach to public life using the need to protect gender equality, health and safety and the communication argument as its defence.

If we take each of these arguments in turn we begin to discover some fundamental flaws in the rationale for banning the veil in public institutions.

The argument for protecting gender equality has almost become a redundant one. For a long time secularists and feminists argued that the veil was a
form of oppression by Muslim men worldwide who forced their women to wear the veil. However with increasing numbers of younger British Muslim women wearing the veil of their own free will, and articulating this expression discursively in terms of their human rights, it becomes very difficult to use the gender equality case.

A recent poll supported this argument when it found that the British public is significantly less likely than the French or German to associate negative attributes of ‘oppression’ and being ‘against women’ with the hijab. The British general public is also more likely to associate the hijab with confidence (41 per cent) than oppression (31 per cent) again in contrast to the French and Germans.\(^7\)

The ‘health and safety’ argument has also now become an invalid argument. In Britain, police officers, nurses, soldiers, transport workers and construction workers have been permitted to wear religious head coverings which have been adapted to ensure health and safety regulations are met.

The communication argument is still the strongest argument against the full veil (niqab). The case of Aisha Azmi, a teaching assistant from Dewsbury in West Yorkshire, who was dismissed for refusing to remove her niqab in the classroom brought the issue of the full veil into prominence. There were actually two underlying issues in this case the first being that the students had complained they had found it hard to understand Aisha Azmi during the lessons. The argument that facial expressions are integral to enable learning is an important one. In this case the teaching
assistant agreed to take off the veil in order to perform her duties effectively. The second less well reported issue was the fact that her new male co-worker had complained that he found it difficult to communicate with her due to the veil. This argument is less straightforward because other teachers in the school did not feel the veil was a barrier to communicating with their colleague. Therefore it is important to establish, in each case, if the communication argument is a real or perceived issue. There are in reality very few instances outside the education setting and perhaps the police, where a full veiled woman can not perform her duties effectively. Where barriers may be perceived they need to be tested against performance rather than perceptions and prejudices.

The above arguments currently applied in Britain to religious symbols are unhelpful, negatively construed and need to change.

**Time for a new approach**

I believe the wearing of religious symbols, including the full veil, should be a fundamental human right of an individual in both the public and private sphere. The real test for religious symbols in the public sphere should always be: ‘Does the wearing of a symbol (such as the kirpan, turban, yarmulke, crucifix and the veil) hinder a citizen’s ability to perform their public civic duties?’

This approach, as opposed to the one currently being applied, will be better placed to answer and effectively address the burning questions of today
asked by many employers and the general public such as: Does the veil inhibit a Muslim female student from learning, or does it affect the ability of a Muslim veiled teacher to teach and communicate with her students? Does the wearing of the crucifix inhibit the employee from operating a shop till? Is the solicitor wearing the turban able to fully represent a youth offender in court or is the MP wearing a yarmulke less well placed to deal with a constituent’s immigration application?

The counter argument to this proposed new approach is that it is the values and beliefs of those wearing the symbols which can influence decision-making. A person’s religious belief and values can influence their attitudes and behaviour which has an adverse impact on others. For example, a Muslim GP because of their religious conviction may not prescribe contraceptives or a Jewish registrar may refuse to marry a gay couple. These attitudes need to be challenged as they do affect the ability to perform public duty and could apply irrespective of whether religious symbols are manifested or not, for example a conservative Muslim may not always wear a hijab if female, or yarmulke if male. The point here is that the religious symbols in themselves are not the issue but it is the attitudes and behaviours.

That is why I’m arguing for clarity in debate around religious symbols and for a distinction to be made between the wearing of symbols and the attitudes and behaviours of those wearing the symbols. This requires a national consensus on the understanding of religious symbols and the responsibilities of those who choose to wear symbols and those who do not. Conservatives in
the new Coalition Government believe in a ‘Big Society’ approach to dealing with social issues, so this proposed new approach is very much in line with current government thinking.

With regards the veil, and this argument can extend to all religious symbols, the state, in terms of its role, needs to reclaim and strengthen its civic bond on this issue with the British public in general and Muslim communities in particular by taking responsibility and the lead in tackling prejudices, assumptions and perceptions on all sides.

By the same token, women who choose to adopt the veil and at the same time segregate themselves from mainstream society, who are also reluctant to take on their civic duties must be held responsible for strengthening their civic bond with the state and the British public.

I believe the most effective ways of challenging negative attitudes and behaviours on both sides, is through education and, where necessary, legislation.

**Education and Legislation**

In Britain we are leading the debate on community cohesion in order to address issues such as perceptions of religious symbols. In 2006 the Government introduced a duty on all schools in England to promote community cohesion. The duty places responsibilities on the school and its governors to address community cohesion under the three strands of 1) Teaching, learning and the curriculum, 2) Equity and Excellence and 3) Extended Services.
The duty provides a real opportunity to address these challenges in a meaningful way through the curriculum, tackling inequalities and importantly providing a vital link between the school and its local community. The school can become the heart of the community and provide a safe place for communities to interact, debate and breakdown prejudices.

Professor Tariq Ramadan argues that education is integral to addressing the issue of religious symbols in the public sphere:

Our pluralist society must provide its citizens with the tools to understand religions, their symbols and their practices. To overcome fears, we must offer proper instruction to our young people; we must cultivate their understanding and their critical spirit. This means acquiring a better understanding of the other’s philosophical and cultural orientations: seeing the other’s world as a source of richness, and not as a threat.\(^\text{10}\)

It is however the ability and confidence of the teachers and school leadership to deal with ‘difficult issues’ that will be the determining factor in developing a new dialogue on religious symbols and other issues of diversity. So far evidence suggests that schools across England are cautious about debating contentious issues thus limiting the potential of the new duty to help navigate pupils and communities alike on what role faith can or should play in public.

In terms of legislation the new Equality Act 2010 provides, for the first time, a real opportunity to bring faith firmly into the public sphere. The inclusion of religion or belief in the new Equality Duty will require public authorities to consider how to eliminate discrim-
ination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations for people of different religions or beliefs. Public bodies will be required to consider the diverse faith needs and requirements of their workforce (including the wearing of religious symbols) and the communities they serve when developing employment policies and when planning services. This proactive duty is a landmark step change in modernising the public sector to become fit for purpose in serving a hyper-diverse and multifaith Britain.

It will be the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), led by Trevor Phillips, which will have the important role in providing good guidance and clear codes of practice on issues such as religious symbols. The EHRC will have to be bold and clear in its guidance on these issues if the guidance is to have any relevance and legitimacy in a twenty-first century workplace. Therefore clarification from the EHRC will be sought on decisions such as a Muslim woman wearing the niqab and applying to be a nurse, who has not been given the job because of her choice of clothing. If we apply the suggested new approach to this issue then on the basis of ‘does the wearing of the niqab hinder the woman’s ability to perform her tasks?’, the answer may be ‘no’. However if the woman refuses to touch a male patient or work with male doctors then, yes. Her attitudes and behaviours do affect her ability to perform her tasks effectively. Each case will need to be judged on its own particular context, however a consistent and transparent approach to judging will help reduce mistrust and
misunderstandings which can lead to tensions within the system and in wider communities.

Clarity is essential but it is tricky. The EHRC will need to set out clear parameters to both employers and employees on the principles for the accommodation of religious practices whilst at the same time taking account of workforce cohesion.

The proposed extension of the public duty to religion and belief is the most controversial and hotly contested aspect of the proposed Single Duty. It will require Britain to nail its colours to the flag publicly on its stance on faith in the public sphere, how faith informs public policy and how faith can unite different communities.

Conclusion

It is the need to be comfortable with public faith which will, in the end, resolve tensions around religious symbols.

Archbishop Dr Rowan Williams argues for the notion of public faith maintaining that secular states need to be more comfortable with public and outward displays of religious conviction:

We do not have to be bound by the mythology of purely private conviction and public neutrality... the state needs to accept that religious belief is neither a rival loyalty nor simply a matter of personal conviction. In dealing with the religious element, the state inevitably becomes involved in the rights of whole communities who have their own part to play in decision-making. Religion’s value to the state comes in bringing its perspectives to that process.¹¹
Britain is in a unique position to fully embrace the notion of public faith because of its history of the relationship between faith and state, and its multifaith and multiracial diversity. At the local level faith policy to address local tensions has become embedded in many major towns and cities which host inter faith groups. There are many examples of how public faith initiatives have contributed to community cohesion in local communities such as the Leicester Council of Faiths, Building Bridges Pendle and Oldham Young People’s Inter Faith Forum.

However at the national level there is still unease and hesitation to acknowledge the role faith can play in public policy. Once national decision and policy makers can accept that faith is not only a divider but can also be seen as a unifier then we will move quickly to seeing ‘public faith’ move from rhetoric into practice. This will be made easier if those from the different faith backgrounds strengthen the commonality that binds them and also understand the scope and limitations of faith in public policy and the public sphere. A national dialogue on developing the notion of public faith in Britain is now desirable and a new government yet to make its mark in this area may well be best placed to take this important agenda forward.
Muslim Women in the West: Understanding the Challenges

Saeeda Shah

Islam has become subject to increased enquiry in the post 9/11 world. Many aspects of its beliefs, teachings and recommended practices are being harshly debated. The status of women in Islam in particular is the target of multiple contending positions and politicised discourses that tend to blur the facts, adding to the challenges facing Muslim women living in the West in their attempts to accommodate the tensions between the Islamic and the western cultural and belief systems.

Islam is frequently critiqued for its suppression and oppression of women. De-contextualised excerpts from religious texts and situated practices in different Muslim societies are used as evidence to support the claims that Islam is in conflict with liberal thought and equal rights, thus directly negating the emphasis on human equality that underpins Islamic philosophy. This paper is an attempt to discuss the positioning and rights of women in Islam, as different from gendered cultural practices and systems that define females’ role and status in many Muslim countries and communities as well as in societies where Muslims are a minority. The intention is to contribute to an understanding of the points of tension as well as points of agreement between the Muslim and the western cultural and belief systems, thus enhancing the possibilities of
promoting and facilitating Muslim women’s participation in the mainstream national life. The assumptions and misconceptions about Muslim women and Islam are not only barriers to this participation but are alienating Muslims, sending negative signals for societal cohesion and co-existence.

The broad focus of this paper is on the British context and its argument is that knowledge of relevant Islamic teachings is significant for engaging with the debates around the role and specific needs of Muslim women, particularly in western societies such as Britain. This could guide policy-making to utilise the huge potential of a large section of British society.

**Women in Islam**

Islam is explicit about human equality. Female marginalisation is not faith-related or specific to Muslim communities but a historical phenomenon across societies. An implicit belief that male/female difference compulsively implies female inferiority seems common to most cultures. It is the socio-historical development of the sex-roles and image of women, and its dissemination through different channels throughout human history that lies behind today’s gendered norms and practices. In the Greek city states, the first upholders of democracy and human rights, women and slaves had no right to vote. The Romans with all their grand laws treated women as merely decorative, bestowing all power to the male head of the family.\(^1\) Aristotle claimed that women were physically, mentally and socially inferior to men. Certain Arab
tribes of the early seventh century (pre-Islam) buried their daughters alive at birth. In today’s India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, in families of particular socio-economic backgrounds (who can be Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or others), sympathies are offered at the birth of a female child to the ‘unhappy family’. If economic constraints force a choice, the female child will be the one chosen to stay out of education.\(^2\) This socio-historical specification of sex-roles has been further emphasised through folk-lore, literature, curriculum and media. Ibsen’s woman becomes controversial by trying to manage the situation herself. Many women suppress their job ambitions to save their ‘doll’s houses’ and it applies to diverse societies and communities. However, the marginalisation of Muslim women is often attributed to Islamic teachings, which is not only a gross misrepresentation but consequently may mar the attempts to develop corrective policies and practices.

**Muslim women: in-group and out-group constructions**

How Muslim women are perceived and constructed has implications for their participation in the public and for accessing equal rights in liberal western societies. Unfortunately, they are doubly marginalised, both from within the Muslim community (‘in-group’) and outside of it (‘out-group’). From in-group, discourses of religion, female role, segregation, veiling, izzat, and others are wielded to discipline what Afshar terms as ‘disruptive potentials of independent women’.\(^3\) Often generalisations of context-specific...
Quranic injunctions are used to marginalise Muslim women so that male occupation of the centres in patriarchal community structures could remain unchallenged. The assumptions held about Muslim women in western liberal societies emerge as barriers.

Moves by Muslim women to participate in the public are generally countered by the given discourses created in the name of Islam, confining women to the private sphere in the Muslim communities. They are deprived of many of the Quranic rights in the name of their domestic role and family interest.\(^4\) Such discourses and practices acquire social validation through given interpretations of religious texts arguing that woman’s ‘sphere of activity is home’.\(^5\) Thus women are either pressurised into invisibility or opt in to invisibility in spite of the Quranic rights given to them:

... which protect their property, give them inalienable rights of inheritance, and... allow them to keep their name.\(^6\)

To debate the position of women in Islam it is important to understand the social structure endorsed by Islam where a man and woman joining in a ‘marriage contract’ have equal rights to set the conditions, including the woman’s role in and outside the family space, and her right to end the ‘contract’.\(^7\) In practice, under cultural pressures or in keeping with cultural norms, women often fail to exercise these rights. Furthermore, the male role as ‘maintainers’\(^8\) is often interpreted as establishing male superiority to the extent of making women subservient. Badawi refers to the discussions among Muslim jurists and scholars...
emphasising that the said Ayah needs to be interpreted in the context where it implies that ‘men excel women in their economic duty’. This Ayah is often used for marginalising women and is quoted by critics as signalling gender inequality in Islam. The discourses of izzat, segregation, veiling and others have intensified these misconceptions. Afshar critiques ‘a general identification of women with the sphere of domesticity’, which creates many problems for women when moving from domestic to public space. It is often ignored that if there were no public roles for Muslim women, the Quran would not be explicit about women being masters of their own possessions and earnings:

Unto the men (of a family) belongeth a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, and unto the women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be little or much—a legal share.¹¹

And:

Unto men a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned.¹²

The important question is whether Islam as revealed through the words of God is patriarchal or not, though ‘there is no doubt that Islamic traditions and cultures are patriarchal’. The stance often adopted by the women Muslim scholars, and as frequently supported by non-Muslim women writers, is that Islam and the Quran do not establish any inherent spiritual, intellectual, or physical inferiority of women. However, many socio-political and economic factors have contributed to the formation of a patriarchal image of women in Islam:
Patriarchy co-opted Islam after the death of the prophet—many passages in the Quran were interpreted by patriarchy loosely and out of context, in support of a vicious patriarchal ideology. These interpretations were then handed down to women as God’s revealed words. Also, the Arabic language is a very rich language, and thus it is not uncommon to run into sentences that can be interpreted in a variety of ways.17

Islam provided women with freedom, economic rights, public and private rights, and political rights, but ‘these rights were unfortunately not manifest in the Islamic societies’.18 The practice of excluding women from the public life was not the original intent of the prophet19 but ‘local ‘interpretations’ [of Islam] have… usually affected women negatively’.20 They are culturally constructed as ‘site of familial honour’,21 and become subject to ‘surveillance’ and manipulations. Skewed codes of conduct constructed by male authority pose further threats to women who chose or dare to move in the positions of visibility. Different standards of conduct/character applied to men and women are socially endorsed as propounded by Islam, raising the issue of interpretations of religious texts:

So far as religious teaching is concerned, traditionally Muslim women have not been well versed. They have been barred from ijtihad, religious discourse and interpretation…’22

Veiling and segregation are other issues exploited to control and suppress women among Muslim communities. Segregation is recommended in the Quran in specific contexts23 but male-dominated community structures impose it as a blanket strategy to perpetuate male control. With regard to veiling, the readings of
suras 24 and 33 highlight the recommendation of ‘veiling’ for the Prophet’s wives as a socio-political strategy.\textsuperscript{24} An injunction for the Prophet’s wives does not apply to all Muslim women as such, but by making situated commands a basis for veiling and sex-segregation has served as a mode for ordering power relations in Muslim societies.

Patriarchal constructions of Muslim woman have not only confined and de-powered them within the community but hugely contributed to skewed out-group constructions further marginalising them by creating challenges for their social, economic, political and educational engagement.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, out-group constructions of Muslim women in the West are strongly influenced by superficial knowledge and media hypes about Islam and gendered practices in diverse Muslim countries and communities.\textsuperscript{26} Generalisations from individual examples in the media, or elsewhere, to the wider population lead to misconceptions about Islam, Muslims and women. Literature and archives abound with records of racist media constructions of Muslims ‘in very derogatory and vilifying ways’.\textsuperscript{27} Muslims have been invented by the media as deviants ‘from the accepted cultural norms of the host society, creating hostility towards them’.\textsuperscript{28} Across ambiguities and misconceptions, images are constructed by media and the masses, which highlight the differences and increase the distances between different groups in society. On the one hand, these images convey messages of rejection and exclusion and on the other hand lead to an equally strong tendency to gravitate towards a concept of group identity to
counter this rejection. The ‘media portrayals of Islam as barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist’\(^{29}\) have contributed to the intensification of political identities that are ‘asserted with pride and are capable of political mobilization’.\(^{30}\) The increasing identification with Islam and Muslim identity in a post satanic-verses Britain and a post 9/11 world are reflected also in the growing use of hijab by young Muslim women, leading to controversies and conflicts in educational institutions and work-places.

There is abundant research claiming that Muslims tend to emphasise their religious identity (Ummah). This identification is no longer necessarily connected to personal participation in distinctive religious practices.\(^{31}\) Modood explains it as ‘an ethnic assertiveness, arising out of the feelings of not being respected or of lacking access to public space, consisting of counter posing “positive” images against traditional or dominant stereotypes’.\(^{32}\) At the intersection of cultural and political contestations an identity discourse is created that challenges exclusion. Identity-construction becomes a political stance to contend assimilation and defend identity and interests, thus shifting from marginalised minority to an overarching powerful identity recognised as Muslim Ummah. The question that arises is how does this identity construction impact on the participation of Muslim women in mainstream life in a liberal western society in the present scenario of mistrust and rejection?

*Negotiating the difference*

In the case of Muslim women, in-group and out-group constructions and practices have constrained their
access to equal rights and their participation in mainstream life. They are doubly discriminated—by cultural norms and practices within the community and by negative constructions and misconception in the wider society. Ironically, the two intensify each other—the gendered norms and practices within the community contribute to misconceptions about Islam, Muslims and women in the wider society; while misconceptions and assumptions in the wider western society push the community towards stronger identification with their cultural and belief systems. Both lead to complicating the issues for Muslim women, who are left struggling against multiple hostile fronts. Gender further complicates the challenges for women who are already struggling to balance cultural tensions.

In the current political scenario, Muslims feel threatened by the pervading anti-Muslim sentiments and, in the process of preserving their identity, tend to contribute to the hostile agenda of exclusion and marginalisation. Constructions of Muslim identity are influenced by global political developments and anti-Islam media. Weiner argues that all human action ‘is the consequence of specific cultural, economic and social conditions and influences’. They are caught between the given responsibilities of a Muslim woman and that of a citizen of a western state, underpinned by gender discrimination in both contexts.

Muslim women are generally held back by both in-group cultural norms and societal assumption. Strategies need to be developed to evolve women out of this socio-psychological suppression. To address the
issues and problems faced by Muslim women, it is essential on the one hand to change the opinions and attitudes which socialise women into roles that contradict the ‘Quranic themes of female spiritual freedom and moral responsibility’. On the other hand, governments, planners, academics and others have a responsibility to develop support systems and to discourage negative assumptions to facilitate Muslim women’s participation. Muslim women’s invisibility from planning and decision making levels, a general scarcity of role models, mentors, and networking are major obstacles to female participation in the public domain.

There is a need for concerted effort to enhance an understanding of Islam among the wider society. The recent wave of individuals associating with faith identity and an emphasis on wearing hijab among young Muslim girls in the post 9/11 world is an indication of the increasing significance of faith and faith identity among Muslims. This makes it more important to improve knowledge and understanding of Islamic teachings and values particularly with regard to gender and women’s position in society. The Muslim women who can make these contributions either face political barriers, or if they manage those barriers, their voices often go unheard. Hazel Blears rightly pointed to the phenomenon saying:

Wider public debate often reverts to stereotypes and preconceptions and I believe we pay too much attention to Muslim women’s appearance—with perennial debate about headscarves and veils—and too little to what they say and do. This must change. We have to get better at listening to
Muslim women, valuing their contribution to this country’s economic, cultural and civic life, and opening the door for more to get involved.\textsuperscript{35}

Misconception about Muslim women is a complex phenomenon linked to, first, a general ignorance regarding Islam and its teachings, and secondly, politicisation of Islam by a select minority eager to construct Islam in a specific way due to global political and economic power struggles. The resulting environment of Islamophobia has contributed to an increased engagement with Muslim faith identity and projection of that visible identity, thus complicating the challenges. Nevertheless, multi-cultural/multi-faith societies such as Britain need to develop and advance strategies and policies that promote female mainstreaming irrespective of faith or other multiple identities, for the sake of progression and cohesion of their own society. In the case of Muslim women, as argued above, both in-group cultural norms and out-group societal assumptions hold Muslim women back. The responsibility lies with the policy makers and implementers to:

- Develop strategies to evolve Muslim women out of this socio-psychological suppression by advancing their knowledge of self-worth and self-concept as Muslim women;

- Develop support systems and discourage negative assumptions in the wider society.

Educational settings can provide a platform for promoting knowledge of self-worth but ironically,
studies emphasise that Muslim girls generally receive negative messages in educational institutions which further undermine their sense of self and mainstream participation.\textsuperscript{36} The teachers and educational leaders themselves are often not well-informed about Islam and women in Islam, and, because of the sensitivity of the debates about Islam and Muslims, they tend to ‘silence’ the issues rather than engage with them for affirmative action. The starting point can be to develop and enable teachers and educational leaders for this task through better and focused teacher training, and a greater balance of perspectives within the curriculum. Targeted efforts need to be made to involve mothers (currently it is more fathers from Muslim community who are the contact point for schools) in the schooling of their children to create communication channels and forum for dialogue.

In spite of the fact that there are increasingly more Muslim girls in education, securing high achievement rates, there are still not many Muslim women in high profile jobs and professions, raising doubts about their self-perceptions, and barriers in the job market. There is a need for positive support systems for Muslim females to build their confidence and aspirations in a context where Muslims are being demonised by society and the media. Not only within the educational settings, but also at the community level support systems need to be established and strengthened to evolve Muslim women out of socio-psychological suppression by enhancing awareness of their self-worth and potential role in the society, and by promoting the value of females’ role in Islam. The voluntary sector can also be involved as they
are already doing work in the area, particularly for outreach programmes and raising awareness among hard-to-reach groups and wider community. Furthermore, educational institutions can involve Muslim women professionals, and those active in the public as mentors and speakers, to raise awareness of the level of female participation and potential. However, one important consideration will be that those managing such support systems and networks should be educated and trained in relevant teachings and values of Islam to minimise the possibility of offending sensibilities.

Recognising and valuing the right to different identities not only helps to resolve conflict in society but contributes to negotiation, sharing, and co-existence.

Furthermore, in spite of the current hostile media portrayal of Muslims, media is a weapon that can be used for positive action with equal effectiveness. It can play a significant role in promoting support systems and positive images. It can generate dialogue by giving voice to Muslim women with knowledge of Islam, its teachings and its history. Systems for monitoring discrimination at all levels need to be more vigilant. Governmental consultations and forums need to target and engage Muslim women in debates—not defining them but asking them to define themselves. The polarisations within the Muslim community certainly make this a hard task and there is no easy solution to this complex phenomenon. Claims regarding celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion become mere lip-service if these do not translate into outcomes.
Gina Khan: ‘My Experiences of Islam in Britain’

by Eleanor Rogerson

Introduction

Gina Khan has experienced two unhappy marriages and two vitriolic divorces. She has been a victim of polygamy, suffered from domestic violence and endured a campaign of intimidation. She has been driven out of her home and labelled as mentally ill. Her experiences are so dramatic and alarming, we might suppose that they amount to a rare story in modern Britain. Yet Khan says such incidents are unexceptional among British Muslim women. She speaks out passionately in a bid to challenge perceptions of and about Muslim women, to prevent women facing similar ordeals and to champion a more progressive Islam:

People are in denial about what’s happening to Muslim women, but I refuse to remain silent.

It has taken decades of reflection for Khan to resolve what she believes and values most and to learn how to express her opinions. She now confidently describes herself as a ‘secular Muslim’ favouring secular democracy, and cherishing her personal freedom and equal rights as a British Muslim. To Khan, western liberalism is about tolerating others, having freewill and living how you wish without discrimination. She sees no
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reason why this cannot be reconciled with Islam. ‘I can be a Muslim and believe in democracy, human rights and equality. I’ve taught my kids that, emphasising to them how it’s important to be a good human being and a proud British Asian.’

This chapter details Khan’s views on major issues affecting Muslim women explained against the backdrop of her personal story. We first look at Khan’s background and the experiences which have shaped her outlook. We go on to look at her opinions about sharia law and the calls to extend its reach in Britain. We also consider its authenticity and who she believes would benefit if sharia was given further status in English Law. She speaks with particular regard to three prominent issues in public debate about sharia that she has personal experiences of: polygamy, domestic violence and divorce. Khan recognises that there are diverse views about these issues amongst Muslim women and discusses these alongside her own ideas. Finally, Khan explains her hopes for future generations of British Muslim women and how she thinks they can be achieved.

Khan believes that it is possible for modern Muslim women to reconcile their religion with western liberalism. However, she knows only too well that certain barriers prevent this from becoming a widespread reality. She describes disturbing levels of repression and cruelty against Muslim women by men who she believes are distorting Islam for their own social and political gain. Khan believes that sweeping reform of Islam is necessary, particularly through questioning interpretations of the Quran. She stresses that these are
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issues which should concern all British people, not only Muslims, as they raise questions about the very basis of our liberal democracy.

*Gina Khan’s Background*

Gina Khan was born in 1967. She grew up in inner-city Birmingham with her parents and older siblings who had immigrated from Pakistan the previous year. At 16, under pressure from her family, she married a man from Pakistan. The marriage was unhappy and short-lived; Khan divorced her husband two years later and was disowned by her relatives and the wider community. She was told that she had disgraced herself and the whole family. Seven years later Khan married a man she loved but within two years he had committed polygamy by marrying his cousin. He became violent towards Khan and had multiple affairs.

It was when Khan divorced her second husband in 1999 that she started to consider more acutely the wider social impact of the issues which she had faced. As well as her personal turmoil, she became more aware of the profound social problems in her community: ‘Polygamy, domestic violence and mental health problems were all so normal to me.’ Part of this increased awareness resulted from Khan’s witnessing a movement towards more extreme forms of political Islam during the late 1980s. This was demonstrated first-hand by the changes in her father. Previously a moderate Muslim who had been happy to associate with a whole manner of people, his religious views rapidly became more extreme throughout the 1990s. He was obsessed with
Islam taking over and became very anti-Semitic. ‘My Dad was totally indoctrinated, not while he was in Pakistan, but here in Britain—it was happening quicker here than in Pakistan!’ Khan saw Islamist propaganda posted throughout her community, young men became fanatical and more women wore niqabs or hijabs: ‘After 9/11, I realised this is jihad—this is their version of a modern new jihad.’

Khan believes that this extremism is often enacted through the repression of Muslim women, who are used as symbols of Islam. Khan says that wearing western style clothing used to be entirely acceptable in British Muslim communities, but women who do so now are faced with increasing pressure to wear the veil. She has seen outright harassment of Muslims not wearing the veil.

Khan started to speak publicly about Muslim female repression in 2007 via local radio, her blog and newspaper interviews. Speaking out came with unwelcome consequences; Khan and her two children were threatened, their home was attacked and they eventually moved out of their home on the advice of the police. Regardless of these consequences, Khan says that breaking her silence was a healing process: ‘I’ve only just achieved freedom now at the age of 40. The only reason I’m at peace in my life is that I’ve stopped living from a script.’

_On sharia law_

Khan is outraged about calls for sharia law to be granted a greater status within the English legal system: ‘There
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would be dire consequences if sharia were given more legal status, it’s a patriarchal system.’ As a secular Muslim, she believes in sharia in her private life and conscience but does not want it imposed by law: ‘I can choose not to drink, or eat pork, or commit adultery but we don’t need any kangaroo courts taking any kind of authority or more control over Muslim women, making more decisions for their lives.’

Proponents of sharia courts argue that broader endorsement of the courts would promote social cohesion by demonstrating public respect and tolerance for Muslim customs. Khan discusses her concerns about sharia with particular regard to her experiences of polygamy, divorce and domestic violence.

Khan believes that any promotion of sharia would intensify inequality by giving authority to men who are obsessed with entrenching their power, often at the expense of women’s civil liberties.

Khan believes that Britain needs to completely reject any accommodation of sharia law: ‘The Muslim community needs to be integrated with mainstream British society. The first step to doing this is to empower Muslim individuals by denying any religiously-inspired legal sanction against them. There must be no legal barriers to hinder national integration between groups in our society.’

On polygamy

Polygamy, Khan argues, is a highly destructive medieval practice: ‘It can’t be explained without looking at the devastating consequences for the women
and the children.’ She vehemently opposes those, such as the barrister Sheikh Faiz, who have called for an ‘accommodation’ of polygamy within English Law. Khan sees it as an absurdity that such men claim to care about the plight of Muslim women, whilst advocating further provision for polygamy.

Khan explains her personal experience of polygamy. Her second marriage soured when, just months after the birth of their first child, her husband’s family forced him to marry his 16-year-old cousin: ‘He wouldn’t use the word “forced” — it’s embarrassing for a man, but he had no choice.’ The polygamy had a profound impact on Khan’s self-worth and confidence: ‘It was a nightmare having to share him, with him sometimes being with her, sometimes with me.’ Khan believes her feelings will resonate with any woman who has had to share a husband: ‘It’s only the men saying that polygamy is fine. I haven’t come across a single woman who’s said “polygamy is fine, I don’t mind sharing”. There’s a word “souten” meaning “co-wife”. Leila Ahmed wrote about it, saying it’s a word which “sends a shiver down the spine of Muslim women”.

Khan calls herself a victim of polygamy in two senses as it is not just the wives who are affected by polygamy. The whole family is affected. As a girl, Khan felt that her mother had an inexplicable rage and bitterness and was often cold towards her. Khan later discovered that this far-reaching anger stemmed from the devastation of polygamy. She had married Khan’s father when she was just 15 and later found out that he already had a wife and five children. Years later he
married a third woman: ‘After what she went through, my mum would turn in her grave if she knew there was a possibility of sharia law being introduced in this country.’

Khan’s older sister had a nervous breakdown when she found out that her seemingly desirable and respectable new husband already had a wife. Khan, although only a small child at the time, remembers her sister’s despair: ‘I watched her being sectioned under the mental health act. She didn’t recover from depression for seven or eight years.’ Sadly, her sister’s experience of polygamy didn’t end there. Khan explains that it happened to her sister twice. ‘The last time I saw her alive she was depressed, she had a constant sadness around her. I blame the polygamy and her husband. The second time round she accepted it as her destiny. She said: “I’ve been divorced once because he had one wife, if I do it again then people are going to think there’s something wrong with me, that the fault is in me as a woman”.’ Khan believes that the choice given to Muslim women is: break your parents’ hearts and be cursed for the rest of your life or simply accept your fate.

She is concerned that if minor sharia rulings were accepted in British courts it would set precedents for more significant future cases. She believes that such decisions are already having an impact on British Muslim women. Polygamy is illegal in Britain, and yet if a man marries multiple women in a country where polygamy is legal, then the British benefits system recognises them all as legal dependents. They are paid benefits accordingly, receiving income support, job-
seekers’ allowance, housing and council tax benefits: ‘This isn’t doing the legal wives any favours. They’re helping the privileged—which is the men.’

On divorce

Khan feels that men have absolute control over religious divorce and can thus withhold it based on their own particular interpretations of the Quran, however radical those interpretations may be. After her first marriage she obtained a civil divorce but was forced to wait two years for the Islamic divorce she desperately wanted. ‘It’s a question of faith, it’s my faith and I wouldn’t be free of him if I didn’t. He could still walk in today and say you’re my wife.’ He did eventually sanction the divorce because he was getting remarried. When Khan’s second abusive marriage collapsed and her husband refused to pay child support or give her a divorce, she approached a sharia council. They didn’t help her at all. ‘I kept thinking to myself, “what am I doing turning to these men, these men who don’t care about me”.’ She received no support from her family, the wider community or sharia councils. ‘I was ostracised for wanting a divorce again.’ She believes that sharia courts are completely unnecessary for Muslim divorce. ‘We don’t need councils to get an Islamic divorce, we just need two witnesses. The government can step in. Why can’t a Muslim woman be given a Muslim divorce at the same time as her civil divorce?’

Khan is also angry about the reluctance of some Muslim men in Britain to register their Nikah (Muslim
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weddings) so that they are legally binding in this country. Khan believes this is often a deliberate bid to disempower the women and deny them the rights due to them under English Law. ‘It isolates women when their marriages go wrong. They don’t have any legal rights.’

On domestic violence

As with polygamy, Khan says most British people do not realise how common domestic violence is. She suffered from domestic violence in her second marriage: ‘I never forgot it the first time he slapped me and, in fact, the side of my face still feels it every time I talk about it. It just got worse after that—it normally does, a slap turns into a punch.’ Khan’s sister also endured domestic violence. She died of natural causes but had been heavily beaten two days before: ‘He had battered her so badly he’d splattered blood all over the wall. It’s so normal in Muslim communities.’

Khan is concerned that sharia might be used to claim ‘mitigating circumstances’ in cases of domestic violence. She believes that many Muslim men are taught that hitting your wife is normal and even desirable for a healthy relationship. ‘Many books say it’s fine. Anyone can go onto YouTube today and there are Sheikhs on there talking about how to beat a woman. Men start thinking that there’s no two ways about it—he’s allowed to beat you, he’s your demagogue and you’re not allowed to answer back... I look at them and think “what kind of God wants that for women?”.’
She believes that the British authorities are not dealing with the problem adequately: ‘Police and social services speak to mosques to ask them to support victims of domestic violence. Unfortunately, many do nothing for the community.’ She believes the same is true of sexual assaults: ‘If a Muslim woman was raped she would hide it, wouldn’t go to British police. If a man has raped a Muslim woman, he has effectively given her a life sentence, without even considering her emotional pain and scars. The way the community and family would see it, is that she is bringing shame onto the family. It’s always the woman who is persecuted.’ Khan knows a young rape victim who has tried to commit suicide on a number of occasions. ‘Everyone around her pulled away from her when she made the mistake of confiding in a few people in her community.’

**Conclusion**

Khan believes that it is possible for Islam to be reconciled with liberal democracy and for equality to be a reality for more British Muslim women. However, she believes there needs to be a considerable shift in the attitudes of Muslims, the government and the rest of society: ‘It breaks my heart to see the way this country is going. There’s so much fear. The fundamentalists getting the upper hand... I believe in God. I still have faith. The love in Islam should be emphasised.’ Khan recognises that there is no simple solution, but believes that Britain needs to reject any accommodation of sharia law; to encourage more
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strong Muslim female voices; and to foster debate with secular Muslims, rather than extremists.

It is essential, says Khan, for more Muslim women to talk about the issues which affect them and give their opinions about what should be done: ‘I’m not seeing enough strong, outspoken women, they must realise that things won’t change unless they break their silence and believe they are full and equal human beings under British law.’ Khan fears that women are remaining silent because they fear intimidation and abuse. She was naive about the consequences of making her opinions known and did not consider the ensuing dangers: ‘I had a brick thrown through the window... and narked, very ratty veil-wearing Muslim women telling me I was lying and needed to fear God.’ She describes her feelings of isolation as her home was targeted by vandals and she was labelled as being mentally ill. Although the police tried to support Khan, she believes that they often turn to the wrong people in Muslim communities. She thinks the authorities need to ensure that they are consulting moderate Muslims, rather than self-appointed leaders who may hold radical views.

Khan knows that there are countless secular Muslims whose voices are not being heard in the public debate about Islam: ‘Modern Muslims have moved on to modern times and are happy to get on with their lives. There’s plenty of Muslims living in the mindset of the twenty-first century who can reconcile their religion with living in a western country. They know that women shouldn’t be forced into marriage and women shouldn’t be beaten.’ She believes that
these secular Muslims need to have a louder voice to drown out the voice of extremists: ‘The government needs to start listening to British Muslim women like Shaista Gohir and Diana Nammi, and ex-Muslim women like Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Maryam Namazie.’

Despite the problems it caused for her, Khan never regretted her decision to speak her mind: ‘I was already ahead of them in my thought. I wasn’t in denial anymore.’ She was encouraged by the supportive responses to her comments: ‘It was amazing. All religions, all races, people of all ages showed support. People sent me countless stories of women they knew who were going through the same things. It wasn’t just Muslims—it’s not just our issue. We’re British and share the same values as human beings.’ She believes that if more people enter the debate, the less problematic it will become for moderate Muslim women to have their voices heard.
Western Liberalism’s ‘Problem’ with Muslim Women

Zohra Moosa

Introduction

The fact that this book is being released suggests that there is some question about the relationship between western liberal ideals and Muslim women that needs answering, some problem that needs solving. In this essay I argue that it is the expectation that this question needs to be asked that is the challenge for social policy. I outline how the assumption of a tension between Muslim women and western liberalism actually stems from (a) narrow and exclusive ideas about what constitutes ‘westerness’ and (b) deeper ideas about Islam as ‘other’ and inherently non-western. I focus on a couple of recent political agendas to demonstrate how these twin challenges influence our ideas about ‘western liberalism’, combine with patriarchy to introduce the expectation of a conflict with Muslim women and their choices, and ultimately affect both how Muslim women relate to the state and more importantly how the state responds to Muslim women.

‘Muslim women’ as metaphor

The assumption that there is something inherently antithetical between Muslim women and western liberalism is actually a reflection of a more deeply held
perception that there is a strong divide between Islam and ‘the West’. It has become rather common to worry about how Islam and ‘the West’ can be reconciled, as if the two are distinct entities, hailing from completely different sources and roots, and are alien to each other. In these discourses, ‘liberalism’ is employed as a rhetorical tool, masking a deeper and more basic discomfort with difference. Muslim women and the seemingly ongoing challenges to social policy they present are often merely brought into the picture as the most poignant symbols of this perceived divide, and are not necessarily positioned as posing challenges in and of themselves. ‘Muslim women’ are then used as markers in the debate, becoming a metaphorical category rather than a group of diverse women who themselves have individual and complex relationships with Islam, the West and liberalism.

Recent debates on ‘the veil’ in Britain offer an obvious example of this tendency. Decisions by some Muslim women to wear the veil in the public sphere have been painted as fundamentally challenging to western liberalism by pundits and decision-makers alike.1 For example, Jack Straw MP’s now infamous media intervention and the subsequent ‘debate’ that followed in October 2006 did this. In addition to Jack Straw’s initial article, more than one writer wrote about Muslim women’s lack of rights in other, ostensibly Muslim, countries as evidence of Muslim women’s oppression generally and Islam’s illiberalism in particular, intimating that the veil is a public display of both.2 Where women’s oppression and illiberalism are unwelcome, the argument goes, so too then does the
Muslim veil, and its representation of such oppression and illiberalism, have no place in Britain.³

Yet a careful reading of this writing exposèes how much of the belief in the ‘illiberalism’ of Islam stems from very particular notions of what it means to be western.

Muslim women’s thoughts on how their dress relates to notions of liberalism are not sought, and this omission is not seen as problematic or unfair. Jack Straw for example wrote that the face veil is: ‘such a visible statement of separation and of difference’. He even explained that his discomfort with it in part stemmed from, as he explains about one constituent who came to his office, the: ‘apparent incongruity between the signals which indicate common bonds—the entirely English accent, the couple’s education (wholly in the UK)—and the fact of the veil’.⁴ That is, the veil of his constituent undermined her otherwise British identity in his eyes, introducing to him the idea that she was ‘different’. Nowhere do we hear about how the woman viewed herself or her actions in terms of the West or in terms of notions of liberalism. Her absence from the debate is striking given the fact that she clearly felt sufficiently engaged in the (western and liberal) political life of the community to have chosen to meet with her MP.

Jack Straw is by no means alone in believing that some manifestations of culture indicate non-westernness and therefore a potential challenge to core western liberal values. His intervention was not the first or only time in dominant political discourses that Muslim women’s dress, and not Muslim women’s opinions or
ideas, has been used as an indication of their westernness and subsequently for Islam’s ability to be reconciled with ‘the West’ and its supposedly attendant liberalism. It is happening again in France right now. In his speech to parliament, President Nicolas Sarkozy said about the niqab: ‘That is not the French republic’s idea of women’s dignity’—as if the women wearing the veil are not French or living as equal members of the French republic.\(^5\) This is especially ironic given that many women wearing the niqab in France are actually ‘French converts’ who likely have much to add to any conversation on what it means to be western and liberal in France as Muslim women.\(^6\)

In this way, ‘westerness’ has been and is used as a proxy for commitment to liberal values. In linking liberalism to the West so tightly in this way, two counter truths are effaced: the ways in which the West isn’t liberal and the ways that the non-west is liberal.

Islam, seen as something coming from outside the West in populist understandings, is then constantly tested for its compliance with ‘westerness’—as determined by the non-Muslim majority—to establish its ability to be liberal. Indeed one of the core aims of the proposed French parliamentary commission on the veil is to establish whether the veil undermines French secularism.\(^7\)

Entertaining such a narrow interpretation of what it means to be western, where Islam is never recognised as being ‘of’ the West, and then propagating the idea that liberalism can be measured by westernness, limits the space available for Muslim women within Britain.
to influence and be incorporated into the body politic. Where the state also delivers services and rights based on the degree of conformance with this narrow interpretation, Muslim women are at risk of deep marginalisation and social exclusion. On one end of the scale for example, Jack Straw’s requests to his Muslim women constituents to remove their veil when in his office will inevitably discourage some Muslim women from attempting to speak to him, either at all, or as freely. On the other end, as I will outline later, this exclusive approach has a profound impact on how the state responds to even very serious problems facing Muslim women, such as gender based violence.

**Roots of the metaphor**

It is hard to pinpoint the exact moment when Muslim women leaped to the forefront of the examples most often used to buttress the argument that the relationship between Islam and ‘the West’ is largely a ‘clash of civilizations’. However we can say that the key elements were crystallised by the time the US and the UK had invaded Afghanistan when ‘Muslim women’ were pointedly used as the justification for the invasion by Britain and America in the form of formal addresses by both ‘first wives’. As Laura Bush now famously said: ‘The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.’ Allies in the War on Terror (WOT) were thus artfully positioned as the defenders of Muslim women’s rights—by other, western, women.
In this act, Muslim women became the litmus test for truth, goodness, moral righteousness—the cornerstones of both civilizing missions of the past and the WOT today. The success of each battle in the War on Terror can be established, we are led to believe, by how well Muslim women are faring—according to criteria set by the agents of the war and not necessarily by Muslim women themselves.

In setting the ‘plight of Muslim women’ as the success thermometer for the WOT in this way, President Bush and Prime Minister Blair effectively entrenched the idea they had already been floating: that the WOT was in fact a result of a clash of civilizations. As we were told repeatedly, we were defending ‘our way of life’ from those that would seek to undermine it. The victor of the WOT, who is able to secure its vision of how Muslim women should be, then, will be the superior civilization. Through this posturing, the everyday decisions of Muslim women are transformed into barometers for supposed deeper ideological struggles between Islam and the West.

The use of ‘Muslim women’ in WOT discourses as a metaphor—and battleground—for this assumed struggle between Islam and the West is one of the most poignant current examples of the tired colonial and patriarchal frame of westerners ‘saving’ native women from native men. In this version, as Mirza paraphrases it, we have ‘white men and women saving Muslim women from Muslim men’. In positioning Muslim women in need of rescuing from Muslim men in this way, the architects of the WOT bestowed a hitherto missing attention on the needs of Muslim women
while simultaneously rendering Muslim women as passive victims of problematic, non-western, cultures. That is, the high profile political focus on ‘Muslim women’ comes at a cost: Islam is positioned as ‘other’ and the rights, needs and interests of Muslim women—as they would define them—are completely effaced. This has real consequences for the abilities of Muslim women living in the West to demand their rights from the state, and for how the western state responds to the rights of Muslim women.

**Implications for the western state**

The underlying proposition in the rubric that ties liberalism to narrow ideas about westerness is that to be an equal citizen with fair access to freedoms and rights, one must perform westernism in the same way as others, must be liberal in the same ways as others and can, equally, only be illiberal in the same ways as others. Challenges by minority groups to the state to be more liberal, for example by allowing greater freedom of religious expression through clothing, are generally not seen as a liberalising force.

This leads to the suggestion that Muslim women’s marginalisation from mainstream society is a function of some of their ‘cultural differences’, which are understood to be inherently unable to mesh with liberalism because they do not fit received ideas of westernness. That is, the higher rates of social exclusion facing Muslim women in Britain are explained as something to do with Muslim women and their ‘culture’. The state’s role in the exclusion, as well as its
inability to deliver certain guaranteed rights and freedoms to all within its territory, is masked. In this way, Muslim women are pathologised for their own disenfranchisement, and the state is excused from its failure.

This is a dangerous road to tread: framing rights and freedoms as contingent on performing a belief in liberal values in only certain ‘western’ ways, as judged by those in the majority, undermines the very liberal values the state is purporting to uphold. The right to liberty is meant to be a natural right, due to a person through their humanity. If a person’s right to liberty depends on whether they appear to be liberal, then the space is opened for the state to deny some people liberty based on their nonconformity.

While there are a number of policy agendas where such a discourse is problematic for Muslim women, examining the issue of gender based violence reveals how it can have especially stark consequences. Indeed, the expectation of a tension between Muslim women and western liberalism creates a policy gap that actually increases Muslim women’s risk of violence.

For example, by speaking about Muslim women as if they are not subjects in their own right but only foils for wider ideological battles, we make it difficult for Muslim women to speak out about the violence they are facing as women. There is the threat that the violence they disclose will be used against them, their families and the ‘Muslim community’ at large in the ‘clash of civilizations’ battle. Previous analysis has shown, for example, that violence against Muslim women tends to be reported using racist tropes in the
media that pathologise Islam and particular ethnic communities.\textsuperscript{11} This acts as a deterrent to Muslim women to approach the state about violence as they will be putting themselves and others they care about at risk of demonisation and racism.

Assuming a divide between Muslim women and western liberalism also results in a tendency for Muslim women’s claims on the state—as citizens—to be positioned as non-mainstream, particular, and peculiar to their Muslimness: because they are seen to be made by non-westerners coming from outside the western system, Muslim women’s claims are treated as ‘special interest’. And as with all special interest causes, Muslim women’s claims then have less chance of being honoured. For Muslim women looking to the state for protection from violence, this is deeply problematic.

The fact is, as we learn more about the violence facing Muslim women in their homes, it is becoming increasingly apparent that Muslim women have not been able to rely on the state for protection. For example, the gender based violence that Muslim women face is conceptualised differently in social policy to the violence other women face: they are largely invisible in mainstream discussions of violence against women, but are centre stage where the violence feeds the notion that Islam is at odds with western liberalism. As a result, there is no systematic information on Muslim women’s experiences of rape or sexual assault; we simply do not know how many Muslim women a year report being raped to the police. Meanwhile, there has been a significant amount of
policy attention and resources directed at those types of gender based violence that are seen to be especially non-western, including ‘honour’-based violence (HBV) and forced marriage (FM). Indeed, it could be argued that they have had a higher political profile than any other type of violence against women.¹²

Certainly both ‘honour’-based violence and forced marriage are serious crimes and deserve robust policy responses, and in the past, there has been a marked failure by the state to respond adequately to the threats that these pose. The fact remains however that Muslim women are equally likely, and sometimes more likely, to be victims of the same kinds of gender based violence as other, non-Muslim, women (including rape, sexual assault and other kinds of domestic violence), as they are to be victims of HBV or FM. Yet debate about the particular support needed by Muslim women to survive ‘mainstream’ types of violence against women, such as culturally sensitive counselling, remains virtually absent in policy agendas.

In addition, because these types of violence are seen as uniquely foreign and non-western, disproportionately focusing on HBV and FM allows the state to perpetuate the myth that the gender based violence facing Muslim women is a result of some kind of inherent tension between Islam and western liberalism. In failing to recognise how HBV and FM are different manifestations of the same problem of gender based violence afflicting all women—both Muslim and non—policy makers mistake the issues at play and suggest an inability to serve the needs of Muslim women as long as they remain ‘Muslim women’ in their eyes. The
attention of the state on HBV and FM is essentially rendered ineffectual because it locates the problem in ‘Muslimness’, rather than sexism. The ongoing failures of the police and policy makers to protect Muslim women from being killed in so-called honour crimes through basic errors in standard protocols for victims of gender based violence are proof of this problem. Instead of recognising this gap, however, policy makers are continuing to suggest the failures are solely the result of a lack of ‘cultural training’.¹³

In these ways, the assumption that there is a tension between Muslim women and western liberalism excuses the state from its failures to address the needs of all its citizens. Not only is the idea that there is something inherently irreconcilable between Islam and liberalism or ‘the West’ a false dichotomy, requiring conformance with fixed ideas of ‘westernness’ to prove a commitment to liberal values and then linking rights to this is unethical. Moreover, Muslim women in the West each have their own individual and varied relationships with Islam, the West, and liberalism—they are not the uncomplex victimised monolith they are being made out to be. And these relationships are legitimate contributions to the debate on what ‘western liberalism’ should constitute, just as Muslim women are legitimate members of British society who deserve equal liberty.

Conclusion

The current preoccupation with how western liberalism relates to Islam in general and what this means for
Muslim women in particular creates several false dilemmas that mask much deeper failures of the state to deliver democracy and liberty to Muslim women. Social policy is focusing on integrating Muslim women into the West as if they are inherently outside it, mistakenly explaining their social exclusion as being a result of so-called cultural differences. In reality, Muslim women are just as in need of social protections as everyone else in society, and how they perform ‘westernness’ should not be determining how successfully they can access these freedoms. Muslim women’s continued marginalisation is actually a consequence of the state’s failure to practice its liberal principles. The correct approach would be for the state to transform itself to meet the needs of its people, not for it to require the reverse.
Notes

Sarah Joseph


2 ‘For whenever, any of them is given the glad tiding of the birth of a girl, his face darkens, and he is filled with suppressed anger, avoiding all people because of the alleged evil of the glad tiding which he has received, and debating within himself: Shall he keep this child despite the contempt which he feels for it—or shall he bury it in the dust? Oh, evil indeed is whatever they decide!’ (The Quran, 16:58-59)

3 ‘O you who have attained to faith! It is not lawful for you to try to become heirs to your wives.’ (The Quran, 4:19)

4 ‘Men shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, whether it be little or much—a share is ordained by God.’ (The Quran, 4:7)

5 ‘Searching for knowledge is compulsory upon every Muslim male and Muslim female.’ (Hadith Ibn-Majah)

6 The Quran, 9:71-72.

7 The Quran, 2:187.

8 The Quran, 7:26.


Faz Hakim
1 I use the terms public and private loosely here, private to indicate those issues which are to do with home/family life and personal choice and public to denote those activities outside of the home and open to the public.


Alveena Malik

2 In 2006 Nadia Eweida lost her tribunal case to openly wear a cross necklace at work at Heathrow.

3 In 2007, the High Court upheld a school’s decision prohibiting Lydia Playfoot from wearing a chastity ring based on its ban on any jewellery in the school.

4 In 2008 Sarika Watkins-Singh was excluded from classes at Aberdare Girls’ School in south Wales as she would not remove the Kara (bangle), which is a symbol of her faith. High Court ruled the school was guilty of indirect discrimination under the Race Relations Act.

5 In 2006 Aishah Azmi lost her case for discrimination at an employment tribunal after she was dismissed for refusing to remove her niqab (face veil) in the classroom.
6 In 2005 House of Lords overturned ruling that Shabina Begum should be allowed to wear the jilbab—a full-length robe—at Denbigh high school, Luton.

7 The Gallup Coexist Index 2009, p. 38.

8 Civic duties are defined here as the duty to deliver public services, the duty to actively receive public services and the duty to engage in the democratic process.

http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/external/content/1/c4/27/52/v1188914711/user/Guidance%20on%20the%20duty%20on%20schools%20to%20promote%20cc.pdf.


11 Williams, Dr R., ‘States Need to be Comfortable with Public Faith’, 29 October 2004; 
http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1477?q=menacing

Saeeda Shah


4 Afshar, ‘Women, Marriage and the State in Iran’, p. 132.


8 The Quran, 4:334.


10 Afshar, ‘Women, Marriage and the State in Iran’, p. 3.

11 The Quran, 4:7.

12 The Quran, 4:32.


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16 The Quran, 30:22.


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34 Stowasser, Women in the Quran: Tradition and Interpretation, p. 21.


Zohra Moosa

1 It is worth noting that these ‘veil debates’ cover a wide range of types of covering for Muslim women and are thus often confused. Opinions on ‘the veil’ range from (reluctant) acceptance of apparently ‘milder’ forms such as the hijab and rejection of more ‘extreme’ forms such as the niqab, to general distaste or rejection of any covering for women associated with Islam.

3 This is not to suggest that Muslim women are not ever oppressed. Rather, the material point is how oppression is determined, and the ways in which Muslim women wearing the veil are perceived in Britain by the dominant non-Muslim majority.


5 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8113778.stm.


8 For BBC coverage of the addresses see: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/1663300.stm.


12 Female genital mutilation (FGM) has also received policy attention, but comparatively little media attention. FGM does not appear to currently garner the same ‘saviour fascination’ as HBV and FM.

13 [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article1918023.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article1918023.ece)