

# The International Women's Movement and the Politics of Participation for Muslim Women

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the potential for Muslim women's political engagement in the international women's movement. Irrespective of the barriers that exist to deny and undermine the agency of Muslim women in the movement, this article calls for a more sustained involvement of Muslim women in global feminist thought and praxis. By articulating a faith-centered approach to social justice, Muslim women have important contributions to make in order to push forward a collective agenda against all forms of violence and oppressions affecting women, in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies. This article suggests that Muslim women implement a strategic-integrative approach to our involvement based on creating our own independent and integrated analyses and political frames, and engaging in solidarity and alliance-building with women across our diversity and difference based on mutually defined goals.

## **Introduction**

Few social movements are comparable to the international women's movement in their ability to leave permanent imprints on the global political structure. The movement has made staggering and unprecedented inroads in global governance and has carved a unique space often termed the new global feminist "public."<sup>1</sup> The relatively recent mantra of "women's rights are human rights" has made many states nervous, as feminist advo-

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cacy efforts seek to influence intergovernmental and multilateral processes and routinely urge state compliance with, or adoption of, key international treaties – mainly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action.

As expansive and compelling as the feminist movement has become, critiques made against it have been just as forceful. Third World and antiracist feminists have been particularly critical of the privileged positions held by the international feminist networks based in Europe and North America.<sup>3</sup> As the self-established pillars and purveyors of global feminist advocacy, they are often criticized for their dismissive or cursory treatment of racial, ethnic, and religious identities and differences. Just as the narratives of racially and religiously minoritized women have a history of silence within feminist discourses, their “invisibility” is paralleled in international feminist organizing.

I do not mean invisibility in terms of minoritized women's participation at the major global conferences (e.g., United Nations conferences in Nairobi, Cairo, Vienna, and Beijing), where women from diverse backgrounds were active participants. In my analysis, invisibility is the structural and politically strategic absences of racially and religiously minoritized women in shaping the framework and scope of global feminist advocacy. It refers to their exclusion in the critical processes before, during, and after the actual international forums. Some examples are determining and prioritizing key themes; producing and disseminating independent research for policy consideration; presenting and circulating narratives that oppose and even conflict with the dominant one; launching media campaigns; and participating in the regular diplomatic forums held in New York, Brussels, Paris, and Geneva. By these accounts, international feminist organizing is indeed privileged work. Moreover, the politics of racism, exclusion, and marginality have long been exposed as structural features in the relationship between women from the North and the South. Furthermore, the international women's movement tends to brush aside the testimonies and lived realities of women as they negotiate their rights and identities differentially— across the cultural, political, social, and economic spaces they inhabit – and in particular, as members of national, ethnic, racial and or religious collectivities.

Due to these entrenched complexities, the political project to save the “downtrodden, oppressed Muslim woman,” which is frequently taken up and thrust into the vanguard of feminist frames for global advocacy, is consistently challenged by many Muslim women. The entry points for Muslim women's political engagements have largely been in resistance to the

notion that we are to be rescued from our intrinsically sexist cultures and patriarchal religion. Further, attempts by Muslim women to reclaim and reframe our own struggles from faith-centered perspectives have been intensely challenging and very often resisted by both feminist academics and activists alike.

As a former participant of the Beijing +5 Special Session on Women (held at the United Nations in New York in July 2000) and having worked in the field of international diplomacy as a practicing, veiled Muslim woman, I am all too familiar with the feelings of anger and frustrations expressed by fellow Muslim sisters, many of whom contemplate or eventually choose to delink from the movement. I recognize that our mere presence in global feminist settings is difficult and messy work. But I insist that our involvement is critical for two reasons: not only are we as Muslim women directly implicated and “spoken for” by feminist politics at national and international levels, but engagement in global civil society increasingly holds tremendous potential for transformative change. There is considerable potential for Muslim women to engage collectively in the structures of the international women’s movement in order to challenge the encroachments of neoliberalism, economic globalization, militarization, racism, and other forms of injustice and oppression that adversely affect both Muslim and non-Muslim societies, especially in the South.

Bearing this in mind, I intend to make a case for a more sustained involvement of Muslim women in global feminist communicative and political practice based on the diversity and multiplicity of our experiences as Muslim women across our own racial, social, economic, political, and cultural realities. Recognizing that this is difficult yet important work, I argue that we, as Muslim women, must continue to contribute our counter-narratives, analyses, and alternatives to the movement in order to push forward a collective struggle for global social justice. In so doing, I argue that we need to maintain a strategic-integrative approach to our involvement in feminist practice. This approach is two-fold: independent and integrated analyses and political frames, and solidarity and alliance building.

*Independent and Integrated Analyses and Political Frames.* Muslim women must come together for collaborative theorizing and analyses, based on a sound Islamic perspective, on the multiple challenges, oppressions, and injustices that we experience. And, in so doing, we must engage dialogically with the varied readings of women’s lives expressed in feminist, Marxist, socialist, and antiracist/anticolonial discourses. Although there is no unitary category of Muslim women, I believe that our coming

together to put forth our own faith-centered discursive frameworks involves working through our own conflicts, differences, and even contradictory experiences. I see this as a necessary process to build our own transnational alliances and to augment our individual and collective political, social, and religious development. We must “write back,” not only as counter-narratives to the dominant feminist axioms about Muslim women, but more importantly, to rupture liberal feminism’s hegemony and, for that matter, secular knowledge itself as the “only” legitimate and valid form of understanding and interpreting women’s lives.

Jasmin Zine’s “critical faith-centered epistemological framework”<sup>3</sup> is an unprecedented development in this area. By centering faith-based knowledge construction, this framework enables Muslim women to situate our analyses from a spiritual and religious lens without the need for validation or to reconcile our struggles and experiences with secular frameworks. As Zine indicates: “This would involve the political and discursive goal of creating a space for faith-centered voices to enter critical academic and political debates and dialogues as valid sites of knowledge and contestations.”<sup>4</sup> Our efforts for faith-centered, integrative analyses will strengthen and diversify our political platforms, and thereby enable Muslim women to speak out cogently against the larger structural and systemic factors that violently disrupt societies. In so doing, Muslim women can collectively reclaim and reconfigure “Muslim issues” away from the single-issue concentrations of our past (such as reproductive rights), and move our politics forward by engaging in the broader struggle of promoting the holistic ethos of Islamic social, political, economic, and moral justice.

*Solidarity and Alliance Building.* As part of diversifying our political frames, Muslim women must continue to establish strategic alliances within the feminist movement based on mutually beneficial and defined goals. Although there are pragmatic challenges in making our standpoints known and in articulating our positions from a faith-centered framework, there is an acknowledged need for diverse women to construct common ground in order to launch a politics of collective resistance against the overbearing forms of injustice and exploitation that encroach on the majority of the world’s population. There is a pressing need to push forward transnational alliances against the neoliberal agenda of economic globalization and the increasing schisms it continues to create between rich and poor. As Muslim women, we need to create these spaces for collaborative engagements as well as to connect with existing ones, which interweave our diverse voices for specific and strategic political purposes.

## **Setting the Scene: The International Women's Movement and the "Muslim Women" Issue**

Just as nation-states emerged as the twentieth century's central actors, it has been stated that the increased visibility, activity, and advocacy of international social movements will stir what Salomon refers to as an "associational revolution."<sup>5</sup> This "revolution" speaks to the transformative changes that will be possible in the landscape of international politics as a result of the escalating number and scale of international social movements influencing national and international policies and practices. Such transnational social movements as the women's movement have made progress in five key areas of global governance: issue creation, agenda setting, institutional procedures, multilateral-level policies, and the behavior and policies of nation states.<sup>6</sup>

The international women's movement is one of the largest such movements, and its members interact regularly with governments and intergovernmental structures. It also is one of the most effective movements, as its members successfully promote causes and also challenge and influence policies and practices worldwide. Over the last 3 decades, the movement has realized several impressive accomplishments, such as codifying women's political and civil rights in international conventions; influencing domestic and foreign policies of states (e.g., U.S. policy on women's health and foreign policy on Afghanistan); mainstreaming women's issues within the United Nations and the World Bank (e.g., establishing the Commission on the Status of Women in the UN and the World Bank Gender and Development focus); advancing gender-specific international laws (e.g., the historic Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security); and pressing for the formation of such key institutional agencies as UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women) and INSTRAW (the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women).

The movement is made up of an expansive albeit loosely connected network of educators, activists, and non-governmental organizations from almost every region of the world. Although there is no uniformity in purpose and practice, those involved at the international level concentrate on influencing global policy through the UN's international conferences. For example, the UN's 1994 population conference in Cairo symbolized a women-centered approach to population policy. Many observers attributed it to the influence of the International Women's Health Movement

(IWHM).<sup>7</sup> The IWHM is a complex configuration of formal and informal feminist networks engaged in a wide range of activities: planning regional conferences, influencing national position papers, producing data to serve as the basis to shift policy, and pursuing an aggressive media strategy. These strategies led the Clinton administration to endorse the feminist agenda, which emphasized women's empowerment and high-quality family planning and reproductive health care.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from conferences, the international feminist movement also promotes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as a standard-setting legal instrument for actualizing women's human rights. With more than 161 nation-state ratifications, many women are making legal claims and holding their governments accountable to this treaty.<sup>9</sup> This has created space for women's agency at national and international levels. In Colombia, for example, the constitution was reformed to reflect various CEDAW articles, including the punishment of any form of violence within the family, the right of couples to decide the number of children in their household, and the state's assistance to support women during and after birth.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in South Africa, the Department of Justice developed a gender policy that stipulates setting a target of 30 percent female employment in management, providing gender sensitivity training, and formulating a sexual harassment policy.<sup>11</sup>

As these examples indicate, the movement's activities and accomplishments have been expansive and its political inroads vis-à-vis other social movements has been impressive. Although its work is frequently debated, there is no doubt that its mere presence in the global political landscape rarely goes unnoticed. Therefore, when the plight of the "oppressed Muslim woman" is taken up in feminist discourse and praxis, Muslim women need to take notice and take charge. A strong case in point is the campaign against gender apartheid orchestrated by the Feminist Majority, a U.S.-based organization. At the 5-year review of the Beijing Women's Conference held in New York in July 2000, this was the most visible and dominant campaign "on behalf" of Afghan women.

Central to the campaign is the *burqa*, which symbolizes the epitome of oppression and was presented as "demonstrable proof" of the barbarism and backwardness of traditional culture and religion. Many women, outraged by the situation in Afghanistan, even wanted to start their own local campaigns of solidarity by wearing black *burqas* to school and work – a sort of "shock and rattle" conscientizing campaign in their communities. There was perhaps no need to wear the entire garb, since "*burqa* swatches"

(a square mesh cloth representing the obstructed view of Afghan women) could be purchased for \$5 off the Feminist Majority web page.

This campaign projects the typical western colonial venture to “rescue” Afghan women from their violent and oppressive Islamic and “tribal” cultures. The underlying historical, political, and economic forces that contextualize the situation in Afghanistan are largely absent. In short, the analysis is packaged in a dichotomized simplicity of equality vs. inequality, freedom vs. oppression, and civilized vs. uncivilized. Religion is clearly identified as the culprit, and secularism is heralded as the only route for the total and indiscriminate freedom for all women in Afghanistan.

The West’s legacy of incessantly having to rescue Muslim women from their misogynist cultures has had a history of disturbing political implications tied to advancing colonial and neoimperialist agendas. Leila Ahmed, for example, mentions how the colonizers portrayed Muslim women in colonized societies “to render morally justifiable its projects of undermining or eradicating the cultures of the colonized people.”<sup>12</sup> Muslim women have been used as political pawns to warrant intervention in the name of “civilizing” and “emancipating” cultures. Ahmed also explores how linking gender issues to western intervention and the insistence of meeting “western” standards has left a bitter legacy of mistrust between Arab and western women.

The Feminist Majority is no exception to this historical political project. In support of the “war against terrorism,” it has done its fair share of patriotic duties to call for the removal – at any costs – of the Taliban government. In fact, the organization’s administration even had a “24-hour war room” (the “Coalition Information Center”) linked to offices in London and Islamabad overseeing their gender-apartheid campaign. Furthermore, as their Website reported, such senior political leaders as Vice President Dick Cheney attended their meetings. Certainly the women in Afghanistan, who bear the brunt of war’s brutalities through forced displacement, death, and destruction of livelihood, would have benefited if their western feminist “sisters,” who exercise considerable privilege in influencing the media and high levels of government, had unflinchingly condemned the bombings. The campaign’s focus, however, did not call for ending the bombing that exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, but was cleverly “adjusted” to focus on three goals: restoring the rights of Afghan women and girls, increasing humanitarian aid, and demanding that Afghan women have leadership roles in rebuilding the country.

This collaboration, intentional or otherwise, between western feminism and the West’s imperialist hegemonies has surfaced at many levels of rela-