Book Reviews


Muslim women in the west, as everywhere, form a highly diverse and complex group, and assumptions about them are often ill-conceived, mis-informed and grossly misrepresented — they are often assumed to be oppressed, powerless and victimised. Their voices are seriously under-represented in academic research. This book consists of a collection of eight chapters (with introductory preface and conclusion) by different female authors dealing with various aspects of the experiences of Muslim women, and their struggle for identity and a strong voice in the United Kingdom and beyond.

The editors — both of the University of Birmingham — Tansin Benn (a Senior Lecturer and Head of Creative and Cultural Studies) and Haifaa Jawad (a Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies, Department of Theology), are excellent examples themselves of female Muslim academics attempting to provide a much-needed and long-overdue resource that will be useful to anyone interested in issues of gender, religion and ethnicity, including students, employers, politicians and professionals.

The study of the situations, perceptions and expectations of Muslim women in the west is complicated by such rapid change as to make much research obsolete before anything like an overall picture has been reached. One main aim of this valuable book is to raise consciousness of the actual day-to-day lived experiences of Muslim women, in the hope that greater sensitivity and understanding will emerge. It offers some unique insights that challenge readers to reflect on their own attitudes, values and behaviour, as they affect the lives of Muslim women, with the intention of improving their position in the future.

Some Muslim women experience double oppression — not only from the non-Muslim background which can be ignorant and racist, but also from the
traditional attitudes of their own cultural community — the old-fashioned family sense of ‘honour’, or stubbornness to let go of certain traditions. If a girl stands up for her rights, she may be seen as bringing ‘shame’ on her family. It is these cultural notions rather than Islam that oppress many Muslim girls. Here, it is important to be aware that the various cultures are extremely diverse, and to realise that if a practice or ritual is Islamic it is Islamic for all Muslims everywhere. Where something has developed as the tradition of a particular country or group, then it is cultural and has nothing to do with Islam. So, for example, Indo-Pakistani-Bangladeshi girls might be coerced into an unwanted marriage and discouraged from further education, whereas Somali-Egyptian-Sudanese girls might have to face the horrors of female genital mutilation before being accepted by their society as ‘respectable’. Islam, of course, forbids forced and false marriages, despises cruel practices, and commands education for all from cradle to grave according to their aptitude and ability.

Female education has been viewed by some Muslims as a threat to their traditional customs and way of life. One study in the 1990s revealed how 370 out of 1000 female students in the UK had ‘disappeared’ from school rolls — they were being sent ‘home’ for extended holidays in their GCSE year, and not returning — or returning married. Abstracting Asian girls from their right to education has had serious consequences on the overall quality of education of women within the Muslim community in Britain since they form the majority group — although it is also fair to state that many Asian families have now taken full advantage of the opportunities offered, and dedicated Asian girls are outstripping their male equivalents in gaining qualifications and good career prospects.

Practices that are unthinkable in one Muslim country are often common in another, but the oppression of women is usually more the result of poverty and lack of education and other opportunities than religion. Western societies have been misinformed and become biased to such an extent that they cannot, or will not, understand that the problem of women in Islam is a social issue — religion being used (misused) by a patriarchal society. A dilemma for some Muslim women can emerge as they take up serious personal study of the Qur’an and soon identify different interpretations of true Islamic teachings which may challenge the values adopted by their parents. It is now perfectly possible for a Muslim female observer to comment that “the behaviour and language of some of our men is appalling, and their abuse of Islam frequent and shocking”.

Islam does not set in opposition career and domestic life for women. But being caught between two cultures where the older generation are bound by a
patriarchal home life presents barriers to careers and education for girls — not to mention the requirements of a single-sex environment, special food, the dress-code, travel restrictions and prayer facilities.

Donohoue Clyne points up the problem of how the books written for the popular market often shape public opinion and reinforce negative stereotypes of women and Islam — usually portraying them as subservient, weak-willed, oppressed, exotic and unwilling victims of sexual mistreatment and other forms of violence. Sensationalism, sadism and sensuality sells. Since most of these books fail to separate Islam from the various cultural practices operating in the different countries, they often leave readers with their sense of outrage at the mistreatment of Muslim women by abusive men and societies reinforced. Some books are accounts of a factual nature, but written by women who have not actually or willingly embraced Islam and feel hostile towards it anyway, or by women who are trying to escape from an unpleasant aspect of their society or culture. The fact that these aspects are usually unIslamic and reflect patriarchal traditions that predate Islam is missed. It is all too common for western media to latch on to selective examples of unjust treatment and generalise them to include all Muslim women, thus branding Islam yet again as a backward and fundamentalist religion.

The ‘veil’ is usually presented as oppressive, or alternatively as sexually exciting and leading to ill-informed ‘harem fantasies’, whereas many young Muslim women see it as empowering and wear it proudly and defiantly as a defence against un-Islamic influences.

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Smith present an overview of the changing face of Islam in the USA where there is enormous diversity in the Muslim population — not only immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers but also every kind of professional person, part of the brain-drain migration to America. This diversity is celebrated as a special and unique experience reminiscent of the hajj. At the same time, large numbers of Muslims in the USA are not practisers and do not attend mosques.

Muslim women in the USA are actually in the forefront of the business of carving an important role for themselves as community activists, professionals, teachers, lawyers and journalists. Women have found there that the ‘self’ they are trying to define has infinite possibilities in the American context which would have been restricted and confined by cultural and traditional restraints in the ‘home country’. The extent to which they choose to exercise their new freedoms that are possible, and to which they will be supported by their families, is the subject of a great deal of attention. Some wish to keep a barrier or ‘hedge’ to maintain their separateness, whereas others wish to fully participate in American society.
They feel the strong responsibility to explain, challenge and counter negative stereotyping. African-American women, for example, are very vocal in their critique not only of American racist society but of similar forms of oppression that they believe characterises the attitudes of some of their immigrant co-religionists, as well as some of their own men. Convert women frequently speak out strongly at the discrepancy between the ideologies of universality, equality and acceptance that they have learned is the essence of Islam, and the racist and sexist practices of some of the Muslims they encounter. Religious education is now largely in the hands of women — both in the home, at school, and in mosque groups.

Women’s activities and roles at the mosques are expanding as women feel isolated and cut off in the west from the outlets normally offered by extended families and the help and services they normally offer (such as caring for children, thus enabling a woman to go out to work). Visits to the mosque are becoming more a family event than a male preserve. Women are offering all sorts of organisational skills and social possibilities, from the traditional ‘bakes’ and money-making activities to lecturing. They are tackling the problems of finding suitable marriage partners, and meeting possible spouses in a variety of ḥalāl opportunities. There are all sorts of exciting new initiatives — for example, high school girls visiting hospitals and nursing homes for the elderly during Ramaḍān as their way of expressing their thanks to Allah and sharing His bounties. Outgoing female converts are helping the public to understand that while practice often ranges widely from the ideal, the essential Islamic system is one that is advantageous for women.

Anne-Sofie Roald gives a fascinating glimpse of the progress made by Muslim women in Sweden, where ethnic diversity has accelerated to include ‘arrivers’ of so many backgrounds that it has pointed up the need to examine the term ‘Swedishness’. Sweden has long been noteworthy for its policies on gender equity and equal opportunity, but whether or not Muslim women have been able to take advantage of it has largely depended on their ability to master the language. Many Muslims ‘cling together’ in their own societies and avoid (perhaps mainly through their language barriers) integrating with Muslims or non-Muslims of other backgrounds. (I personally found this to be so in Finland also, where the audience who turned up to hear me speak consisted largely of Somali men. When told that the next session would be for Finnish speakers only, the Imām felt there would be few attending, but the place was filled by white Finnish convert women. I also discovered that the Asian contingent in Helsinki rarely had much to do with the very lively Tartar contingent!) The most influential spokespersons for Islam in Sweden (and I am sure in Finland too) tend to be Swedish converts, who try to steer
Muslim women towards greater homogenisation. Those women who play a part in wider society come to adapt Swedishness far more than those who live in segregated areas keeping to patriarchal interpretations of socio-religious matters.

I found it interesting that one of the female MPs notified the Office of Equal Opportunities that women were discriminated against as they had to pray in a separate room. In fact, it was the other way round, with men not allowed in any circumstances to enter the women’s prayer hall, whereas women may pray behind the men in their hall. The Swedish media also regarded an ‘honour-killing’ in terms of Kurdishness rather than blaming it on Islam and Muslims.

Harfiyyah Abdel Haleem researches the experiences of ‘new Muslim’ women in Britain, developing her 1980s research and collating it with Adlin Adnan’s 1996 study of over 100 new Muslims. She explores the social consequences of accepting Islam as regards reactions and repercussions of non-Muslim family and friends, and of adopting the Muslim lifestyle and dress.

Muslim reactions to new Muslims vary from ecstatic welcome to suspicion, and a zeal to educate the new Muslims and correct their mistakes — which can lead to a plethora of superstitious and incorrect information being showered, sometimes aggressively, on the innocent novice, to her confusion and distress. For the convert herself, major difficulties arise from the practical business of wearing ḏījāb and prayer — most find it exceedingly embarrassing to pray in public, and difficult to find somewhere to pray in private. Wearing Muslim dress can be seen as ‘dressing up’ or ‘showing off’. If the convert is still at school, she may find that her teachers have a negative attitude towards Islam, and some textbooks still have factual errors and elements of bias against Islam.

However, convert women often bring to Islam range of skills and advantages not usually found in ‘born Muslims’ in Britain, and as they combine the educational background and language common to the rest of society, they can prove very useful ‘missionaries’. They are strong since they have personally rejected (or are striving to reject) the temptations of the secular society. I was fascinated to see my own name mentioned in this chapter, with quotations from a Daily Mail of 1993 that announced my sacrifice of my wardrobe of clothes, plus alcohol and bacon. One of my headlines stated how I missed going down to the pub — something I had not actually said, as I was not an enthusiastic pub-goer anyway; I remember the interviewer asking me at least three times if I missed pubs, and I only slipped up and said ‘yes’ the last time — but it somehow became a headline statement!
Chapter Six recounts a research project into careers agencies in England, to establish the extent to which guidance offered to Muslim women towards the end of their schooling reflects understanding and accommodation of cultural-religious factors. Unhelpful stereotypes, lack of recognition of changing beliefs and practices, and lack of information on religious affiliations were recognised as key barriers. The needs were identified to rewrite equal opportunities programmes in such a way as to recognise and respect differences, to better train careers staff, to create activities to target the Muslim community, and to network with parents, families, schools and employment providers. Actual practical experience in working with Muslim women was seen to be very valuable in opening the eyes of the uninformed.

Chapters Seven and Eight deal with the teaching profession, giving some experiences of Muslim women in their teacher-training and early careers in the 1990s. They discuss the problems of the prejudices and expectations of senior management and colleagues, pointing up how women who wear the hijab often meet with more difficulties than those who do not, in their training, their likelihood of gaining employment and their relationships both in the staffroom and classroom. Several Muslim women teachers felt unwelcome, undervalued and underused, even in situations where they shared religious and cultural identity with over 90% of the pupils. Others faced highly unpleasant situations and problems, even racist remarks from their pupils! Various ‘coping strategies’ are discussed, and several sample ‘life histories’ give valuable case-studies to consider.

There needs to be greater dialogue inclusive of the voices of Muslim women, more opportunities for conferences and forums in academic and educational environments which welcome the views and opinions of Muslim women. Redressing the imbalance between Muslim men and women in powerful contexts is essential to enable the views and aspirations of women to be heard and incorporated in key decision-making processes. This book is an excellent and timely contribution towards enhancing the position of Muslim women and the improvement of Muslim/non-Muslim relations generally. I highly recommend it.

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