Realising Muslim women's rights: The role of Islamic identity among British Muslim women

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Synopsis

This article considers the complexities of the British Muslim-Islamic identity and the positions it offers British Muslim women to realise rights from the State in Great Britain. By recognising the interplay of religion, gender and ethnicity in the everyday lives of British Muslim women, it is possible to reveal how religious identity positions have re-constructed rights and provided Muslim women in the UK with a platform from which to attain rights. Specifically, two sets of rights are examined, the right to employment and education, and the right to personal security and family. The article is organised in three parts. The first introduces the methodological and conceptual issues informing the research. The second section analyses the ways in which community and rights intersect with identity. The third area examines in detail the two sets of rights outlined above as presented by those interviewed for the purposes of this research.
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Introduction

Commentary in the British popular press and statements by politicians assume that knowing Muslim women is simple (Merali, 2002; Shaheed, 1999, pp. 61–62). Ontological priority is accorded to their religious identity and behaviour. In particular, you may know a Muslim woman when you see her because she wears a *hijab*.[1] Her attempts at invisibility in fact make her visible as a Muslim woman and outline her in popular consciousness (Sylvester, 1994; Winter, 2004). It is also assumed that you may know a Muslim woman by knowing Islam or *Shari'a* Islamic law (Mayer, 1995).[2] But, as has been pointed out elsewhere, Islam itself is heavily contested and therefore it is necessary to examine the power relations operating behind claims to know Muslim women and their rights (Mandaville, 2004). This article begins to provide a more complex analysis than that based on the assumptions above, of Muslim women and of the gender-religious identity markers by which we claim to know them. Following the work of Brah, my work acknowledges that different social markers, such as gender, religion and identity are contingent relationships with multiple determinations (Brah, 2001, pp. 2–3). As a result, women's rights strategies deployed by Muslim women also need to be located and analysed within this context of diversity (Abu-Lughod, 1998).

This is not to claim that Islam has nothing to do with the ways in which Muslim women are treated or with how Muslim women construct rights and identity. Islam may not be easily dismissed as a secondary element in the gendered experiences of Muslim women. Rather, Islam partially constitutes Muslim women through its conjunction with other socioeconomic markers. The sociology of Islam is consequently recognised through the ways in which Islam is transformed in the British context. Therefore, while this article focuses upon the expression and articulation of an Islamic identity by British Muslim women, it does not presume that this is the only identity position they adopt, or

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that it is fixed or completed. The identities of Muslim women are understood here as contextual and relational *positionings*, and it is suggested that the articulation of an Islamic identity may support Muslim women in their strategic negotiations over the realisation of their rights (Hall, 1992, pp. 252–259).

Existing literature on Muslim women's agency and human rights focuses on the phenomena of Islamic feminism and of increased manifestations of female religiosity in the Middle East (Ask & Thomsland, 1998; Hadad & Esposito, 1998; Zuhur, 1992). The debate over the validity of "Islamic feminism" centres upon the perceived absence of practical outcomes in the everyday lives of Muslim women (Moghadam, 2002). This article reveals the ways in which the theological strategies of Islamic feminism generate socioeconomic and political outcomes. This reinforces the claim that women's rights articulations are not solely the consequence of abstracted thought processes but of competing forces operating outside and within our current understanding of human rights (Halliday, 1995, p. 150).

Additionally, the ways in which Islam operates as a human rights strategy for Muslim women are highly gendered and emerge in contexts constructed by complex gender relations. The article therefore examines the ways in which the adoption of an Islamic identity is a subversion or confirmation of the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988). The concept of patriarchal bargaining implies rational-choice decision-making in the first instance. Kandiyoti (1988), however, argued that the bargains shaped the more unconscious aspects of women's gendered subjectivity, since they permeate the context of their early socialisation, as well as their adult cultural habitus. She further demonstrated that women's strategies varied across communities and classes because the form and mechanism of patriarchy varied across similar fault-lines (Kandiyoti, 1987). These bargains therefore exert powerful influences on shaping gender ideology and on the potential and form of women's active or passive resistance. Through her research in the Middle East she showed that in times of economic change, the nature and form of patriarchy is broken down and transformed, and consequently women's bargaining positions alter (Kandiyoti, 1988). This notion of bargaining also suggests that women are complicit in the maintenance and perpetuation of patriarchal structures as they invest into it through their agency and struggles. In light of this, consideration is given to the Islamic concept of gender complementarity. Gender complementarity is the belief that gender differences are naturally and socially constructed such that men and women's relationships are complementary and work in harmony (Rahman, 1980).

The research process and data in context

It is important to locate my research in two ways, firstly as structured by my own positioning, and secondly in the wider public debates. My research is informed in part by my academic background in international relations, but also through my multiple subjectivities as female, white, non-Muslim and as a researcher with English as my primary language. The research was conducted at a time when public debates conflated faith with nationality through heightened awareness of the "violent Other." Also, at this time Islamic dress, operating as a signifier of difference as well as of piety, dominated public understanding of Islam, Muslims, and identity, via the controversy of the French headscarf ban, and the high court case of Ms. Begum (R. V. Denbigh High School Governors, 2004). My position as a white non-Muslim is therefore particularly important given the complexities of the insider–outsider debate (Wolf, 1996).

The research itself contains three elements, first are interviews with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) about women's rights in Muslim communities in the UK. The NGOs chosen maintained a common link through their explicit reference and preference for Islam as a vehicle through which to conduct politics and identity. The NGOs are located across the UK, and included those who are advocates, welfare groups, newspapers/magazines, and support groups, and all operated within British civil society. These included the Islamic Affairs Central Network, Nottingham; The Revival Magazine—the voice of the Muslim Youth, Manchester; Muslimah Graduate Society, Coventry; Muslim Women's Help line; The Islamic Society of Britain, (specifically the Women's Participation Advisory Group); Islamic Human Rights Committee, London; Young Muslim Sisters (Birmingham); The Muslim Council of Britain (specifically the Women and Family Affairs Committee); The Islamic Shari'a Council, East London; Q-News Magazine, London. In all, ten NGOs accepted my request for interviews, yet a number failed to respond, including all the Mosques I contacted. The lack of Mosque-politics represents an area for further research, but in itself does not invalidate the claims I put forward, because to assume that Mosques in themselves encapsulate the entirety of Muslim identity politics is as ethnocentric as assuming faith associations have no relevance in British civil society. (Indeed, a significant number of interviewees did not attend a Mosque on a regular basis or use its facilities.) The second element of my research is the analysis of individual responses and communications with Muslim women. This was done in a number of ways, such as in-depth interviews and the use of open-ended questionnaires.