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## Faith, Feminism, and the Other: Rethinking Christian and Muslim Women's Engagement

Idrisa Pandit<sup>1</sup>

This article explores the tensions between Western approaches to feminism and local approaches to feminism in Islamic contexts. The concern for the plight of Muslim women locally and globally has often translated into campaigns to free the women of an unknown exotic world so far removed from our own, or the drive to fight for the causes of Muslim women living in the West. Muslim women are often viewed on the spectrum of submissive to oppressed. Our sympathy for Muslim women, the “other,” is often framed in terms of creating an awareness of the misery of a section of the Muslim population, “victims,” with no capacity to raise their own voice, individuals who lack any and all agency. They never speak but are often spoken for by others – individuals, think tanks, and governments that even go to war over the cause of liberating Muslim women in far-off lands, or institute policies locally that they see as ending “barbaric practices” presumed to be inherent in the cultures to which these Muslim female victims belong.<sup>2</sup>

It is important for me to first situate myself. I am a visible Muslim woman living in Canada who has experienced and lived in the East and the West. My experiences as the “other” were shaped and formed as a minority living in India, the United States, and Canada. I am devoted to the study of Muslim women's lives in the East and the West.

One trait that liberal Western democracies such as Canada share with oppressive governments in Muslim-majority countries such as Saudi Arabia is the obsession with and policing of Muslim women's bodies and their attire. In Canada, we often struggle to juggle multiculturalism with feminism, individual rights and choice with imposition of ways of life that we consider “liberating” for others. In all of these debates and arguments, what often gets lost is what Muslim women in Canada and around the world themselves want, or think of their lives. This preoccupation with liberating Muslim women often overlooks the complexity of Muslim women's lives, the intersectionality and multiplicity of social contexts and cultures. Instead it reduces all Muslim women to a monolithic image of powerless creatures who are damaged by and suffering in their faith and culture.

Questions I explore include:

- Are we listening to the voices of change in local communities in far-off lands as well as in Canada?
- What does liberation look like for women in other countries, and for our Muslim women neighbours?

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<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada, “Equality of Men and Women,” *Discover Canada: Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/discover-canada/read-online/rights-responsibilities-citizenship.html>

- What are the factors that impact the lives of these women, and how are our assumptions about them and our responses rooted in misperception and misinformation affecting their lives?

I also want to find a faith-based response to this dilemma of overcoming the ignorance of the female Muslim “other.” This response will vary from the one we are most exposed to by “native informers”<sup>3</sup> such as Azar Nafisi, Irshad Manji, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and others who have sensationalized the issue by turning personal accounts into universal stories of Muslim women. Hirsi Ali, a self-proclaimed atheist, argues that Christianity has a better moral framework than Islam and therefore suggests in her book *Nomad* that Muslim women should be saved from their faith by converting them all to Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to propose a different way for Christian sisters in faith to engage with and understand the lives of Muslim women. I believe that there is a way for faith communities, especially female members of the Christian community, to help guide this discussion in a positive direction – one that has a real impact on women’s lives. I suggest that the historical wrongs of colonialism and Orientalism, as well as the modern-day revival of the myths rooted in these approaches, can be overcome through an anti-oppressive pluralistic approach of engagement. This approach has to be rooted in respectful dialogue and deep listening. Sisterhood in faith must empower those who are already doing the difficult work of bringing positive change in their own communities and motivate others to join in building a healthy pluralistic society that is equitable and inclusive. In this conversation all shades of feminism should be welcome so true sisterhood of women from different backgrounds can really emerge. It can only happen when we attempt to create a dialogue of civilizations and communities rather than being mired in the stereotypical clash of civilizations and clash of cultures debate.<sup>5</sup>

## Historical Roots: Christian Obsession with Muslim Women

There is a long and dark history of colonial times alive in the collective memory of many Muslims around the world. In the Orientalist mind, Muslim women were projected as exotic objects of desire for lustful men – a common image exploited by Hollywood<sup>6</sup> – or prisoners of their faith in need of liberation by the colonial masters. The project of saving Muslim women from their faith has deep roots. We get a glimpse of the concern missionary women serving the British Empire held for their Muslim sisters in conference proceedings of a gathering held in Cairo in 1906. Muslim women are objectified and presented as ignorant, insignificant slaves of their lustful masters – the Muslim men:

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<sup>3</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin White Masks* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Nomad: From Islam to America: A Personal Journey Through the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997); Gerald Caplan, “Culture Clash Splits Canadians Over Basic Values,” *Globe and Mail*, March 26, 2017, retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/second-reading/culture-clash-splits-canadians-over-basic-values/article4626123/>

<sup>6</sup> Jack. G. Shaheen, “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (July 2003):171–93.

Man is the absolute master and woman the slave. She is the object of his sensual pleasures, a toy, as it were, with which he plays, whenever and however he pleases. Knowledge is his, ignorance is hers. The firmament and the light are his, darkness and the dungeon are hers. His is to command, hers is to blindly obey. His is everything that is, and she is an insignificant part of that everything.<sup>7</sup>

They appealed to the rest of the civilized Christian women of the West to rescue Muslim women from their faith and cultures, clearly demonstrating that Christian women's burden was the freedom of their Muslim sisters from their oppressive faith:

We, the women missionaries, assembled at the Cairo Conference, would send this appeal on behalf of the women of Moslem lands to all the women's missionary boards and committees of Great Britain, America, Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Holland, Australia, and New Zealand.

While we have heard with deep thankfulness of many signs of God's blessing on the efforts already put forth, yet we have been appalled at the reports which have been sent in to the Conference from all parts of the Moslem world, showing us only too plainly that as yet but a fringe of this great work has been touched ... The same story has come from India, Persia, Arabia, Africa, and other Mohammedan lands, making evident that the condition of women under Islam is everywhere the same – and that there is no hope of effectually remedying the spiritual, moral, and physical ills which they suffer, except to take them the message of the Saviour, and that there is no chance of their hearing, unless we give ourselves to the work. No one else will do it. This lays a heavy responsibility on all Christian women.<sup>8</sup>

Making no distinction among Muslim women in different parts of the world, the missionaries portray the monolithic subjugated Muslim woman as a victim of Islam, and nothing but conversion can save this hapless soul. The reality of Egyptian society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presents an entirely different picture. The story that these women missionaries do not tell is that colonial subjects in Egypt were well aware of the colonial mission of emancipating Muslim women as an excuse for British control of Egypt, and they actively resisted this influence through their local efforts towards empowerment of women – through secular and faith-based feminism. The missionary women's concern was more a propaganda tool than a feminist mission to “emancipate” the women of Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

The colonial debate on Muslim women was centred on the idea that Islam was inherently oppressive to women. In her book *Women and Gender in Islam*, Egyptian-American scholar Leila Ahmed noted that “the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and these customs were the fundamental reasons for general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies. Only if these practices ‘intrinsic’ to Islam

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<sup>7</sup> Annie Sommer and Samuel Zwemer, eds., *Our Moslem Sisters: A Cry of Need from the Lands of Darkness Interpreted by Those Who Heard It* (London: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1907), 7, retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/ourmoslemsister00sommgoog>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>9</sup> Pauline Lewis, “Zainab Al-Ghazali: Pioneer of Islamist Feminism,” *Michigan Journal of History* 4, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 1–47.

(and therefore Islam itself) were cast off could Muslim societies begin to move forward on the path of civilization.”<sup>10</sup>

Lord Cromer, the British Controller-General and later Consul-General in Egypt, spearheaded this campaign to rid Muslims of Islam and free its women from the bondage of the faith. For Cromer, while Christianity taught respect for women and elevated them, Islam degraded them, and that degradation was symbolized by the custom of veiling. To truly embrace the spirit of Western civilization, Muslim women would have to rid themselves of these practices. While seemingly an advocate for women’s rights, he implemented policies that harmed local women. His hypocritical policies laid restrictions on government schools and raised the fees, making it harder for women to attend school. He even banned female doctors from training, insisting that all women in Egypt should only be treated by male doctors, as in the “civilized world” male doctors were the rule. While he imported missionary women from the Empire to rescue oppressed Muslim women, back in his own country Cromer opposed the suffragists and worked hard to suppress their activities. “Feminism on the home front and feminism directed against the white men was to be resisted and suppressed,” wrote Leila Ahmed, “but taken abroad and directed against the cultures of colonized peoples, it could be promoted in ways that admirably served and furthered the project of the dominance of the white man.”<sup>11</sup>

Shifting to the modern discourse on Muslim women that is supported and funded by the multimillion-dollar Islamophobic network,<sup>12</sup> the Orientalist stereotypes, generalizations, and myths about Muslim women still remain and are exacerbated by the media. The obsession with female garb, the policing of Muslim women’s bodies, and the belief that getting rid of their faith is the only way for Muslim women’s liberation, continues. “Saving Muslim Women Syndrome” persists in the twenty-first century, just in different garb.

### “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?”

Professor Lila Abu-Lughod, an anthropologist at Columbia University, has worked on women’s issues in the Middle East for over thirty years. In her latest book, she explores the question of whether Muslim women need saving.<sup>13</sup> Abu-Lughod has argued for years that reducing the complexity of Muslim women’s lives to one thing, or to a category – Islam – is dismissive of all the layers of their experience in their respective contexts. Media portrayal of all Muslim women as subjects of the mythic “Islam Land” creates arrogance, ignorance, and prejudice. She warns us against essentializing Muslim women and lumping them into a monolithic entity laden with generalizations. In creating the image of the particularly oppressed “other,” we run the risk of disassociating the West from the complex web of Muslim women’s lives which are shaped by the historical realities of colonialism and the current influences of cultural hegemony, capitalism, and globalization. Women all over the world are victims of different forces of oppression, including the force of abuse of religion in their lives, so isolating Islam is unhelpful in understanding the diversity and particularity or lives of Muslim women.

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<sup>10</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 152.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>12</sup> Corey Saylor, *Confronting Fear: Islamophobia and its impact in the U.S. 2013–2015* (Washington, DC: Council on American–Islamic Relations / Berkeley: University of California Berkeley Center for Race and Gender, 2017), retrieved from <http://www.islamophobia.org/images/ConfrontingFear/Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

The saving syndrome reinforces Westerners' attitudes of superiority, a notion that Muslim women reject as an excuse for political intervention, as a 2007 Gallup study demonstrated through interviews with tens of thousands of Muslim women around the world.<sup>14</sup> The Afghan war, which was dubbed as a war to save the women of Afghanistan, is a classic example of using this saving syndrome. As a 2010 CIA document made public through WikiLeaks identified, declining support for the war among Europeans was becoming a concern. The CIA suggested recruiting "Afghan women to sell war to Europeans."<sup>15</sup>

With the assumption that lives of women are in danger elsewhere, in a world beyond our present reality, Western feminists and others tend to overlook the conditions of women in their own nations and communities. The best way to effect change in the lives of women elsewhere would be to examine how our ways of life in the interconnected community may be influencing the lives of those women. Recognizing one's privilege and power vis-à-vis marginalized women both in the West and elsewhere may be a first step in making a difference in the lives of other women. An example would be advocating against consumerism and war and violence, all of which negatively impact the lives of women elsewhere. There is also enough for us to do right where we live in the area of preventing violence and harm directed at women.<sup>16</sup>

Abu-Lughod encourages us to question the "moral crusades" of intervention in the lives of Muslim women and the power dynamics and political ideologies underlying these interventions that are rooted in militarism or "pulp nonfiction" and promote a new form of "gendered Orientalism."<sup>17</sup> Through various stories of women in her book, Abu-Lughod affirms what the Gallup study<sup>18</sup> shows: that women see their faith as a tool to fight injustice, not its cause. However, she does acknowledge that suffering of some Muslim women is not totally disconnected from cultural expectations or particular religious interpretations. As Abu-Lughod argues, the only way to understand Muslim women's lives is through creative, humane, and productive ways of engagement. The fight for gender equity crosses all geographical boundaries, and any campaign for gender justice has to ensure that we are inclusive and listening to diverse Muslim voices so as to engage in a productive dialogue with equal partners, not in a dynamic of saviours and victims.

Cathy Hine, an Australian expert in gender studies and a missionary who has spent numerous years working in various Muslim-majority countries, contradicts Abu-Lughod. Like her early-twentieth-century missionary sisters, she believes that Muslim women do indeed need to be saved, and the only way to rescue them is the same tool that the missionary women of the British Empire suggested at the Cairo conference: conversion to Christianity. In fact, she believes that she has a special mandate, given directly by God, to save Muslim women:

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<sup>14</sup> John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Melanne Verveer to Hillary Clinton, "Recruit Afghan Women to Sell War to Europeans: CIA Report," March 27, 2010, *Hillary Clinton Email Archive*, WikiLeaks, retrieved from <https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/3122>

<sup>16</sup> Maire Sinha, ed., *Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2013), retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11766/hl-fs-eng.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*

<sup>18</sup> Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*

In May 2014, while I was on an extended retreat, God spoke to me from Exodus 3 about women who live in Islamic contexts: “Cathy, I have heard their cry, I know the burden they are under. I want to bring them out from under that burden, and I am sending you.” It was reiterated recently when, during worship, God gave me a picture. I saw the joy of His people worshipping together, dancing and celebrating, and among them I saw some women wearing hijabs and burkas. But then He pointed me to a well, and huddled beside it was a woman who looked poverty-stricken, broken and afraid, and who was being completely ignored by the worshipping community. As Jesus invited me to see this overlooked woman with His eyes my heart was broken with compassion.<sup>19</sup>

Hine believes that hapless Muslim women are enduring injustice and Christian missionaries have failed to convey the “good news” to Muslim women and focused only on men. She finds no potential in Muslim women as long as they remain Muslims, but in terms of potential as recipients of the good news, she finds them very significant:

But, within Islam, women are both the greatest keepers of tradition and the most radical voices for change – this makes them important for transformation in the world of Islam ... the Church and mission workers must also recognise the importance of the role of women in the spread of the good news.<sup>20</sup>

Hine even acknowledges the role Muslim women play as change makers in their respective societies. However, as a Christian, she feels she needs to aid the Muslim women in their activism by bringing Christianity into their lives and introducing a new kind of missiology, “for inviting women who live under Islam to friendship with Jesus. It needs to be one that connects with their reality, challenges injustice and offers transformation through encounter with Jesus Christ”:

As a Christian I want to join hands with them; I want to add into that conversation the values, example and good news of the kingdom of God so that, like the woman at the well in her encounter with Jesus, these women too might be invited into friendship with Jesus and become agents of transformation in their communities.<sup>21</sup>

## Who is the Modern Muslim Woman?

Since most of the representation of Muslim women, especially media representation, casts them as a uniform entity, it is worthwhile examining who a “Muslim woman” really is in the modern world. Given the diversity of Islamic cultures, geographical regions, and political and economic contexts that shape the lives of Muslim women, it is very hard to characterize all Muslim women with one standard definition. The stories of Muslim women and their lived experiences are as diverse as the places they come from, the sociopolitical

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<sup>19</sup> Cathy Hine, “Do Muslim Women Need Saving?”, *GO News* (Interserve Aotearoa New Zealand), March 2015, retrieved from

<http://www.interserve.org.nz/RESOURCES/PUBLICATIONS/GO+NEWS/Do+Muslim+Women+Need+Saving.html>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

systems they belong to, the opportunities they seek, and the circumstances they inherit, reject, or create. As Meena Sharify-Funk's research on Muslim women's identity illustrates, there is a discrepancy between how Muslim women see themselves and the definitions imposed upon them by others.<sup>22</sup> Muslim women are represented as someone else's other – “the traditional other”, “the Oriental other”, “the Occidental other”, “the secularized other,” or the “Islamized other.” As Sharify-Funk's work suggests, “Muslim women are seeking to form their identities in the midst of various processes of ‘othering,’ or in other words, in cultural environments in which the possibilities for self-definition are sharply constrained by stereotypical categories.”<sup>23</sup>

It may be worthwhile briefly examining a few facts about the reality of Muslim women around the globe. In the world of social media, the constraints and barriers to knowing the reality of Muslim women's lives in the West and the East have been lessened, if not completely removed. Although many in the West have difficulty finding nations led by Muslim women on a map, the fact is that a number of Muslim women in the East broke the ultimate glass ceiling quite a while ago. There have so far been ten modern Muslim women heads of state or government: Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), Khaleda Zia and Hasina Wajid (Bangladesh), Tansu Çiller (Turkey), Mame Madior Boye (Senegal), Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia), Roza Otunbayeva (Kyrgyzstan), Atifete Jahjaga (Kosovo), Ameenah Gurib-Fakim (Mauritius), and, most recently, Halima Yacoub (Singapore). It is important to note that these women, who come from very diverse cultural, national, social, and political contexts and personal histories, have been able to accomplish their goals without the burdens that others lay on them as Muslim women.

In the areas of social and political activism, we find women at the forefront of the struggles on issues that often concern the saviours in the West and sometimes leading to intervention in violent or subtle form. It is important to name a few of these women. These women know their communities and societies and the challenges to women's rights posed by internal societal dynamics as well as outside intervention. They are pursuing their activism amid very difficult circumstances without needing help from outsiders, often repairing what has been damaged by external political and economic intervention.

## Pakistan

Asma Jahangir of Pakistan was a tireless human rights lawyer and activist who passed away recently. Along with her sister Hina Jilani, she established the first all-female law practice in Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> Upon her death she was mourned by tens of thousands in her own country and around the world. A cross-section of Pakistani society came out to lament the loss of this brave soul who fought in and out of court for all those who were criminalized, marginalized, and oppressed in the name of their faith or for being of a different faith. This public mourning shows the respect people have for their social change makers. Asma earned

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<sup>22</sup> Meena Sharify-Funk, *Encountering the Transnational: Women, Islam and the Politics of Interpretation* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Chapter 7, “Muslim Women as Self/Other: The Politics of Identity,” 133–60.

<sup>24</sup> Mubasher Bukhari, “Pakistani Human Rights Champion Asma Jahangir Dies,” Reuters, February 11, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-jahangir/pakistani-human-rights-champion-asma-jahangir-dies-idUSKBN1FV0MF>; “Pakistan: Asma Jahangir Leaves Behind a Powerful Human Rights Legacy,” Amnesty International, February 12, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/02/asma-jahangir-leaves-a-brave-human-rights-legacy/>



the wrath of many on all sides. On the one hand, religious zealots wished to kill her because they deemed her gender justice work an affront to Islam. On the other hand, military governments oppressed her for her role in fighting for restoration of democracy under two generals.

Pakistan produced the youngest Nobel Prize winner, Malala Yousufzai, who became a fighter for women's education in her teenage years.

Mukhtar Mai, like Asma Jahangir a winner of the Council of Europe North-South Prize for human rights, is an illiterate woman who became a champion of human rights. She is from a tribal region of Pakistan and a victim of an "honour revenge" gang rape. She chose to live and end violence against women by challenging Pakistan's Zina (sexual offences) laws and use her struggle to emphasize the need for education in the remote corners of Pakistan.

Obaid Chenoy is an Oscar-winning filmmaker who in her films highlights crimes against women, leading to the end of misogynistic laws in the Pakistani constitution.

There are numerous other examples of women who run projects for the betterment of their less fortunate sisters in Pakistan. The success of the work of these women and thousands of others is rooted in their knowledge of their society and the political, religious, and legal system, as well as social codes and norms. All of them know how to operate within the system rather than use interventionist systems of change that often lead to failure.

## Afghanistan

In another region of Western military intervention, Afghanistan, it is the bravery and courage of Afghani women that has curtailed the abuse of women by the Taliban. In today's Afghanistan, nearly 30 percent of parliamentarians are women.<sup>25</sup>

Leaders such as Malalai Joya of the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) distanced themselves from those who used women's struggles to justify the war in Afghanistan. Sonali Kolhatkar studied whether Afghan women had historically been victims of their faith and the impact of U.S. intervention in the name of women in Afghanistan as well as efforts of local Afghan women in resisting oppression on their own terms.<sup>26</sup> What she uncovered is that the revolutionary women of Afghanistan, members of RAWA, resisted and struggled to end oppression against women long before the West discovered it as a cause to justify the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

Many women have struggled in the name of their faith to end the abuse of faith aimed at controlling women's bodies: Malalai Joya, a feminist, activist, and parliamentarian; Fawzia Koofi, a human rights activist and Vice President of the Afghan National Assembly; Shukria Barakzai, Afghan politician, journalist, and women's rights activist; Sakena Yacoobi, executive director of the Afghan Institute of Learning, an NGO led by Afghan women that she founded in 1995; Safia Amajan, an Afghan teacher and public servant who lost her life when she was gunned down by a Taliban criminal; and others.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Isobel Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet: How Women Are Transforming the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2013), 175.

<sup>26</sup> Sonali Kolhatkar, "The Impact of U.S. Intervention on Afghan Women's Rights," *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice* 17, no. 1 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38G15T971>

<sup>27</sup> Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet*, Chapter 5, "Redirecting Jihad: Afghanistan," 161–202.

## Iran

In 2003, Iranian lawyer, writer, and human rights activist Shirin Ebadi won the Nobel Prize for her efforts to promote democracy and human rights, becoming the first Muslim and Iranian woman Nobel laureate.<sup>28</sup> While among all the stories of women's activism it is news about Iranian women removing hijab on the streets of Iran that makes headlines in the West, it is important not to appropriate their stories and struggles. These women are fully capable of challenging the mandatory rule of hijab, a violation of their religious freedom. Iranian women outnumber their male counterparts in graduate degrees, especially in science, technology, and mathematics. Maryam Mirkhazani, the only woman in the world to win the Fields Medal in mathematics, was an Iranian and a product of the education system of Iran.<sup>29</sup>

## Yemen

In the Arab world, we have the example of women such as Tawakul Karman, a journalist at the heart of the Yemeni revolution, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 at the age of thirty-two for leading her nonviolent struggle for human rights in Yemen, becoming the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize up to that time.<sup>30</sup> In a very poor country with a dismal literacy rate, Tawakul Karman led a successful movement to oust one of the most powerful dictators in the Arab world.<sup>31</sup>

## Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, women activists have endured imprisonment for daring to drive and for challenging the guardianship law. Their actions resulted in Saudi women being allowed to drive as of June 2018, as well as elimination of the guardianship law.<sup>32</sup> While Salman, the current King of Saudi Arabia, is selling his image in the West as a progressive leader in favour of women's rights, he is actively erasing the work of brave Saudi women who have struggled and continue to suffer in their fight for fundamental freedoms.<sup>33</sup>

## Iraq

In Iraq we see religious and secular women working alongside one another to end the oppression and devastation caused by the American invasion and rebuild their country.<sup>34</sup> While the common narrative about post-invasion Iraqi society is that the Americans went to liberate the women of Iraq, the real history of women in Iraq is far from the image of illiterate and oppressed victims of Saddam's regime. The impact of sanctions on Iraq after the invasion

<sup>28</sup> Lizette Alvarez, "Iranian Lawyer, Staunch Fighter for Human Rights, Wins Nobel," *New York Times*, October 11, 2003, retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/11/world/iranian-lawyer-staunch-fighter-for-human-rights-wins-nobel.html>

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Chang, "Maryam Mirzakhani, Only Woman to Win a Fields Medal, Dies at 40," *New York Times*, July 16, 2017, retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/16/us/maryam-mirzakhani-dead.html>

<sup>30</sup> Nobel Women's Initiative, *Tawakkol Karman, Yemen, 2011*, retrieved from <http://nobelwomensinitiative.org/laureate/tawakkol-karman/>

<sup>31</sup> Tom Finn, "Yemen's Women Revolutionaries," *Dissent*, Winter 2015, retrieved from <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/yemen-women-revolutionaries-arab-spring-2011-tawakkol-karman>

<sup>32</sup> Ashitha Nagesh, "The Badass Women Fighting for Basic Rights in Saudi Arabia," *Metro*, July 30, 2017, retrieved from [metro.co.uk/2017/07/30/the-badass-women-fighting-for-basic-rights-in-saudi-arabia-6816206/](http://metro.co.uk/2017/07/30/the-badass-women-fighting-for-basic-rights-in-saudi-arabia-6816206/)

<sup>33</sup> Cristina Maza, "Saudi Arabia Feminist Activist Detained as Country Claims It Is Increasing Women's Rights," *Newsweek*, February 8, 2018, retrieved from <http://www.newsweek.com/saudi-arabia-activist-detained-womens-rights-801459>

<sup>34</sup> Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet*, Chapter 7, "Daughters of Zainab: Iraq," 241–67.

was particularly devastating for women.<sup>35</sup> Human rights activist and journalist Yanar Muhammad received the 2016 Rafto Prize for her “work on behalf of women and minorities in war-torn Iraq.”<sup>36</sup>

### Africa

The stories of the African continent are stories of resilience and courage. Dr. Hawa Abdi and Dr. Deqo Mohamed, a mother-daughter duo known as the saints of Somalia, are famous for creating a full-service refugee village for more than 90,000 women escaping war.<sup>37</sup> In The Gambia Dr. Isatou Touray co-founded GAMCOTRAP, an organization fighting against the cultural practice of female genital mutilation by using religious education, especially among imams, to end this un-Islamic practice.<sup>38</sup>

### Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia there are women like Zainah Anwar of Malaysia, the founder of Musawah, “a knowledge building movement. It facilitates access to existing knowledge and creates new knowledge about women’s rights in Islam.”<sup>39</sup> In Indonesia, Sitti Musdah Mulia is a religious scholar and women’s rights advocate who bravely challenges conservative religious elements aimed at curbing women’s rights in the country. According to American scholar and diplomat Isobel Coleman, she is “Indonesia’s quintessential Islamic feminist.”<sup>40</sup>

### China and Female Spiritual Leadership

Female spiritual leadership is a contested issue in many Islamic circles in the West, yet in the Hui Chinese Muslim community female spiritual leaders or imams are the norm. It is, in the words of Professor Dru Gladney, an expert in Chinese Muslims, “old-fashioned feminism.”<sup>41</sup> In China, Muslim women are leading the way in terms of female spiritual leadership. The Hui female imams have preserved the faith in their communities against great odds posed by the political system.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Iraqi Women Before and After the 2003 Invasion: Interview with Prof Nadjé Al-Ali Univ of London,” *Information Clearing House*, June 19, 2015, retrieved from <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article42194.htm>

<sup>36</sup> “Iraqi Women’s Rights Activist Wins Norway’s Rafto Prize,” *RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty*, September 30, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.rferl.org/a/iraqi-womens-right-activist-mohammed-awarded-norway-rafto-prize/28023498.html>

<sup>37</sup> “Dr. Hawa Abdi + Dr. Deqo Mohamed,” *TED*, February 2011, retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/speakers/dr\\_hawa\\_abdi\\_dr\\_deqo\\_mohamed](https://www.ted.com/speakers/dr_hawa_abdi_dr_deqo_mohamed)

<sup>38</sup> “Case Study: A Conversation with Dr. Isatou Touray,” *UN Women*, February 6, 2018, retrieved from <http://untf.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2018/02/a-conversation-with-dr-isatou-touray>

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.musawah.org/>

<sup>40</sup> Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet*, 61.

<sup>41</sup> Bethany Allen-Ebrahmanian, “China: The Best and Worst Place to Be a Muslim Woman,” *FP (Foreign Policy)*, July 17, 2015, retrieved from <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/17/china-feminism-islam-muslim-women-xinjiang-ujghurs>

<sup>42</sup> Jacqueline Armijo, “A Unique Heritage of Leadership: Muslim Women in China,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2009): 37–45; Maria Jaschok, “Sources of Authority: Female Ahong and Qingzhen Nusi (Women’s Mosques) in China,” in Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, eds., *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 37–58.

## Who Has the Right to Define Feminism?

Another dramatic shift in the last three decades has been the movement of Muslim women reclaiming their faith, and seeing the inherent gender justice in the scripture from a woman's perspective. This struggle to rid Islam of its patriarchal and misogynist understandings is rooted in the early Islamic era when women were at the forefront of all affairs, including scholarship.

In a 2007 *New York Times* article, Carla Power introduced the Western world to the secret history of female scholarship explored by Muhammad Akram Nadwi in his doctoral work at Oxford.<sup>43</sup> The 8,000 early Muslim women uncovered in Akram's research, some dating back as long as 1,400 years, were keepers and transmitters of traditions or *hadith* literature, Islamic jurists, and teachers of male scholars. This lost history has been overshadowed over the course of time by the patriarchy that erased the contributions of Muslim female scholars.

The revival of this tradition is led by modern female scholars who are in the forefront of the struggle for gender justice. Because of the meanings of the term *feminism* associated with Western liberal feminists, these scholars either reject the feminism label or accept it reluctantly. They are engaged in the revival and reclamation of Islamic scholarship and are redefining gender justice from within the faith, using the Qur'an as a foundation of gender equity. This reinterpretation of religious texts, especially ones that have historically been used by male authorities to deny God-given rights to women, is strengthening the connection between modern Muslim women and their faith. The key argument of all female scholars, and many male counterparts, is that Islam's scripture, the Qur'an, embodies justice and equity and does not in any way condone violence against women.

As Coleman reminds us, "Islamic feminism has been ridiculed in the West – dismissed as nothing more than an oxymoron – and condemned and demonized by conservative Muslims."<sup>44</sup> Attempts to silence Muslim women scholars and others who support this project of reclaiming the rights of women within the Qur'an have not succeeded. The preeminent voices in this movement include Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Laleh Bakhtiar, Riffat Hassan, and many others.

In spite of a vibrant Muslim women's movement in all aspects of activism, scholarship, and advocacy for gender equity, why are some liberal Western feminists unwilling to acknowledge Muslim women's work as genuine "feminism"? Is the Western liberal feminist movement exclusivist and still unable to shed its colonial and imperialist history?

Professor Deepa Kumar, a media studies expert and author of a study on Islamophobia, argues that racism and empire hold back Western liberal feminists from working in the interest of Muslim women and other racialized women whom they see as victims in need of rescue rather than agents and active participants in the struggle for gender justice.<sup>45</sup> Some Western liberal feminists such as Meredith Tax take issue with the critique

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<sup>43</sup> Carla Power, "A Secret History," *New York Times Magazine*, February 25, 2007, retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/25/magazine/25wwlnEssay.t.html>

<sup>44</sup> Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Deepa Kumar, "Imperialist Feminism and Liberalism," *OpenDemocracy*, November 6, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/deepa-kumar/imperialist-feminism-and-liberalism>

of imperialist feminism and accuse scholars like Kumar and Sadia Toor of being antifeminist and using imperialist feminism as a cover for not criticizing “Islamism.”<sup>46</sup>

## Is Islamic Feminism Against Multiculturalism?

Related to the debate on Islamic feminism is the question of multiculturalism. The Canadian citizenship guide defines multiculturalism “as a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity. Canadians celebrate the gift of one another’s presence and work hard to respect pluralism and live in harmony.”<sup>47</sup> Recent discussions on Muslim women in Canada, especially related to the controversy over taking the citizenship oath while wearing niqab, have called the limits of Canadian multiculturalism into question.<sup>48</sup>

In the past, some Western feminists such as Susan Moller Okin presented multiculturalism as a problem for feminism. Okin accused other liberal feminists of not criticizing multiculturalism for fear of being labelled imperialists. She also claimed that Third World feminists also wish to get rid of cultural excuses for women’s oppression and therefore cultural diversity as part of multiculturalism does a disservice to these women. In a blanket generalization, she suggested that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are “rife with attempts to control women and to justify controlling them.”<sup>49</sup> In this generalization Okin conflates culture and faith, and her ill-informed and prejudicial view of Islam as a faith with inherent misogyny is no different from that of the early colonialists.

In response to Okin’s claims, Letti Volpp rightly asks why “bad behavior” in minority communities is labelled “cultural.” Volpp suggests that culture is invoked only in the case of others who are perceived to have a culture while the West is presented as acultural, resulting in “an exaggerated perception of ethnic difference that equates it with moral difference from ‘us.’”<sup>50</sup> Such selective blaming of culture, Volpp suggests, “leads to the misapprehension that certain immigrant cultures are fundamentally different from ‘our’ culture. Ethnic difference is equated with moral difference, with which we must struggle in a multicultural state.”<sup>51</sup> In contrast to the Orientalist projection of Islamic culture as monolithic, static, and inferior, culture is defined, produced, and changed by the people who belong to and identify with the culture. Therefore, labelling minority cultures as barbaric and inferior creates societal divides where the majority culture appears hegemonic.

Patriarchy is certainly not a monopoly of any one culture or faith tradition. By identifying “other” cultures as the problem cultures, the majority culture tends to overlook gender discrimination within its own culture, so that misogyny and patriarchy are always deemed to be problems of “other” cultures. An us vs. them mentality on important issues of violence against women is detrimental to improving women’s lives, regardless of their geographic location or cultural heritage. It is critical to examine how misogyny and patriarchy manifest in different societies and cultures, what the underlying causes of this

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<sup>46</sup> Meredith Tax, “The Antis: Anti-imperialist or Anti-feminist,” *openDemocracy*, November 19, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/meredith-tax/antis-antiimperialist-or-antifeminist-0>

<sup>47</sup> Government of Canada, “Equality of Men and Women.”

<sup>48</sup> Tania Kohut, “Zunera Ishaq Takes Citizenship Oath Wearing Niqab After Challenging Ban,” *Global News*, October 9, 2015, retrieved from <https://globalnews.ca/news/2269064/zunera-ishaq-takes-citizenship-oath-wearing-niqab-after-challenging-ban/>

<sup>49</sup> Susan Moller Okin, “Feminism and Multiculturalism: Some Tensions,” *Ethics*, July 1998, 668.

<sup>50</sup> Leti Volpp, “Blaming Culture for Bad Behavior,” *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2013): 89.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

discrimination are, and how best to address them constructively without imposition or lack of knowledge about the context. If the domain of feminism is closed to “other” communities, particularly Muslim communities, it signals a projection of inferiority onto others, especially Muslim women who will continue to be viewed as passive victims of their faith and culture. It is also an active way of erasing the identity of Muslim women and denying their activism, scholarship, and leadership in the realm of gender equity.

## Overcoming the Threat of Muslim Culture

Presence of visible Muslim women in Canadian culture threatens some in the majority community in Canada. They see it as an erosion of “Canadian” culture. Such fear of the Muslim “other” then results in public debates about the presence of Muslims in Canada and even policy changes such as the Hérouxville code, the proposed Quebec Charter of Values, the niqab ban, and the like.<sup>52</sup> Even the Canadian citizenship guide, which on the one hand affirms multiculturalism, on the other hand outlines prescriptions for newcomers couched in racist language, invoking stereotypes.<sup>53</sup>

While Canada may have been a pioneer in embracing multiculturalism as an official policy, entrenched in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988, neither Canadian society and government nor the settlers invented multiculturalism. Often we downplay the fact that the Indigenous population of Canada was a multicultural and a multilingual society. For multiculturalism to succeed in governing the Canadian way of life, we cannot police one another. It is best to embrace one another with all our differences in a truly pluralistic fashion than to issue apologies years later for hate and prejudice that ensue from ostracizing, demonizing, and marginalizing people of minority cultures.

## Belonging and Acceptance

While belonging in a community or country is difficult to measure as determinants of belonging may vary from person to person, Muslim women, especially visible Muslim women and racialized women in general, struggle to belong in the majority culture in Canada. While equity and inclusivity are markers of citizenship, these principles do not necessarily function well for visible minorities. There is an ongoing othering of Muslims, and a 2017 survey conducted by Angus Reid indicates that almost half of Canadians view Muslims unfavourably. While 88 percent of Canadians approve of a nun’s habit, only 75 percent approve of hijab and 32 percent approve of niqab.<sup>54</sup>

Belonging is much more than becoming a citizen of a state. Unreserved acceptance without judgement must precede belonging. The sense of belonging is often slowed down by negative media representation rooted in classic Orientalist tropes of the Muslim other as uncivilized, barbaric, antidemocratic, illiberal, backward, misogynist, unchanging, and anti-

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<sup>52</sup> Graeme Hamilton, “The Hérouxville Code,” *National Post*, December 30, 2007, retrieved from <http://www.nationalpost.com/h%C3%A9rouxville+code/206887/story.html>; Jake Flanagan, “The Dangerous Logic of Quebec’s ‘Charter of Values,’” *The Atlantic*, January 23, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/01/the-dangerous-logic-of-quebecs-charter-of-values/283272/>; Graeme Hamilton, “Quebec Passes Bill Banning Niqab, Burka While Receiving Public Services,” *National Post*, October 18, 2017, retrieved from <http://nationalpost.com/news/politics/quebec-passes-bill-62>

<sup>53</sup> Government of Canada, “Equality of Men and Women.”

<sup>54</sup> Angus Reid Institute, *Religious Trends: Led by Quebec, Number of Canadians Holding Favourable Views of Various Religions Increases*, April 4, 2017, retrieved from <http://angusreid.org/religious-trends-2017/>

Western. Added to the general stereotypes is the added burden of visibility for many Muslim women. Female Muslim bodies have become a point of discussion and contention for religious, secular, and feminists alike. Everyone other than Muslim women seems to know what is best for them, an attitude that prevents some Muslim women from integrating into the communities in which they live.

One constructive step towards Muslim women's belonging would be to shift our consciousness to actively listening to what Muslim women themselves have to say. Regardless of how Muslim women may dress, Sunera Ishaq, who took the Canadian government to court over denial of her right to wear the niqab for the citizenship oath and won, demonstrated that Muslim women not only possess agency but will exercise it and are capable of fighting for their own rights.<sup>55</sup> Often in the debates about Muslim women and obsession with their lives and garb, we do not hear the voices of Muslim women, the ones deemed victims.

### **So What Do Muslim Women Really Want?**

The Gallup research study, conducted between 2001 and 2007, provides us the first comprehensive look at what more than a billion Muslims around the world really think. This study is based on tens of thousands of face-to-face interviews with diverse residents of more than thirty-five nations that are either predominantly Muslim or have substantial Muslim populations. This study shatters the myth that Muslim women are prisoners of their faith. A surprising finding was that Muslim women around the globe cherish their faith and their rights from within the faith. Highlighting the importance of intersectionality of issues – social, political, economic, etc. – Muslim women do not believe gender issues are the most urgent issues confronting them.

The Gallup study, along with field work conducted by Isobel Coleman in various Muslim-majority nations, validates the importance of local cultures and religious traditions in the struggle for gender justice.<sup>56</sup> The Muslim women in the Gallup study reject Western intervention in the name of feminism used to justify war, occupation, colonialism, and imperialism. They resent this type of intervention as it sets back local efforts of working for gender justice and emboldens the enemies of women's rights in those communities. The women interviewed identified gender injustice still prevalent in their communities as something they wish to change, but not with the help of outsiders who impose values and norms that are alien to the local cultures and in the process cause a great deal of violence and destruction. While choice and agency are concepts that carry different meanings in the West, Muslim societies around the world still have their distinct social codes of dress and behaviour. Women of those countries understand these codes as appropriate in their communities, something outsiders need to learn to respect.

### **Obsession with Muslim Women's Bodies and Dress**

It is important to ask why a Muslim woman's religious practice such as observing the hijab or niqab continues to be an obsession and concern for those who purport to speak in

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<sup>55</sup> Goldblatt Partners, *Federal Court of Appeal Upholds Woman's Right to Wear a Niqab During Oath of Citizenship*, November 15, 2015, retrieved from <http://goldblattpartners.com/news-events/news/post/federal-court-of-appeal-upholds-womans-right-to-wear-a-niqab-during-oath-of-citizenship/>

<sup>56</sup> Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*; Coleman, *Paradise Beneath Her Feet*.

the name of individual freedom and choice. There is no difference between oppressive laws that mandate a dress code for Muslim women in Iran and Saudi Arabia and laws that ban the hijab and niqab. Those of us who care about human rights and individual choice and liberty should be equally outraged about any forms of policing of women's bodies.

The obsession with resurrecting the colonial arguments of freedom for Muslim women being freedom from their choice of dress, or even their faith, is oppressive and antidemocratic and takes away attention from real issues that are of common concern to all women. Muslim women's garb cannot serve as the end point of assessing their liberation and emancipation, even as many Muslim native informants and comprador intellectuals do support such views.<sup>57</sup> It is important to remember that these native informants are actively engaged in supporting the multimillion-dollar Islamophobia industry that serves the interest of the far right and alt-right, feeding the growing xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment.

### Stepping Away from the Image of a Monolithic Muslim Woman

In a "Sisters Project" supported by Ryerson University, the creator Alia Youssef addresses this myth of a monolithic Muslim woman and showcases a representative population of diverse Canadian Muslim women. In this project she highlights "the diverse stories of inspirational women across Canada, while also creating a space of inclusion and belonging for self-identifying Muslim women to embrace and celebrate their unique identities."<sup>58</sup> Their stories are stories of mothers, daughters, professionals, artists, academics, activists, body builders, and many more. As one hears their stories, the pain associated with their belonging and identity in the larger society is evident. Every Muslim woman has to struggle to counter the media misrepresentation of the monolithic Muslim woman. Muslim women, especially visible Muslim women, have to justify themselves and also carry the burden of being representatives of their whole faith group and bear the brunt of hate crimes against Muslims.<sup>59</sup> Recognizing the diversity of Muslim women and the everyday realities that shape their identity, whether in Canada or elsewhere, is the only way to move away from essentialist caricatures of the mythic and monolithic "Muslim woman."

### From Saving the Soul to Becoming Partners

In a world, including the Western world, where women are still unequal to men in most cases, it is time for women of all stripes to come together and offer solidarity and support to one another. In the case of Muslim women and Christian women in particular, this is a good time to stand in solidarity and find commonality in their struggles within their faith, not outside it. For those Christian women who believe their Muslim sisters worship the wrong God, let the love of neighbour that Jesus taught lead the way towards finding sisterhood among Muslim sisters in spite of the differences in belief. Muslim and Christian women can stand together with all other sisters of faith, or no faith, because the sisterhood of humanity is stronger than the divisions of faith. Here are a few suggestions I wish to offer to Muslim and Christian sisters as a way to begin the journey of Muslim-Christian struggle for gender justice and ending violence and abuse against women in all its forms:

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<sup>57</sup> Dabashi, *Brown Skin White Masks*, 38–64.

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.thesistersproject.ca/>

<sup>59</sup> Statistics Canada, "Police-Reported Hate Crimes, 2015," *The Daily*, June 13, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/170613/dq170613b-eng.htm?HPA=1>



1. Build understanding through engagement. Multicultural and multifaith engagement involves delving deep into building understanding of one another without stereotypes and prejudice. It is an engagement beyond cultural exhibitionism and exoticizing of one another. This engagement entails building trust through mutual respect, embarking on a long-lasting journey to learn from one another with openness. It also involves being grounded in one's own faith and beliefs, taking pride in one's cultural heritage, and taking a risk to engage with others who may appear so very different in many ways. It involves a sense of being vulnerable, embracing the commonalities, and cultivating and nurturing shared values, while understanding and respecting the differences without judgement.
2. Acknowledge the harm, biases, and stereotypes of one another through appropriate education, awareness, and open engagement.
3. Listen openly and deeply to one another.
4. Engage in meaningful social action rather than polemical debates that can be divisive.
5. Engage with equity, not charity – critically examining who leads the conversations and extends the invitations. Equitable conversations allow true dialogue to emerge without self-congratulatory charitable gestures.
6. Dare to ask. Assumptions lead to misconceptions and prejudice rooted in ignorance and fear. It is better to be direct and ask than to be polite and harbour resentment.
7. Educate one another about one's customs, faith practices, and norms. Read materials that educate without sensationalism and exaggerations.
8. Stand in solidarity against oppression in all forms for one another, and others.
9. Embrace the principles of justice rooted in each tradition and find common causes to fight injustice – poverty, homelessness, and domestic violence in our own communities and war and oppression carried out elsewhere for imperialist gains.
10. Be compassionate and overlook one another's shortcomings and celebrate the good and beautiful in one another.