

Abstracts of Papers

Cassandra Balchin: "Women's transnational engagement for equality and justice in the Muslim Family"

Musawah (www.musawah.org) is a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family and builds on decades, if not centuries, of effort to establish greater gender equality in Muslim contexts. These efforts include the work of the international solidarity network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (www.wluml.org). This presentation will discuss women's activism for their rights, specifically focusing on rights within the family and the obstacles posed by religious fundamentalisms in Muslim contexts, illustrated through the work of Musawah and WLUML. It will look at the various frameworks women have used to demand their rights and how women's activism challenges numerous stereotypes about the political context and engagement of women in Muslim communities.

Katherine E. Brown: "Muslim women and proscribed political violence"

Women have always participated in proscribed violence. Women have performed strategic, supportive and active roles in violent movements. Between 1985 and 2006 there had been over 220 female suicide terrorists, representing approximately 15% of all bombers, and in five years since 2001 it is estimated that women have successfully carried out 50 suicide attacks worldwide. In 2005, a female European convert to Islam carried out a suicide attack in Iraq and in Germany a number of attempted plots involving women have been disrupted. In the UK 6 women have been brought to trial for terrorism related offences (of 235 convictions since 2001). This has led to some policy analysts to see 'female terrorism' as a growing trend, and that military personnel should be 'trained' to shoot women and children in combat operations.

However, this recent increase in writings on female suicide bombers/bombings has been criticised by Claudia Brunner as carrying out 'epistemic violence'. She argues that "an object of knowledge called 'suicide bombing' has emerged in its own right", and that it has become a 'privileged significant' or 'kollektivsymbol' that is intricately linked to 'new security policies'¹. In an attempt to take up her cry to "look for alternative ways of understanding the world"² this paper addresses Muslim women's political violence, and suicide bombing, through the feminist lens of relational agency as opposed to 'security'. First the paper will review the ways in which Muslim women have engaged with political violence, it will then consider the ways in which this has been explained in contemporary analysis. Second the paper will introduce an alternative framework for examining Muslim women's engagement with proscribed political violence, namely 'relational autonomy', and then seek to apply this framework to relevant EU cases. The paper concludes by considering what impact this has for (Islamic) feminist politics.

Rokhaya Diallo: "Representing Muslim women in French public space"

In France a large number of women from Muslim background are not perceived as Muslim because Islam is usually linked to the Northern African or Middle-Eastern countries and less so with sub-Saharan Africa or East and Central Europe for example. A significant number of Muslim women have recently emerged within the French political arena. They are depicted in a caricatured way (most of time as subordinates, victims or simply bystanders rather than (pro)active agents) by the news media. Consequently, many Muslim woman in politics conform to what is expected of them in terms of the stereotyped images promoted. I will discuss three such cases and talk about how my organisation *Les Indivisibles* combats such stereotypes and works to advance more accurate images instead.

Giulia Fabbiano and Alexandra Poli: "Who are 'Muslim women' in France? Deconstructing the implicit evidence of a category"

Since the end of the 'eighties, there have been increasing debates regarding Islam in France. The main issue that has inflamed discussions, as in other European countries, has been the question of the veil which seems to determine, most of the time, the perception of this religion. In this paper, we want to explore the use of the "Muslim women" category in the context of a comparative sociological research between the French and British context. In France, what is referred to as "Muslim" is quite uncertain because of the specific norms of our secular system. What do we mean, then, when we talk about "Muslim women"? While there has been a wealth of specific accounts of the veil conceptions, few studies have questioned the use of the Muslim category in France. A fundamental tension has risen from the movement between an explicit and implicit use of the notion which could stand for a specific practice of the religion, a general belief system, as well as a cultural or an ethnic background, and even more a social affiliation. Furthermore, the confusion between ethnic and religious criteria is often taken for granted. In any cases, we argue that the figure of Muslim women has become central to the public debate and has considerably transformed the paradigms for understanding ethno-cultural differences within the French society. By looking at the key features of the methodological approach we had to build in France, we would like to examine in more detail the complex way in which such a research about Muslim women has to deal with. Our presentation will be divided into three parts which aims to cross over different levels of discourses on Islam in France. In the first part, we'll point out the trends surrounding the translation of a British research framework within the French context. In the second part we'll look at the limits and opportunities we encountered during our fieldwork implementation. This will allow us to focus on the impact of being a non-Muslim researcher doing research on so-called "Muslim women". Then, we will question the relevance and the role of the Muslim self-affiliation of the women we interviewed in their multiple involvements in politics.

¹ Brunner 2007b p.18

² Brunner 2007b p.21

Shaista Gohir: “Cultural taboos related to sexuality: getting difficult issues onto public agendas”

One of the aims of this presentation, as its title suggests, is to identify issues of importance to significant numbers of women in Muslim communities across the UK but which are rarely discussed openly due to their culturally sensitive nature. These issues may be divided into two categories for the sake of convenience: those to do with controlling women through strict imposition of lifestyle rules and those to do with controlling women but which are related to criminality. For example, they may relate to sexual orientation choices, physical and sexual abuse of children, women and other vulnerable categories within families and communities; sexual exploitation for pecuniary purposes etc. Another aim of this presentation is to raise possibilities of involving women from Muslim communities to resist control and of placing such issues onto political agendas.

Naçira Guénif-Souilamas: “How can one be a female, French Muslim? On the invention of an oxymoron”

This paper considers intergenerational differences in the perception of Muslim women and of the circumstances under which the very notion of Muslim women became part of the public space.

Danièle Joly: “Muslim women: theatres of action”

This paper is based on research for an ESRC project about the civic and political participation of women of Muslim background in Britain. This study of women of Muslim background situates their action within a particular approach regarding the interaction between the individual, the collective and society. It draws on data gathered through a sociological intervention approach. It is organised on the basis of the various key collectives of whom Muslim women partake and examines how they develop their action in respect of those collectives. We have identified three major entities which are the theatre of Muslim women's action: the ethnic group, the religious group and majority society. All three are traversed with contradictions within each and between them. Unequal relations of power characterise the interface between majority society on one hand and both ethnic minorities and Muslims on the other hand. But this does not signify that the relationship between ethnicity and Islam is free from tensions. Unequal relations of power also affect the women in relation to the men within all these entities. Muslim women have to situate themselves and their actions within this complex web of interactions. Drawing on these parameters, our conceptualisation of Muslim women's action as collectives and as individuals articulates it within the web of contradictions framing the underpinnings of interactions between groups and within each group. Those contradictions create what Archer calls a 'situational logic' within which Muslim women develop their action (1995).

Maleiha Malik: “On Headscarves: accommodating religious symbols in schools and the workplace”

This paper explores the theoretical and legal debates about the accommodation of religious minorities in schools and higher education institutions through a focus on the 'Muslim women and the headscarf' cases in European and British law which have all raised the issue of accommodation of minority religious dress codes in schools. It argues that the 'problem' of the headscarf raises more fundamental issues about how 'law in society' scholarship should respond to freedom, human rights and equality claims by non-Christian religious minorities. In the context of the headscarf, these changes require a shift from 'single axis' equality to 'complex equality' as the goal of human rights, constitutional and discrimination law. An analysis of two key headscarf cases that are relevant for British law – the Leyla Sahin case in the Eur. Ct. H. R (2005) and the Shabina Begum in the House of Lords (2006) – is used to discuss the way in which 'single axis' equality fails to allow legal analysis to accurately reflect the viewpoint of the women who are the subjects of the litigation. It is suggested that a shift from 'single axis equality' to 'complex equality' could allow legal analysis to more accurately reflect the choices and viewpoints of the individual women who choose to adopt the headscarf and who are the subjects of the headscarf cases.

Laura McDonald: “Engaging with security: challenges for activist Muslim women in the UK”

The use of women as symbols and vessels of social and political change has been documented and analysed at length. In militarised discourses in particular, including those currently produced within 'War on Terror' security discourses, women are often portrayed as a metonym, considered reflections of the status, ideologies and actions of allies or enemies. In the case of Muslim women, who are the focus of this paper, these constructions have tended to be embedded within binarised discourses of Oriental and Occidental-isms - as oppressed chattels or pious sisters of Muslim men, to be saved or defended. In this context, feminist scholarship has developed an important and nuanced critique of such highly reductionist tropes; as part of this critical approach, the paper unpacks a recently revived notion of women as the solution to 'Muslim terrorism'.

Within academic and political security discourse since the attacks of 9/11 and 7/7, Muslim women have been increasingly viewed as part of a solution to the problem of 'Islamic terrorism' and 'extremism'. In the UK, notions of women's 'natural' ability to employ soft power, their perceived influential positions in Muslim communities, and implicit assumptions around women's tendency towards religious moderation, have resulted in Muslim women being given a prominent position within the British government's security strategy, particularly in relation to the Prevent element of the CONTEST (2) counter terrorism policy. As part of this approach, the activism, social and religious participation of Muslim women in British society has been appropriated – in a way comparable to other state's use of women - as part of a drive to strengthen and support 'moderate' communities.

Acknowledging this backdrop, and drawing upon on-going empirical research with, the paper explores the complex set of challenges facing Muslim women – particularly activists engaging at varying levels with both communities and the state in relation to the security agenda. This includes women actively working with counter-terrorism police, those facilitating community and state engagement, and women who have experienced the 'hard' end of security mechanisms either through their work with suspect community members or as potential informers and suspect

individuals themselves. Such women are forced to negotiate between their desire to engage for the purposes of preventing violence and supporting communities, and the personal discomfort and social stigma generated by both rejecting and working within problematic state frameworks. It is argued that the wider discourses, as well as specific policies including the Prevent agenda and community intelligence policing - which are promoted as empowering Muslim women - are, conversely, restricting and inhibiting community activism, reducing the level of engagement that lies at the heart of the British security programme, and adding to the long history of stigmatizing Muslim women.

Nicola Pratt: "Middle East women's activism"

This paper explores the factors shaping women's activism in the Middle East with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Over the course of visits to each of Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, interviews were conducted with different women, including members of women's groups, political parties, NGOs, women's 'national machineries', Palestine solidarity/culture groups, and artists, writers, lawyers, academics and other professionals involved in ad hoc initiatives to highlight the issue of Palestine.

I use the concept of 'bargaining' to think through Middle East women's activism. Women are bargaining with different structures of power related to gender, ethnicity/religion, nation and class whilst strategizing to achieve their objectives and advance their demands—whether these are changes to legislation relating to women's rights or lobbying for Palestinian self-determination (amongst others). Different women may accommodate some relations of power (e.g. gender) in order to transform other relations of power (e.g. ethnic/religious hierarchies; authoritarian government). This has implications for the reproduction of particular axes of social and political conflict and injustices. However, interests, identities and positionalities of women activists cannot be conflated in understanding the nature of bargains. The paper highlights the significance of ideologies in mediating interests and identities in different eras of recent Middle East history.

Sara Silvestri: "From categories to human beings: Muslim women in the variable geometry of Europe"

This paper reflects on empirical and theoretical concerns that emerged in the course of conducting a comparative study of Europe's Muslim women in five European countries. More specifically it seeks to disentangle categories: broadly about religion, and more specifically about Islam in global politics, and about Muslim women's relationship to their faith. An argument is put forward for reconsidering forms of public engagement, opportunities, dreams and hindrances faced by Muslim women living in Europe, by adopting a relational and intersectional approach and taking into account the variable geometry of in which they are inserted.

Khursheed Wadia: "Women from Muslim communities in Britain and France: political participation and issues"

The paper discusses some of the findings obtained from a survey of over 200 women from Muslim communities in Britain and France. The survey, based on the annual *Audit of Political Engagement*, carried out by IPSOS-MORI on behalf of the Hansard Society (and Electoral Commission until 2008), aims to do three things. It aims to contribute to dispelling the myth that women from Muslim communities are uninterested and uninformed about politics and that they are either unable and/or unwilling to participate in the political sphere. It shows that the political action and activism of women from Muslim communities in Britain and France is not limited to a particular type of participation or issue. In presenting the evidence that it does, it ultimately aims to convince political decision makers that women from Muslim communities are autonomous political actors in their own right with whom it is important to engage in order to formulate innovative and imaginative policies which respond effectively not only to their own needs in the first instance but also to those of their communities and wider society in the long run.

Afiya S. Zia: "The politics of researching the organic Muslim woman"

In the opportune after-math of 9/11, a newly acquired need to search for an apolitical, 'soft' and progressive Islamic identity has preoccupied the international community. This has resulted in an attempt by some western governments to intervene and reinforce the communitarian logic of religion, specifically Islam, in Muslim-majority countries, even as they seek to dismantle its militant version. This is conceptually possible because Muslim scholars in the west are redefining the veil, the Shariah, madaris, religio-political parties and faith-based groups. This literature re-inscribes such sites, where women's gender roles and identities get constructed, as areas where Muslim women can potentially convert such patriarchal symbols and structures into liberatory possibilities for themselves.

In the context of Pakistan, such donor funded, development assistance is compelling a simultaneous theocratisation of the development discourse, particularly that related to gender. This paper discusses how Anglo-American development assistance initiatives in Pakistan, such as 'Respecting the Veil', a programme for women home-based workers, are re-embedding an 'organic', 'indigenous' gendered identity exclusively through the lens of Islam. Other DFID-assisted research include one on 'Women's Empowerment in the Muslim Context' and another on Faith Based organisations. This paper will argue how such efforts contribute towards the growing cleavage in the pre-existing debate of an Islamic versus a secular feminist approach for realising women's rights. This paper hopes to highlight the political differences between research efforts about diasporic Muslim women and those living in Muslim majority countries. This is timely because there is growing concern amongst secular feminists about the romanticised notion of the 'agency' of the faith-based women's movement. The anxiety is that the politics of Muslim women's resistance has clearly become about dress and domesticity rather than about political change and challenging patriarchy.