

Muslim Girl Studies: *Bismillahs*, Barbies, and Bling

A colloquium on “girl studies,” organized by Marcia Hermansen (director, Islamic World Studies) and Laura Miller (professor, Department of Anthropology) took place on 12 April 2008, at Loyola University Chicago.

Presently, the study of adolescent females – increasingly referred to as girl studies – as a separate realm of focus is a contested idea in academe. Supporters claim that girl studies is a worthwhile research domain due to the prior disregard for age within women’s studies and gender within youth studies. Detractors note that the category and boundaries of what is considered a

“girl” are unstable and historically and culturally varied. More specifically, such scholars as Sharon R. Mazzarella, Norma Odom Pecora, and Catherine Driscoll have argued that over time, literature, popular reading, and consumerism have become the means through which the mainstream culture instructs girls on how to become women. In turn, many girls negotiate their interests, sexual expression, body image, and rites of passage in culturally approved ways. Other girls, however, engage in personal, subjective interpretation by rejecting hegemonic standards of femininity in a post-industrial western world and often in the context of violence, displacement, and resistance.

Loyola’s conference highlighted the impact of mainstream norms and ethnocentrism in girl studies by including scholarship from a range of American and non-American cultural contexts. We investigated how girls’ lives are constructed in an era of massive change as communities around the world experience processes of both globalization and localization.

Until recently, incipient girl studies has been dominated by feminist psychology and informed by adolescent development theory. However, Loyola’s Girl Studies Colloquium engaged the field from an interdisciplinary perspective, including religious studies, anthropology, sociology, theology, women’s studies, psychology, and education. Interestingly, four of the seven papers incorporated material directly relevant to the study of Muslim girlhood, and three of them featured a specifically American focus.

Marcia Hermansen and Mahruq Khan’s presentation, “South Asian Muslim American (SAMA) Girlhood Embodied: Structures and Symbols of Control and Self-Expression,” examined the gendered life rituals (i.e., the *Bismillah*) that SAMA girls encounter in their families and faith communities in addition to the disparate ways in which they balance dress, behavior, and femininity in the context of both Islamic norms and American culture so as to construct, reinforce, and subvert traditional notions of “ideal girlhood.” The American media’s fascination with Muslim girl scouts, athletes, and all-girl proms demonstrates the ability of subcultures to challenge and subvert prevailing cultural expectations of both insiders and outsiders.

Extending girlhood from adolescence to “adulthood,” Farha Ternikar in “Girlhood, Marital Status and the Pakistani Immigrant Community” explained that single or unmarried SAMA women in their late twenties and thirties are still considered “girls” within their religio-cultural communities, underscoring the significance of marital status in defining girlhood. Women who remain single beyond the “acceptable” age experience social marginality and negotiate a “third space,” for which there is no established cultural script, at times by altering their work, education, and living arrangements in adherence to gender role expectations.

Shalini Shankar's paper, "Defining Desi Teen Culture: Teenage Girls, Class, and Cosmopolitanism in Silicon Valley," focused on class as exercising more influence on this American Desi girl subculture rather than on specifically religious identities. Global consumer trends and multi-cultural competency are marshaled to convey cosmopolitan "bling" by the newly emerging category of female "teens" with newly realized pre-marital autonomy based on prolonged education and independent material resources.

While the previous three papers focused on South Asian girls in the diaspora, Shweta Singh's discussion of "The 'Identities of Women' Framework and Neighborhoods" looked at the identity formation and agency performance of girls, some of whom are Muslim, in relation to their public presence within northern India neighborhoods. Singh found that age, the families' desire to maintain their (upper) class status, and the presence of unrelated boys in the neighborhood played critical roles in limiting Indian girls' mobility, despite their coeducational schooling. Religious identity was not isolated as a salient variable in this study, and discussion indicated that it could be important.

Other colloquium presentations focused on issues of consumer culture, mental health, and Japanese girl subcultures; however, much of this research has theoretical implications for the study of Muslims girls' lives to varying degrees. For instance, Colleen Conley and Karen Rudolph documented health consequences of physical development for girls' lives in their paper, "The Emerging Sex Difference in Adolescent Depression: Interacting Contributions of Puberty and Peer Stress," which classifies pubertal status, timing, and perceived timing as indicators for social acceptance and deviance among adolescents. As young Muslims continue to be born and raised in the United States, they will increasingly encounter and respond to such perceptions by their peers, especially in the school setting, which could have larger health and psychological ramifications.

Rebecca West's paper on "Sincere Fictions of American Girlhood" touched on race, social, and economic themes by critiquing the commodification of girlhood through deconstructing the marketing practices of the "American Girl" doll store. The exaggeration of the "ethnic" dolls' physical characteristics; the segregation between the dolls of different ethnicities in the store's display and literature; the company's emphasis placed on adopting white, American values; and the socialization of girls into motherhood will have a strong social influence on young consumers, non-Muslim and Muslim alike. Interest in dolls as projections of cultural constructions of female identity among Muslims has already been studied by Amina Yaqin in her article "Islamic Barbie: The Politics of Gender and Performativity."

Finally, Laura Miller's discussion, "Gendered Interlacements: Gothic Lolita Slang," underlined the place of the female gender and slang usage in

the construction of girl and urban subcultures in Japan. By emphasizing the social construction of gender through choosing alternative clothing and appearance, Miller argued that this girl-centered subculture not only challenges the notion of male-dominated alternative domains, but also illustrates girls' agency and shifting subjectivity within global political economies. Socio-linguistic aspects of Muslim Student Association subcultures (i.e., Islam-speak) and insider discourse have, in fact, been studied in projects undertaken by Miller's Loyola students. By extension, urban "niqabi" girl subcultures would be ripe for this sort of analysis. Although her presentation on Japanese Gothic Lolitas did not speak directly to the experience of Muslim girls, it reinforced the social power that girls exert on the larger society, continuously reminding us to not dismiss the growing influence of youth subcultures and minority populations.

People who are interested in this subject will benefit from the following books: Sinikka Aapola, *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power, and Social Change* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Anita Harris, *All about the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Yasmin Jiwani, Candis Steenbergen, and Claudia Mitchell, *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2006); Sharon R. Mazzarella and Norma Odom Pecora, eds., *Growing up: Girls Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); and Amina Yaqin, "Islamic Barbie: The Politics of Gender and Performativity," in *Fashion Theory* 11, no. 3 (2007): 173-88.

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