

of the spectrum. I have often asked Imams when doing mosque visits whether they would categorize themselves as a moderate or conservative. Quite a few times I have heard them say in response, 'There is only one kind of Islam.' Whether we like it or not the real guardians of the Islam that is closest to what is in the texts of the Qur'an and Hadiths are the fundamentalists. History demonstrates that moderate Islam or tolerant versions of Islam are temporary. Sooner or later, there is a reform movement bringing the community of faith back to the purest expression of Qur'anic Islam. Whether our dear Muslim friends are moderate, conservative, fundamentalist, or nominal matters little in the end. None of those versions of Islam can save them, only Jesus.

THROUGH THEIR OWN EYES: UNDERSTANDING MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE WEST

By Elsie Maxwell

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When you look at Muslim women in the west, what do you see? We westerners tends to see the growth in the number of women wearing the hijab scarf or the number of completely veiled Muslim women. What does the Muslim woman see as she looks at the same landscape? In this article I will let some Muslim women speak for themselves by giving you a review of selected books and articles they have recently written. In the end, I will summarise the main issues, changes or features as Muslim women see them.

1. A Statistical View of Muslim Migrants in the UK

Dr. Serena Hussain completed her doctorate, 'A Statistical Mapping of Muslims in Britain' at the University of Bristol in 2005; it was the first PhD to be supported by the Muslim Council of Britain. She uses the quantitative data of the 2001 census, which clearly shows the growth of British Muslims since the 1960s, and the subsequent changes that occurred.¹

Hussain's comments on the background of the people and highlights the following issues: (1) She identifies the first group of migrants, coming from 1945 to the 1970s, as migrant workers from areas of poverty who accepted undesirable employment for financial gain. (2) Hussain cites two events that led to Muslim immigration into the UK: the 1947 partition of India and the building of the

Mangla dam in Pakistan which displaced 100,000 Mercuric people. She also notes that Bengali Muslims are among the largest people groups who migrate to the UK. They previously migrated to Assam Province in India; but, then found themselves in a Hindu country, and returning to the Bangladeshi city of Syhlet was not an easy option. (3) The immigration growth shown in UK cities is a normal outcome of a chain migration as kin networks of these people groups migrated and settled in the same areas of Britain to reproduce the former village communities with the same language, culture and kinship. Hussain's concerns focus on the people, their needs, their cultural and social behaviour patterns behind the migration and choices they make. She notes that recent events of the 1990s, including unstable political developments, conflicts, natural disaster and religious or ethnic persecution, caused many more people to migrate to the West. The number of applicants for asylum rose to 14,570 in 2002. Likewise, these people clustered in cities to form new kinship and language groups and likeminded Muslim communities. *Her emphasis is strongly on the people and why they left and not on what the country of migration (the UK) is offering.*

In general, the British government and society first viewed these people as *ethnic groups* rather than *religious groups*. Progressively, however,

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ethnic groups rather than *religious groups*. Progressively, however, Muslims have been seen more in terms of their religious affiliation. Proponents of the secularized society expected that for these immigrants religion would move from the public to the private sphere; but, in the case of Muslim immigrants, Islam has moved from the private to the public sphere. The census brought the notion of a religious minority clearly to the forefront. The survey showed the importance of religious practice in each group. For example, the South Asian ethnic minorities nearly all claimed a religion and 90% said it was of personal importance to them, which is far from the usual response. (Whites 5%, Caribbeans 20%, Indians and African Asians 35%, and Pakistanis and Bengladeshis 67%.)' (Modood et al. *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity and Community*, Palgrave MacMillan, 1997, p 35 & p306). But counting or measuring practicing Muslims is problematic. How does one decide what the indicator of practicing is? One can measure the

growth of Mosques, but attendance at the Mosque is not obligatory for women and children or men facing practical difficulties in attending. Muslims do not make a distinction between practicing and non-practicing.

But the data of the census helps to provide general data about Muslim women in Britain: Muslims have the third highest marriage rates of young marriages ages 16-24 – 34%, ages 25-34 – 93% compared to 44% of Christians. There is clearly a trend *to formal marriage at younger ages*. The number of dependent children is the highest – 63%, but Sikhs and Hindus also have high rates.

Although 73 % reported speaking English, and thus should be able to get jobs outside the home, yet Muslim women reported they are not in paid employment and are 3 times more likely to stay at home. The younger generation expressed a greater desire for a more vocal religious identity, but there is no official data available to decipher the levels of religiosity for Muslim women.

2. An Insider's Look at Faith

A second recent document is the research report by Dr. Sara Silvestri, a professor at the City University, London and Cambridge University. Her report covers Europe's Muslim women in Belgium/Brussels, the United Kingdom/London and Italy/Turin.² She used a questionnaire plus structured and unstructured interviews with Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Moroccan Egyptian, Somali, Turks and Chadian women to gather her data. Her research attempts to examine the respondents' relationship to their faith and their ordinary interaction with and feelings towards European society. In her summary of findings, she states that:

The situation is much more fluid, complex, and multi-layered, with many opinions and behaviours – often of an opposite nature – coexisting together.... despite recent vocal attacks of controversial Muslim intellectuals and female activists denouncing female repression in their religion.... all the respondents... affirmed to love and follow their religion freely. Islamic principles and practices were seen not as blind impositions but as a rational source of personal morality that the individual is free to follow. (Silvestri, 2008, p.6)

Many of the interviewees made a special emphasis of their personal autonomy in relation to faith and the essential idea that their faith was all-encompassing. The stress on the importance of the home and their mother in the teaching of their faith was noteworthy, but the younger generation see further knowledge and self-education in religious matters as important. Some expressed concern that religious leaders were unprepared to share the changes and questioned their way of learning (43-45).

Silvestri's report showed a strong affirmative response that the women felt they belonged to Europe, and were emerging as independent, determined individuals. Most were speaking the language of the country of residence. Most also acknowledged the benefits of living in a democracy and wished to continue as such rather than under Sharia law. They hoped that their children would be more fully integrated into European culture (p.7). This is interesting as on the one hand we have seemingly strong Islamic growth visible in the public sector, but on the other hand, social research showing religious growth as becoming an increasingly private and personal matter among many women.

3. Exposure of Wide Reaching Problems in Marriage

The British public have become alarmed, shocked and concerned about the need to protect and help Muslim and Hindu women. Recently, the media has portrayed a number of tragic cases of arranged and forced marriages and honour killings, not just in Muslim countries, but also in the Western countries where they are now living. Issues were raised in the House of Lords, and government committees were formed. The opening of this problem with people for whom honour and shame are the highest code for behavioural patterns has been difficult and led to painful clashes. While problems surrounding marriage are not new, the idea that these matters would be exposed in public by Muslims and not just outsiders is new. Now there are a large number of books written by Muslim women about marriage – personal stories of arrangements that went horribly wrong or tragic honour killings – available on Amazon. See, for example *Leila, Married by force*, in which a Moroccan born in France tells her story. Some other good examples are *Murder in the Name of Honour: The true story of One Woman's Heroic Fight against an Unbelievable Crime* and *The Imam's Daughter*, the story of a British born daughter of a Pakistani Imam in northern England.³

Yet, in the summer of 2008 prominent Muslim institutions based in the UK endorsed a new European version of a Muslim Marriage Contract promoted by the Muslim Institute. This Contract, 'emphasises the Qur'anic vision of marriage as a relationship of mutual love, mercy and kindness... recognises the role Muslim women play in modern societies.' In practical terms it no longer requires a 'marriage guardian for the bride' and it 'enables the wife to initiate divorce and retain all her financial right agreed in the marriage contract.'⁴ The annual report of the Muslim women's helpline registered 1500 to 2000 serious calls to the helpline about forced marriages, but they have no clear data records and percentages to show whether it is an increase or if now women are aware of the helpline and the younger ones are more emboldened to seek help. The behaviour of forced marriage and honour killing is difficult for researchers to verify and case studies are too few to provide significant answers to these problems. Young Muslims still tend to comply with their parents' plans, but there is evidence that the trend is changing. See, for example the campaign against forced marriages begun in 2008 by the European Muslim Network.⁵

4. The Strides Taken and Recorded by Muslim Women

Over the years, there have been many developments and changes for women in the area of Muslim institutions, publications, scholarship, and activism. These changes are far-reaching and broad, extending from how the Mosque is viewed to how women respond to the religion.

Growth of Muslim Institutions

The Mosque in non-Islamic countries has a unique and different role than the one in a Muslim country. Many of the mosques I have visited are not just religious

places of worship and religious education (teaching Arabic). They also offer services to meet the community's needs. For instance, most mosques have a number of rooms for meetings, facilities for weddings, spaces for hosting Ramadan meals and rooms offering accommodation. They also have the appropriate religiously clean rooms to care for the dead and the required ceremonial body washing. The Mosque promotes Islamic culture, welcoming the wider public by putting on special events, awarding special offers in the book shops and opening library services to students.

Women have founded culturally based groups for the promotion of culture and counselling services plus a variety of helps for children's education, health, and finances. It is not surprising that a number are London based services, but Birmingham, Leicester and the Bradford Northern areas also have likeminded groups, such as the following: Moroccan Women, Newham Asian Women's Project, The Southall Black Sisters (West London region), Hassania Moroccan Women Centre, An Nisa (Brent, London), Saturday School and Montessori-Olive Arabic School of City Circle (London).

Additionally, since the growth of Islamic schools, both primary and secondary schools have been granted official recognition like other church or religious based schools. There are still many more schools, however, which are not official but run privately with paying pupils.

Growth of Muslim Publications and Scholarship

For the first time, a Muslim women and family focused magazine, *emel*, has been published. The publication is for Muslim women, and it has a female editor, Sarah Joseph. Joseph is a convert to Islam from Christianity.

The magazine *emel* resembles any woman's monthly journal. Topics include the following: a main feature often related to the holiday event of that month or season, editorial articles on topical issues of faith and current affairs, articles of real life written by real people, articles on food, a health page with doctors advice, fashion pages of the newest ideas for women and children, a page about cars, some house furnishings, art, music and gardening. It is in many ways a family magazine and emphasises life and faith as one.

The continuous quality of the monthly magazine is striking. Its high glossy modern style is extremely attractive. It has good quality content with a variety of articles and issues covered. The Islamic religious topics are also discussed, but one feels there is an effort to present things in a positive light and an appealing manner. The Fast of Ramadan has been made the attention of one magazine each year, which is not unusual, but there has also been a feature magazine on Jesus and Christmas the last two years. Well known Christian leaders have been interviewed about their faith. Often the cover picture featured both veiled and

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non-veiled women. Two outstanding issues were *The League of Extraordinary Women* and *Power Women*, which catalogued the UK's most influential Muslim women. Women leaders and ordinary women have both been publicly and visually presented to the British society.

This magazine supports the idea that Muslims are not just an ethnic minority group but a significant religious minority who want to be seen, heard, understood and accepted as a religious group.

Just as Muslim women can now feature in and produce a major publication, there has also been a rise in Muslim women's role in scholarship. Today, there are a number of progressive Muslim female scholars and theologians. Some examples include the following: German converts Halima Krausen and Rabeya Mueller; US-based Lebanese scholars, Amina Waddud & Aiziza al Hibri; Pakistani-American scholar Amsa Barlas; and Syrian-American scholar Nimat Hafez Barazangi. These Muslim women establish their own voice in theological issues and become known to a wider public world.

Amina Wadud is an American professor of Islamic studies. She is working for women's reform but from the Qur'anic text. She rereads the sources to demonstrate that the texts are favourable to women as well as men, and that the religious official and culturally patriarchal rulers are usurping the role of God in wrongly applying the principles.

Wadud's first book was *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: OUP, 1999). The ideas in the book were also championed earlier by Leila Ahmed who regarded the text as egalitarian. However, Ahmed read with a patriarchal lens, and thus Wadud felt the material needed to be reread and re-contextualised. Wadud expresses her personal journey of critically analyzing Islamic theology and reconceptualising the relationship between a Muslim and her God. She made International headlines when she led Muslim Friday Prayers in New York City. Her most recent book is *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's reform in Islam* (One World, Oxford, 2006).

Asma Barlas works on the same theme in her book *'Believing Women' in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin: University of Texas, 2002). Her work is an historical analysis of past religious authority and shows how inequality and strong negative attitudes to women developed. She affirms the equality of the sexes in the sacred scriptures.

Nimat Hafez Barazangi explores similar ground in *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006.) Her search has a personal emphasis as she sees the self-identity of Muslim women as important. The participation in rereading the Qur'an is the foundation to becoming the spiritual and intellectual person mandated in the Qur'anic view of the individual and what God intended in his creation of pairs, (al-zawjayn) male & female. The most striking chapter is the one called 'Religio-moral-rational

characteristics of the Qur'an and the story of creation'. Her major emphasis is on self-identity of women and the implications of this for society.

Growth of Muslim Activism

Women are progressively challenging Islam. There are now women activists for certain rights within the Islamic community. For instance, **Irshad Manji** is a Canadian writer and harsh critic of Islam in her book, *The Trouble with Islam*. Further, Manji openly admits to being lesbian. Her main desire is to encourage her Muslim friends to question Muslim practices and speak out against violence to women. **Rana Husseini** is a Jordanian journalist and human rights defender. She has spent a great deal of energy raising awareness of the issues surrounding honour killing. Finally, **Ayaan Hirsi Ali** is a Somali-Dutch activist for women's human rights; her prime areas of concern are forced marriage and circumcision of girls, such as the Pharonic types practiced in Somalia. *The Caged Virgin*, London: FreePress (Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.), 2006⁶

These women are outstanding examples! In these past few years some Muslim women have begun to express critical opinions of Islam, and some Muslim women have even published their views, voiced them on television or put them in films. Women have voiced these concerns orally in the past, but putting things in print, in films and into the public arena is new.

Other helpful sources of information for those seeking to understand the experience of Muslim women in the West are the many **websites** where Muslim women are writing about the issues. I would suggest listening to **Sylvia Poggioli** who has posted a six-part series which one can listen to (NPR) or download and read.⁷ **Seyra Ates**, a Turkish law and women's rights activist, also participates with Poggioli in these broadcasts. Ates mentions that sometimes the German court is capitulating to Islam under the guise of religious tolerance. One judge ruled that the Qur'an sanctions physical abuse, so the judge ruled in favour of a husband who beat his wife. Her other fear is that the Islamisation of Turks is growing in Germany.

There are a few notable Western women embracing Islam. Two examples of women who converted to Islam and have written publications include Karin van Nieuwkerk and Anne Sofie Roald.

Karin van Nieuwkerk examines gender and conversion to Islam in the West. Her book *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (University of Texas Press, 2006) is the outcome of a conference in Nijmegen, The Netherlands in May, 2003. It tackles the topic of conversions to Islam, which have accelerated significantly after September 11, 2001 and were seen in Europe to have a political dimension, whether intended or not. The book offers many conversion narratives (American, Afro-American and European) and different

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Islamic paradigms (conversion to conservative theology or Sufi and mystical Islam). There is an interesting section on converts raising their daughters as Muslims and how some found Islam liberating from secularism and materialism. In a very useful and striking presentation, it demonstrates the influence of these converts on society. One should also read the book by Kate Zebiri,⁸ a Christian professor writing about British Muslim Converts.

Anne Sofie Roald, a Norwegian convert mentioned in the above book, is now a well-known European scholar teaching in Malmo University of Sweden. Her research on the role of religion and identity is recorded in *Women in Islam: The Western Experience* (London: Routledge, 2001). The research examines the opinions of Arabic-speaking Sunni Islamists living in the West for more than 10 years as they speak on faith and its practices, da'wa, Islamic world-view, polygamy and head-covering, with or without a face veil. On the one hand, the West feels threatened by the growth of Islam. But on the other hand, Muslims are affected by European ways of living and thought patterns. Change was more related to interaction with the majority society than the length of time spent in the country. The third fact of importance was that membership in a group, as those with close social affiliations to others, were less receptive to alternative views than those who were on the fringe or were individualists. Strong cultural customs, even non-verbalised, play a part in the formation of attitudes. Emphasis on the equality of the sexes has gained much ground, and many women are accepting the re-reading of the Qur'an. But establishing such equality through reinterpreting the Hadith is much more difficult.

5. Summary

It is obvious that Muslim men and women are a significant religious minority in the West and have a certain impact on Western society. Westerners are feeling the influence and some have negative reactions towards this situation.

Also, Muslim women are interacting with their own society as well as the Western society. The degree of contact and interaction varies, but their voices are being heard. It is interesting the number of women who expressed positive appreciation of their Western countries.

The quest for self-identity, which is part of the life search of all people, is also profound for our Muslim sisters. I was astounded to see Barazangi beginning her search by looking at creation and God's purpose for women as this is my favourite way to begin dealing with the identity issue. This was also a major topic of research among the convert women, including the idea of name changing.

It is not surprising that marriage issues are a major area in every study, but the openness in which Muslim women are championing publicly the problems and concerns is new for the people of the honour and shame culture. Television programmes, web sites, and YouTube videos have given voice to these concerns.

Certain changes have been initiated as a result.

The most shocking areas of challenge have been those which would re-read or re-interpret the Qur'an. Women dealing in theology have caused a number of clashes and reactions.

As a Christian I am disturbed by the great increase in women converts to Islam. I found reading their conversion stories challenging. I have learned much by reading Muslim women writers and not just Western and Christian scholars of Islam. Sometimes it was irritating, and other times refreshing, to see another view; but, it is well worth the effort to move out of our comfort zone and read other authors.

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- 1 Serena Hussain, 'Counting women with faith: what quantitative data can reveal about Muslim women in 'secular' Britain' in Part 3: Islam, in *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularism*. Aune, K, Sharma, S, Vincett, G. Editors. Ashgate Publishing, 2008.
 - 2 Sara Silvestri, *Europe's Muslim Women: potential, aspirations and challenges*, Brussels: The King Baudouin Foundation, 2008. Download at <http://www.kbs-frb.be/publication.aspx?id=241206&LangType=1033>.
 - 3 *Leila, Married by force*. OH! Editions, France, 2004, translated by Sue Rose, 2006 Portrait., Piatkus Books Ltd. 2007. Rana Hussein, *Murder in the Name of Honour: The true story of One Woman's Heroic Fight against an Unbelievable Crime*. One World, Oxford. 2009. Hannah Shah, the Imam's Daughter, Rider & Co, 2010.
 - 4 Taken from a joint Press Release of City Circle, London, The Muslim Law Council, UK, the Muslim Parliament, the Muslim Women's Network, UK and the Fatima Women's Network. Reported by in Silvestri, 2008, p.24.
 - 5 Can be found at: <http://www.euromuslim.net/index.php/2008/03/02/joining-hands-against-forced-marriages/>.
 - 6 Also, read the review of her latest book, *Nomad*, in this Seedbed, below.
 - 7 (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18330334>).
 - 8 *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives*, Oneworld Publications, 2007.