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Introduction: Gender and Islam in Asia

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Introduction

By Huma Ahmed-Ghosh¹

At the outset, I would like to thank Diana Fox, editor of the Journal of International Women's Studies for giving me the opportunity to edit this Special Issue. When she approached me to do a Special Issue on gender and Islam, I chose to focus on women in Asia for the reasons I discuss below. Teaching in the USA for over a decade and doing research and writing in the field of gender and Islam brought to my attention a gap in materials relating to this topic in Asia. When I decided to put a course together on women in Muslim countries, I discovered that there was no dearth of materials on women in the Middle East but very sparse (in comparison) materials on Muslim women's lives in Asia given that the majority of the world's Muslims reside in Asia. While talking of materials to put in a syllabus or to use for research I refer primarily to publications accessible in the West and published in English. The "selection" of what is accessible in the West itself is determined by the politics of the West and its interactions with the Muslim world, thus limiting vital resources that are produced in local languages and publishing houses. Politically, given the USA's historic relationship with the Middle East starting from the Crusades to the quest and control of oil through the rhetoric of "freedom and democracy" and "liberation of women," the status of Muslim women have become center stage in the denigration of Muslim states. This rhetoric has thus led to an emphasis on the Middle East in comparison to Asia where the rise in fundamentalist states have led to disempowerment of women and have therefore provided the USA with "evidence" to not only denounce such states but also to go to war against some of them. In light of these issues, an attempt has been made here to focus on the lives of Muslim women in Asia in countries that have a Muslim majority and a substantial Muslim minority too. This is in an attempt to decenter the western politically motivated discourse on the Middle East and to reflect on the heterogeneity of Muslim women's lives globally.

From the responses to call for papers, it was interesting to observe the themes that emerged from different regions. Submissions were clustered around current political social and economic issues confronting women in these countries thus leading to multiple submissions on the same topic from one particular country, for example the topic of polygamy in Indonesia and garment workers in Bangladesh. I have chosen to include these articles because the authors approach these topics from different perspectives. The diversity of articles has enriched the dialogue on Muslim women and globalization, fundamentalism and nationalism in Asia. It has also brought to our attention how women empower themselves to reclaim their identity through their own interpretation of religious texts. The eclectic range of articles submitted defies the presumed homogeneity of Muslim women's lives and gives them an agency not usually acknowledged in the West.

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Numerous articles in this volume address women's voices, agencies and activism within their Muslim belief. These papers explicate women's roles as leaders, negotiators and interpreters of their faith. Svetlana Peshkova in her ethnographic research on women leaders in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan sets the tone by degendering the desire for leadership by claiming that it is "culturally and historically" determined. In her interesting article, Peshkova challenges formal leadership defined through men's leadership in public spaces to show how religious and political leadership by women (Otinchalars) in the private sphere serve an equally important function in disseminating religious knowledge to women. A similar discussion, though in a different setting, is put forth by Ann Kull in her well-researched paper on Islamic education of female teachers in Indonesia. Kull argues that while a gender perspective is being introduced in Islamic education text books and curriculum, some changes have to occur such as reinterpreting some verses in the Quran, hiring more female teachers etc. To add to the recognition of women leaders' and teachers' contributions to Islamic education in Uzbekistan and Indonesia, Yasmin Moll brilliantly contextualizes the Malay women's Islamic group, Sisters in Islam, within the larger discourse on religion and the nation-state. Moll goes a step further in her discussion on Islamic feminism as explicated by Sisters in Islam, as an organization that questions traditional interpretations put forth by so-called Islamic leaders who may not have the ability to read Arabic or have an in-depth understanding of Islam in Malaysia. Moll problematizes the approaches to understanding Islamic feminisms by highlighting the strategy engaged in by Sisters in Islam. Such negotiations and reclaiming of Muslim women's identities is expressed through the articles on Muslim women's groups in India. Both articles by Nadjé-Christina Schneider and Nida Kirmani address the emergence of Muslim women's movements due to the shifting political realities of Muslim women in India, especially since the mid-1980s. Schneider's engaging article tries to show-case Indian Muslim women's attempts to reclaim their religious identity through their own interpretation of the texts. Similar to Sisters in Islam in Malaysia, her article explicates how Muslim women in India are trying to open up spaces within the Muslim community to reclaim their rights. Kirmani details two Muslim women's groups that are debating women's rights within an Islamic framework and discusses the neglect of Muslim women's issues in mainstream women's movements. On the U.S. front, Marcia Hermansen and Mahruq Khan illuminate young women's agency in the diaspora, through their ethnographic research in Chicago. This article talks about how South Asian Muslim American girls are able to reinvent their identities through their thorough understanding of Islam, western public spaces, and negotiations at home.

The next set of articles discuss how state intervention and political conflicts impact women's lives in ironically empowering ways. The two articles on the discussion on veiling in Afghanistan and Turkey are rooted in Muslim women's decisions to practice their belief in accordance with their understanding of Islam. These articles are also in response to the state and its prescriptions for women. In the case of Afghanistan, compliance with coercive state policies and due to their personal beliefs, veiling by Afghan women is discussed, whereas, in the case of Turkey, this discourse is complicated by the conflicts of secularism and Islamization. Hilal Ozcetin in her interesting paper on Turkey addresses issues of exclusion of Muslim women's groups from the broader women's movements. Ozcetin claims that Muslim women are trying to distance their agenda and identity from binary categorizations and reclaim their identity as neither

“modern” nor “anti-modern.” Julie Billaud, too, in her insightful paper deconstructs the meanings of veiling in Afghanistan. Billaud talks about how Afghan women have “developed creative strategies” through veiling to negotiate their rights and be in politics. While in compliance with state policies, Afghan women through veiling are also making personal choices to negotiate their spaces. Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, in her provocative article on CEDAW and Afghanistan, traces the history of the UN document and concludes that despite reservations to the document, its ratification by the Afghan government is a step in the right direction. Farhoumand-Sims claims that while UN documents may be flawed at some level and not culturally sensitive in all cases, they do put in place models of human rights that all nations should aspire to, especially Afghanistan which is currently seeing a deterioration of women’s rights.

In a peculiar twist of fate, ironically, such attempts at empowerment by Muslim women are further detailed by Sandya Hewamanne, through her research on internally displaced women in Sri Lanka. Hewamanne skillfully argues how displaced Muslim women learn to adapt to shifting social locations which render them independent of conservative gender practices they migrated from.

On the other hand, rise of Islamization has also led to the renegotiation of masculinities in some countries. Articles by Sonja van Wichelen and Bianca J. Smith on Indonesia discuss the rise of polygamy in Indonesia. van Wichelen argues how democracy enabled Indonesian men to encourage polygamy. Her article discusses various standpoints women’s groups have taken on this issue and she concludes that Indonesian men are defining their masculinity through polygamy not only because of Islam but also because of postcoloniality, modernity and globalization. Smith brings to our attention how male Muslim teachers and preachers continue the practice of polygamy by enculturating women into it.

The articles on Pakistan engage in a dialogue on the impact of the state on women’s lives and their resistance to the state agenda. Anita Anantharam’s interesting article sets the stage for the discussion on Islamization of Pakistan by discussing poetry of two feminist poets Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed. Anantharam discusses how Riaz and Naheed use the medium of poetry as “feminist critiques of nationalism.” Afiya Zia’s article follows along the same path to discuss the continuing Islamization of Pakistan through her noteworthy attempts to demystify General Musharraf’s regime in Pakistan that started with the promise of secularization and progressiveness for Pakistan. Systematically, Afiya Zia unravels instead the move towards Islamization of the state and women’s integral role in Islamic movements. Lubna Chaudhry, through her article brings a different perspective to resistance by women. Chaudhry through lyrical narratives of rural women in Punjab, shows how they resist/negotiate power through “deviant” and “unruly behaviors.”

Globalization has also impacted Muslim women in Asian countries in contradictory ways as pointed out by some authors in this volume. As mentioned above, in many instances, Muslim women have been able to negotiate their identities and appropriate space to bargain for their rights. In other situations, even as women have been exposed to globalization that brings them out of their homes, their lives have become more complicated due to economic exploitation. Shelly Feldman and Nidhi Khosla’s articles elaborate on the impact of the growing garment industry in Bangladesh on Muslim women workers. Feldman tactfully traces the increase in women’s employment

in the garment industry since the 1980s to point to the continuing exploitation of women's labor and her devaluation not just in the labor market but also at home. Feldman locates her argument within the larger political economy of Bangladesh to argue her case. Khosla, in her descriptive article, while recognizing the positive impact of the garment industry on women through the income it provides, is cautious in her discussion too pointing to the exploitative nature of the industry as does Feldman. Khosla appeals to the "stakeholders to focus attention on making the industry a more humane and sustainable option for women."

Meghan Simpson in her article also discusses globalization but focuses on media. She looks at the impact of traveling soap operas in Kyrgystan. Simpson illustrates through her discussion of a Brazilian telenovela based in Brazil and Morocco, how transnational media impacts women's perceptions of representation of Muslim women in other countries. Simpson's article is fascinating because it engages in an intergenerational analysis of how the telenovela sets Islamic standards for women in Kyrgystan.

As is evident from the above discussion, the collection of articles in this volume speaks not only to the urgent socio-political intersections and crisis in Asian countries but also to women's diverse experiences. This collection also discredits the illusion of Muslim women as passive bystanders.