

# 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>2</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>23</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>24</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-

tions and exchanges between women from the North and South, and is central to the hostility and mistrust expressed by the latter.<sup>13</sup> Feminists frequently have represented themselves as enlightened and liberated subjects who claim authority and answers to the problem of Others, while having only a limited understanding in the ways women's agencies are complexly engendered within their own societies.<sup>14</sup> Muslim women have criticized international campaigns launched "on their behalf" as saturated with racist overtones and sensationalizing oppression in order to captivate and paralyze the issues under western feminist dictates. In response, feminist activists have criticized Muslim women's passivity in challenging their countries' sexist and misogynist practices. In addition, they construe any attempt to articulate rights from an Islamic framework as justifying human rights abuses under the guise of cultural relativism.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that our struggle to make our standpoints known and to "take back" control and leadership of our issues in the international movement is a complicated task embedded in colonial and imperialist relations that historically have been based on asymmetrical relations of power and privilege. For example, our marginalized position in the women's movement is echoed in the legacy of power imbalances between women from the North and South. Malika Dutt mentions the frustrations of Southern women activists who insist that the mainstream women's movement concentrate on themes (violence, culture, reproductive health) without dialoguing or incorporating Southern narratives in their analysis and advocacy efforts.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Dutt adds that in the pre-Beijing meetings, Southern women, especially, were frequently grafted onto the agenda and that differences and discussions of racism and power within the movement were seldom discussed.<sup>17</sup>

Chandra Talpade Mohanty indicates that women from the South are far more concerned about development, imperialism, and power differences between white and non-white women, yet their concerns are not readily advanced and prioritized at international conferences.<sup>18</sup> It should also be mentioned that the disparity of resources between Northern and Southern women's groups impair advocacy efforts. Smaller and less formally organized groups, for example, which often have the most to contribute, lack international standing and the financial and human resources to participate in the UN system. Indeed, being involved in the UN is a long-term, expensive, slow, and questionable venture for many organizations. The success of the West's women's movement could have been possible only due to an overwhelming amount of financial support given to Northern feminist organiza-

tions by Northern private foundations.<sup>19</sup> Certainly Muslim women's organizations, the majority of which are short-staffed and poorly financed, rarely find the financial strength for a more consistent and prominent presence.

Despite these serious practical and structural impediments to participation, significant inroads have been made by Muslim women that highlight the possibilities and the need to push forward with our own agendas. Sisters in Islam, a Malaysian organization, has actively participated in global feminist forums where they present their own strategies to promote women's equality in Malaysia. As Ong writes:

Sisters in Islam represents a kind of feminist communitarians that combines the liberal right to question, revise, and transform the givens that are represented by some cultural or religious hegemony; yet they do so within the cultural norms or projects of their own community.<sup>20</sup>

This organization addresses the patriarchal and sexist undertones of gender relations in Malaysian society from an Islamic framework and advocates changes to policies and practices based on the rereading of religious texts. As Ong argues, dialoguing with Islamic clerics extrapolates more egalitarian interpretations around Muslim women issues and makes their agency in dealing directly with their own religion evident.<sup>21</sup> This political process makes inclusive the voices of those women who seek to resist exploitation and oppression in their societies from a nonsecular vantage point. This has important implications for women who reject the simplistic call for them to "transcend" the limitations of their cultures and religions to fight all forms of patriarchy.<sup>22</sup>

Sisters in Islam provides a glimpse of the possibilities for Muslim women's activism and potential to promote women's rights at the national level while having a solid political presence at the global level. This group's work demonstrates how addressing concerns of inequality and injustice can be positioned within a religious framework that is neither exclusively estranged nor at odds with existing international instruments promoting women's rights. In this regard, my attempt in the following discussion is not to outline an inviolable model that will reconcile all of our differences and contradictions that appear while working in the international movement. Rather, by outlining what I refer to as a strategic-integrative approach to our involvement, I hope to highlight an approach that may enhance the possibilities of our effective participation and advocacy as Muslim women by means of interrupting dominant feminist thought and praxis in order to promote inclusivity and multivocality within the international movement.

## **Toward a Strategic Integrative Approach**

*Independent and Integrated Analyses and Political Frames.* It is of fundamental importance that Muslim women come together from across our locations – geographic, cultural, political, and economic – to carve our own independent spaces for collaborative theorizing and analyses concerning the multiple challenges, oppressions, and injustices that we experience. This is an important political project, for it is primarily an opportunity to pool our combined intellectual resources to discuss the experiences and exploitations of women from a common Islamic purview. There is a tremendous need for reflection, debate, and transformative educating in Islamic theology as a starting point, in order for Muslim women, particularly Muslim women scholars, to cross our cultural and political cleavages so that we can constructively discuss and debate the various religious permutations and configurations of gender relations.

In addition, by creating our own autonomous spaces, practicing Muslim women can recognize and sort through our own internal complexities, differences, and standpoints. The idea is not to homogenize the group, as Barbara Smith recognizes in her research with Black women. Nevertheless it is important, because “when we are truly autonomous we can deal with other kinds of people, a multiplicity of issues and with differences, because we have formed a solid base of strength with those with whom we share identity and or political commitment.”<sup>23</sup> Hence autonomy is needed first to develop self-defined independent analyses in order to position counter-narratives and our own faith-centered alternative frameworks. Muslim women can use this process to support each other and make new transnational alliances and to begin a project to systematically conscientize and raise awareness of women's rights and opportunities within our own diverse communities.

An important starting point is for Muslim women to rupture collaboratively imperialist notions of Muslim women's assumed passivity and complacency in feminist discourses that tend to measure other cultures' ideologies, social mores, and customs by a western cultural yardstick. Feminists routinely present Islam within a “fundamentalist” or extremist framework, projecting religion as an obstacle to women's full equality and promoting secularism as the “natural” space for neutral and progressive work toward the advancements of all women. Secular feminism has been the dominant voice of feminism in the Muslim world for most of the twentieth century, having made significant inroads for women's rights. As

Amina Wadud indicates, however, secularists from Muslim countries largely bypass the centrality of Islam's spiritual significance in the lives of women and, although they rightly draw attention to the infringements of women's rights, posit approaches that are external to Islam's cultural ethos.<sup>24</sup>

This has created tension between practicing Muslim women and secularist women from Muslim countries at global forums. For example, at the Beijing 5-year review in New York, the stereotypical epithets labeling the religious contingent as "fundamentalist" and secular feminists as "progressive" were quickly cemented. The striking divide of religious and secular women from the Muslim world was a salient theme in their interactions, as they publicly delegitimized each other's claims in almost all areas of discussion. It appeared as though the concerns of women within the Muslim world were packaged into two rigid camps, both diametrically opposed and politically positioned to be in opposition to the other. The secularist platforms were very generously supported by western feminist groups and legitimized in conference themes and discussions, while the religious voices were silenced in an unwelcoming environment that isolated faith-centered perspectives from the normative framework of international justice.

Rupturing secularism's hegemony as the only valid and legitimate form of understanding and interpreting women's lives is an important task. Muslim women need to create and engage discursively with new and varied epistemologies that challenge Eurocentricity and secular hierarchies, and shift toward a culturally pluralistic approach to knowledge production. By engaging in an anticolonial project, marginalized and historically silenced communities are able to carve their own discursive spaces in order to unveil western origins and agendas of theories and concepts promoted as "universals." This will allow them to center indigenous and alternative paradigms to the dominant one and project alternative sets of questions, techniques, and strategies.<sup>25</sup>

Jasmin Zine's "critical faith-centered epistemological framework"<sup>26</sup> is an example of a useful tool that will enable Muslim women to open a new discursive space to ground their theory and praxis from a faith and spirituality framework that can be accommodated within an antiracist feminist paradigm. One benefit of this approach is that it will enable Muslim women to forcefully speak out and mobilize against human rights violations in Muslim societies from an Islamic vantage point and, as Zine emphasizes, "at the same time [be] attentive to the way that extremist or fundamentalist religious dogmas can become complicit in these constructions and the structural relations and circumstances that sustain them."<sup>27</sup> This is an impor-

tant process that must be undertaken so that practicing Muslim women can reclaim their voices and resist both Islamic extremism and Euro-American cultural universalism, both of which tend to discard, silence, and marginalize the worldviews of others. Muslim women's narratives must be rooted within alternative paradigms so that they can affirm their own religious and cultural locations and place themselves, as subjects, at the center of their own analyses instead of remaining the passive objects of (other people's) study.

It is important to note that faith-centered women who engage their agency must nevertheless avoid the pitfalls of subscribing to the "angelic east – satanic west" dichotomy. As Wadud mentions, Muslim women who articulate their rights within an Islamic perspective and proclaim Islam's ethical and egalitarian ethos speak from what she considers to be neotraditionalist strategies.<sup>28</sup> These strategies appear to be situated against the West at all costs. Wadud writes:

The more conservative neotraditionalist perspective seems ill prepared to face and accept the effects of the new global economies on local life-styles. The effort to preserve the dignity of Islam from the disintegration of the encroaching Western culture and secularism often proves only to create a rigid barrier between what is perceived as Western modernity and what is perceived as Islam. ... the issue of Muslim women's identity, experiences and concerns over equitable rights and responsibilities by asserting that "Islam" provided women their full rights more than fourteen hundred years ago.<sup>29</sup>

These traditionalist perspectives tend to simplify debates as the West against Islam, and hence such international documents as CEDAW and the Platform for Action are easily dismissed as un-Islamic. Wadud points out that neotraditionalists seldom stop to analyze critically the gender biases that have developed side-by-side with Islamic jurisprudence and the Shari'ah.<sup>30</sup> She argues that in order for Muslim men and women to establish a just and moral social order, Muslim women's full human dignity needs to be realized, as echoed in the Qur'an, by removing whatever impediments there are in the way for them to actualize their surrender to Allah as a vicegerent (*khalifah*). The method to be followed, as outlined by Wadud, includes,

The attempts to address the question of Muslim women's autonomous agency and authentic Islamic identity in the context of Islam and modernity can only be successful when a complete reexamination of the primary sources of Islamic thought, praxis, and worldview is made that

intentionally includes female perspectives on these sources and that validates female experiences.<sup>31</sup>

Muslim women alongside Islamic scholars (both male and female) have to come together to partake in a timely and much-needed initiative to collaboratively sort through perspectives, experiences, and understandings of the intrinsic message of gender equality as they are revealed, but seldom practiced, in the Qur'an and the Sunna. This type of work is happening on various levels, but more transnational spaces for dialogue and discussion need to be created consistently across our diverse national, cultural, and political boundaries. This transnational dialogue among Muslim women is a necessary process for their political, social, and religious development individually as well as collectively.

However, while constructing their counter-narratives, Muslim women need not be estranged from the contributions of western critical theories and feminist writings on women's experiences from feminist, Marxist, socialist, postmodernist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist perspectives. Centering their analysis on an Islamic framework does not nullify or undermine the important contributions made by these disciplines in exploring structural forms of power, oppression, and injustice as well as the complexity of female experiences and gender relations. Hence the "satanic west and angelic east" binary often created by Muslim women needs to be ruptured. Broad, critical, and multiple forms of theorizing and analyses must be interwoven into their theory and praxis, for this will strengthen and diversify their understanding and political platforms, as they are informed and speak to the range of forces impacting upon women's lives.

For example, exposing the links between capital and labor, knowledge and power, patriarchy and structural violence, imperialism and economic globalization, and institutional racism and colonialism, can give Muslim women an enriched understanding and recognition of the multiple and competing contexts informing the lives of women in all societies. Dialoguing with these multiple texts will not "stain" or stifle Islamic frameworks, but will engender creative responses, generate alternatives, and support resistance from within an Islamic purview. There is a potential for Muslims, as outlined by Ziauddin Sardar, for example to establish alternatives to the exploitative international capitalist system based on sound Islamic principles.<sup>32</sup> Part of Muslim women's project is to come together to explore their own set of possibilities and viable alternatives, and to share these with the larger feminist community. Sardar elaborates on the possi-

bilities for transformative change based on alternative Islamic models, such as the concept of *tazkiyah*, which allows for the “preservation of moral and environmental integrity, cultural strength and the practice of such vital Islamic concepts as *ijma* (consensus of the people), *shura* (cooperation for the good) and *istislah* (public interest).”<sup>33</sup> These, he argues, must be the cornerstones of science, technology, and economic policy.

By integrating analyses from many sources and expanding women's political frames to address those concerns that adversely impact Muslim communities, Muslim women's projects as faith-centered women can make meaningful contributions to solving global challenges. At global forums in the past, Muslim women have concentrated their advocacy efforts on specific platforms, mainly the issues surrounding reproductive rights and freedoms (e.g., gay and lesbian rights, prostitution, abortion, female genital mutilation). By not contributing the Islamic analyses and frameworks to such other forums as women and economic justice, armed conflict, indigenous rights, refugees and humanitarian assistance, the contributions of Muslim women blatantly demonstrated a parochial agenda. This undermined their overall responsibility as Muslims to engage in and respond to the oppression and injustice that adversely affect the welfare, concerns, and interests of women from around the world. By developing their own independent integrated analyses and diversifying their political frames in global feminist advocacy, Muslim women will be able to make broad and critical contributions to a wide range of issues, thereby promoting the holistic ethos of Islamic social, political, economic, and moral justice.

*Solidarity and Alliance Building.* As part of diversifying their political frames, Muslim women need to continue making strategic alliances within the women's movement, despite the difficulties this may impose, based on mutually beneficial and defined goals. Arguably the most powerful coalition of which Muslim women have been part is pro-life advocacy movement. But this “holy” alliance between Muslim and Christian women has to be studied further. In my own reflections of the Beijing +5 Conference, this alliance triggered an overwhelming campaign against “fundamentalism” that was dominated by Islamophobic sentiments. Feminists launched emergency forums and rallied on New York's streets to protest Muslim and Christian pro-life supporters. The bloc sought to protest against governments that opposed certain sections of the Platform for Action, specifically those relating to reproductive rights and freedoms.

What I found problematic about the coalition was that most NGOs involved in the global women's movement work on a wide range of issues.

However, the pro-life coalition is a single-issue group that focuses on motherhood and family as they define those terms. In using the word pro-life, the majority Christian members of this coalition assert more than a belief that abortion is wrong – they oppose all family planning efforts, which they often equate with abortion. In this regard, distinctions between Islamic and Christian perspectives on reproductive rights are blurred, and the differences and contrasting perspectives within the coalition are muted and replaced by a strong conservative Christian voice.

Although there is a tremendous need and potential for Muslim women to enter alliances with other women, there is, as indicated by Jasmin Zine, an assumption that all spaces of marginality and difference are symbiotic to one another and that there is a common vision and agenda for “social justice.” Experiences in coalition building among women across race, class, religious differences have tended to collapse all forms of social difference into a neat aggregated, and undifferentiated category of “other” – as if all marginalized communities ought to support or reinforce each other’s platform.<sup>35</sup> Internal tension, conflict, and irreconcilable differences are frequently construed as threats, and the dissenting groups or individuals are blamed for sabotaging the critical agenda against injustice. Campaigns that sweep away differences consistently exclude, silence, and isolate the very voices of those groups that typically lack the power and the privilege to make their standpoints heard and accepted.

In my view, the issue of alliance and solidarity building among different communities needs to be rethought. Muslim women must make strategic alliances with other groups and take part in practicing a communicative and political practice that allows for and recognizes difference and complexity, without falling into the traps of complete fragmentation. Solidarity should not mean that everyone has to think the same way, but that diverse bases of knowledge and ways of seeing and making sense of the world should be acknowledged and respected.

As Jodi Dean points out, working toward solidarity should allow people to disagree over issues of fundamental importance precisely because they “care” about constructing a common ground.<sup>36</sup> Difference and complexity should not be tucked away; rather, they should be considered as starting points in a critical dialogue that moves toward carving “common spaces” for mutual engagement and, by the same process, identifies and acknowledges the spaces of disengagement that exist among and between different individuals and groups. Adopting such a strategy will enable Muslim women to come together across their differences and, by the same

token, to join other women from around the world to launch a politics of collective resistance against the overbearing and commonly experienced forms of injustice and exploitation.

Muslims, who have an important contribution to make based upon their faith-centered perspectives, do not need to be exclusively “contained” in religious caucuses at feminist forums – they need to be inculcated and aligned within the range of issues taken up in feminist settings. Coalition building within the international women’s movement must be defined not so much in terms of who we are but in terms of what we want to achieve together. Muslim women need to engage in new forms of alliances within the movement where they are not necessarily stuck in places where their interests and positions conflict, but rather, create temporary “common places” for strategic political convergence. They can no longer afford to be trapped in an “all or nothing” approach to coalition building, and must recognize the potential need to enter alliances with other women whose perspectives might vary and even conflict with their own.

Bearing this in mind, the call for feminist solidarity is accompanied by serious pragmatic challenges that exist when working toward unity in an array of difference and diversity. How do practicing Muslim women work with secular-oriented women in Muslim countries against laws that harm all women? How do women from varying class backgrounds engage in a common platform for economic justice? How do women from both sides of an ensuing conflict dialogue for peace? It has widely been accepted that solidarity and alliance building cannot be assumed, but must be achieved. As people need to communicate to establish common ground, so dialogue holds the dynamic potential for fostering solidarity.

Before engaging in dialogue, however, Nira Yuval-Davis states that women must first be personally committed to the process in terms of wanting to work with others, and serious in their need and approach to solidarity building.<sup>37</sup> In discussing the feminist approach of transversal politics, she captures the perspective of dialogue in the framework of “rooting and shifting.” Developed by Italian feminists, this approach is premised on each participant bringing in her rooting in terms of her membership(s) and identity(ies), but at the same time, through engaging in dialogue and listening to others, she is to try and shift so that she can put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have different membership(s) and identity(ies). This interaction seeks to create an environment in which people can interact and influence each other. This does not mean that a woman should have to decenter herself by losing her rooting and set of values to accommodate oth-

ers or take part in the process. People can learn to center in another person's experience, and then validate it and judge it by its own standards without necessarily having to adopt it as valid for themselves and enforcing it on others.<sup>38</sup> Yuval-Davis points out that in this form of coalition and solidarity politics, it is imperative "to keep one's own perspective on things while emphasizing and respecting others."

Similar to transversal politics is the communicative engagement with reflective solidarity, as outlined by what Jodi Dean promotes as the construction of a "we."<sup>40</sup> She draws on Foucault's notion that a "we" in coalitions emerges through dialogue and the identification of shared questions – as opposed to a "we" that is established prior to this process. This "we" is created and negotiated through language and the sharing of experiences. This "we" can be eventually formed through questions, interrogations, and queries, and becomes an established relationship creating a common space for dialogue. The point is not to try to homogenize the group, but only to establish a framework for discussion whereby members of a "we" can fiercely disagree with one another without having to create an "us" vs. "them" situation. On the other hand, this "we" cannot remain fixed in a dialogue, but has to be recreated and renewed constantly as the group confronts and challenges, accepts and rejects the claims raised by each and all. Similar to transversal politics, this entire process of reflective solidarity that requires each person to respect another person's perspective, and above all, try to make alliances with diverse women must be prioritized.

## Conclusion

The feminist methodologies outlined above for solidarity building among women across our differences are arguably more theoretical than practical at this point in time. I recognize that there are tremendous barriers to our involvement as faith-centered women within the majority of international feminist settings and in current feminist politics. Certainly our presence has been resisted in the past, and adopting a more determined and forceful presence as I argue in this paper will probably mean greater obstacles ahead. I also am fully aware of our muted history in western feminism, and realize that our involvement ignites many questions. One could ask why Muslim women should even want to work in a movement that delegitimizes the centrality of faith and religion in our lives? Do we not, by our participation, validate and even advance the neoimperialist project of western-secular universalism? How do we work against the movement's deeply embedded

racism and Islamophobia? Furthermore, how effective is international advocacy, and does it really affect the lived realities of marginalized Muslim women, particularly in the South? These questions need to be flagged and regularly revisited.

My interest in centering a discussion on Muslim women's participation within the international feminist movement is rooted in a reality that our absence in addressing and positioning solutions to the oppression experienced by women goes against the very mandate for Muslims to be in the vanguard of the fight against all forms of violence and injustice. I also believe that what is happening in the world today, as a result of neoimperialism and economic globalization, is so pervasive and tightly structured that a counter-hegemonic movement made up of diverse social actors from around the world is an important force that can challenge and disrupt it. I am interested in the possibilities, opportunities, and spaces for Muslim women to make meaningful contributions to enhance the lives and improve the status and circumstances of all women and, in so doing, to address and be part of collective efforts to establish just and progressive alternative visions.

I believe that there is a tremendous need for faith-centered activism to take its place in global feminist advocacy, precisely because faith-based analyses and alternatives can make crucial contributions to the work of global social justice. We, as Muslim women, do not need to sit on the margins of addressing oppression and injustice against women, but rather must submit to the project of resistance and pushing for transformative change for all women, in spite of the barriers that seek to silence our voices.

## Notes

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