



“Muslim Women Seeking Power, Muslim Youth Seeking Justice”: An Edited Volume of Research Findings, Resources and Advocacy

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of a recently published book on the search of Muslim women and youth for social justice and equality, both in Muslim-majority cultures, and in Western countries of the Muslim diaspora. The theoretical and research model of critical realism is employed, in which levels of disadvantage and oppression are identified using a value-based approach. The model is applied to Islamic ontology, and the “middle path” of Islamic modesty, peace-making and compromise within multicultural, plural societies, with a focus on Islamic feminism. In a study of Muslim women in management in Western, Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, barriers to women’s employment are identified. Empirical work using “situation tests” comparing ethnically-identified CVs submitted in employment applications showed significant discrimination against Muslim women and young people in the spheres of employment in England and The Netherlands. A study of citizenship education in English schools showed that Muslim adolescents were particularly likely to adopt positive citizenship values, despite social pressures such as Islamophobia, which could lead to discrimination, and alienation. Case studies of Bangladesh and Pakistan (Muslim-majority cultures) in the search for social systems which could apply Islamic values in positive ways proved disappointing. We identified numerous ways in which girls and women in these cultures were exploited and oppressed, socially, economically and sexually. A final chapter explores why higher order values have so little purchase in some Muslim-majority (and other) cultures. The case study of women in Gaza, surviving intermittent warfare, did offer a model of Islamic peace-making, and prospects for a rapprochement of Muslim, Jewish, Christian and Humanist moral positions in seeking to establish co-operative multicultural, plural societies.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Muslim Women, Feminism, Islamophobia, Employment Discrimination, Citizenship Education, England, The Netherlands, Gaza, Bangladesh, Pakistan

1. Introduction

This article summarises 12 chapters of an edited book [1], which draws in part on papers previously published in *SCIRP* journals [2] [3] [4] [5]. The authors explore issues of Islamic feminism, and the discrimination imposed upon Muslim women by Muslim men through non-Islamic traditions of patriarchy and male hegemony, and by non-Muslims in the wider society in Europe and North America. The authors also document, explore and explain the impact of Islamophobia on adolescents in Britain and The Netherlands. Further chapters, with Mahmoud Abubaker, Wesam Abubaker, Nader Al-Refai, Sadia Kadri and Afroze Shahnaz give accounts of the sufferings endured by children and adolescents in Gaza, Palestine (through Israeli blockade and warfare), and in Bangladesh and Pakistan (through sexual domination and exploitation). The book argues that high quality education for children and adolescents (including Islamic education) is a way forward for making “good citizens” for all young people, and also offers girls and women pathways to equality and justice.

2. Critical Realism and Women’s Equality: An Islamic Approach

In the first chapter [6] Adam-Bagley and Abubaker review the developing literature from Muslim feminists who show that the equality of men and women is clearly sanctioned by The Qur’an (the revealed word of God), and the Sunnah (the ways in which the final prophet, Muhammad, interpreted and lived the Qur’anic message). Supporting these Islamic feminists, the authors point to changes in Shari’a law which reflect the Qur’anic account of women’s equality, and draw on recent examples from law and ethnography, from Egypt and Palestine. The authors focus on the principle of *Islamic modesty*, a pathway involving a moderate or middle road in relating to the world in dignified ways, living (as migrants) in quiet co-operation with other groups in Western plural societies, in which multicultural integration means that all groups respect each other’s cultural norms in ways which maximise harmony and economic progress.

The authors develop the theme of *critical realism* as a means of researching and understanding how groups in a plural society relate to one another. This is a value-based approach in which the researchers focus on “hidden” groups within

a social system, whose oppression is concealed or taken-for-granted by other groups. Children, women and ethno-religious minorities (e.g. Muslims) are seen as examples of such “absent” groups identified by critical realism. Built into critical realism is the idea of *under-labouring* (taken from the philosopher Thomas Hobbes) which identifies value principles through which evidence is appraised and assessed. Throughout the book, authors used three under labouring principles: the idea of Islamic modesty, compromise and peace-making; the idea that children’s needs and interests should always be paramount in any social movement or institution; and the idea of peace-making, derived both from Islamic and Christian-Quaker principles.

3. Muslim Women as Managers and Professionals

In the second chapter [7] the authors develop a model of women as managers and professional leaders, in Western and in Muslim majority cultures. Well-qualified women in all cultures are denied full opportunities in management and the professions, and this can only be explained by deeply-rooted structural biases in male-dominated cultures. The authors identify special strengths, which women as “strong family managers” bring to organisations when they assume executive roles. These strengths are relevant both in cultures where Muslim women are a minority group, and also in “mainstream” Muslim countries. In many Muslim countries women as managers are especially disadvantaged because of traditional male beliefs about the role of women, beliefs which are not supported by Qur’an and Sunnah.

The third chapter [8] reports a critical realist study of how employers in the telecommunications sector of Palestine construct and offer Work-Life Balance benefits to professional women employees, compared to Western organisations. The authors show important differences in this Islamically-oriented culture, with practices clearly reflecting Muslim traditions of respect for women. Nevertheless, these women managers clearly experienced a “glass ceiling” in their dual roles as family managers and workers. Our parallel study in Jordan points to similar conclusions [9].

4. Women of Gaza: Enduring Multiple Trauma with Islamic Patience

In the fourth chapter [10] Wesam Abubaker reflects on her experience as a teacher in elementary schools during the Israeli bombardment and blockade, a situation which continues. Through interviews with teachers, she shows through these extended accounts, how many children have experienced severe trauma (death or severe injury of parent or siblings; and physical and psychological trauma of experiencing the effects of bombardment) and have developed acute forms of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result. This chapter gathers together and evaluates a variety of psychosocial programs which try and address these traumatic outcomes, with varying degrees of success. More than a half of all

children living in the war zones have multiple psychological traumas, exacerbated when new attacks occur. At least a third of these psychologically traumatised children do not recover, despite ad hoc programs of “reparenting” by teachers who had themselves experienced multiple trauma. The teachers interviewed showed “Islamic patience”, a dignity of suffering, supported by their strongly held religious faith.

5. Ethnicity and Citizenship Education: Case Studies of England and the Netherlands

The fifth chapter by Al-Refai and Adam-Bagley [11] reviews the issues and research surrounding ethnicity and education in two countries (England and The Netherlands) over the past 50 years, and then focuses on the “integration” of Muslim minorities in these two countries in the past two decades. The authors conclude that ethno-religious prejudice (Islamophobia) exists in both countries and offers a challenge to the Islamic dignity and patience of Muslim minorities. This is illustrated by an empirical study of citizenship education in 10 English secondary schools in NW England (half of the schools were state-administered; the remainder were Muslim-administered). Conclusions are that Muslim adolescents are particularly receptive to the prosocial messages from Citizenship Education, probably because of their prior socialization in family and Mosque, on Muslim values of friendship and co-operation.

6. Comparing Islamophobia and Discrimination against Muslim Women Professionals in Dutch and English Cultures

Chapter 12 by Adam-Bagley and Abubaker [12] continues the comparison of prejudice and ethnic relations in England and The Netherlands, and offers expanded accounts of replications of earlier field work, comparing racial discrimination in England and The Netherlands (in 1973) [13], with replications reported in recent articles [14] [15]. The issues of racial and ethno-religious attitudes (including prejudice and Islamophobia) are discussed in relation to the changing plural societies of The Netherlands and Britain. The plural multiculturalism which marked both Britain and The Netherlands in the 1990s has changed in character with the rise of populist political parties (including those of the extreme right), and the increased levels of Islamophobia. These prejudiced attitudes give rise to discrimination, the denial of fair access to housing, services and employment. In both England and The Netherlands discrimination (measured by “situation testing”) remains marked.

The effects of this discrimination against Muslim women seeking employment is considered in detail, including the intersection of statuses (gender, ethnicity and religion) which mean that “Muslim women of colour” are particularly likely to be discriminated against in their search for employment. The theme of the book of “Muslim women seeking power” is exemplified in their struggles against

discrimination in employment. The next chapter [16] reports fresh empirical work on “situation testing” in employment applications (sending two CVs in applications for employment, CVs which are identical except for the implied ethnicity of the candidate). These comparisons of several thousand applications for potential employment (as junior accounts managers) show that there is marked discrimination against the Pakistani-origin British woman in England, in more than half of the applications. The Turkish-heritage Dutch woman candidate was also discriminated against in about a quarter of her applications. Discrimination, potential and actual is marked in Britain, and also exists to a lesser extent in The Netherlands. Such discrimination is, for both men and women, likely to produce degrees of *alienation*. The nature and effects of this alienation is another of the themes of this book. In extreme cases alienation may lead to acts of violent rebellion, especially in young men with impaired mental health who fall victim to terrorist groups.

7. Searching for Islamic Values in Action: Case Studies of Exploitation of Women and Girls in Bangladesh and Pakistan

In seeking for cultures in which the large majority of the population are Muslim and which should in theory offer the highest standards of Islamic equality and justice, and spirituality in action which should create an ideal form of society in which the Sunnah, the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad become manifest in everyday actions, the authors of the book turned to Bangladesh [17] [18] [19] and Pakistan [19] [20]. This research led to deeply disappointing findings, demonstrating “hypocrisy in action” rather than “spirituality in action”. The research team describes the unequal treatment of girls and women in Bangladesh, and their oppression in various realms of life, including health and education. Many Islamic principles, values and ethics are ignored in a culture dominated by a male hegemony, in which men become, in Marxian terms “a class for itself” in which men deprive women of the justice promised by Islam. The widespread rape and sexual assault upon unmarried girls is described, an exploitation which takes a different form when young, teenaged girls become married. Violence in marriage is frequent, reflecting the non-Islamic practice of parents of a girl being required to pay large sums to the husband’s family.

The most manifest form of female exploitation occurs in the many brothel villages of Bangladesh, in which girls suffer the most severe forms of sexual and physical exploitation. These practices are either legal, or are ignored by authorities, who often appear to be corrupt. Bangladesh leads the world in rates of child marriage (at ages 12 to 15), and these early marriages have many adverse health consequences for the females, both in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In Chapter 9, the researchers use a public health approach to review and describe the very high rates of completed suicide in girls and women in Bangladesh, both before and after marriage [18]. In most world countries the com-

pleted suicide in females is less than half the rate in males. The *reverse* is the case in Bangladesh, and we ascribe this very high rate of self-killing in girls and women to the abuse and exploitation of Bangladeshi females, particularly in rural areas and in the impoverished classes. Public health strategies include measures to help girls complete high school, and to avoid marriage before the age of 18. Ideally, “Muslim women seeking power” should achieve rates of completion of higher education that equal those of men. Chapter 10 [19] links the oppression of girls and women in both Bangladesh and Pakistan to the negative effects of child marriage on the personal and reproductive health of women, with a special focus on fistula (causing chronic infection and incontinence) which results from pre-pubertal girls having to endure sexual intercourse by older men. Another aspect of child marriage is the emergence of PTSD in these girls and women who are separated from their kin networks, physically abused, and subjected to rape not only by their husband, but also by their husband’s brothers, and father. This practice is entirely contrary to Islamic principles.

Chapter 11 focuses on “the hard struggle” which girls and women in Pakistan have to engage in to obtain justice and equity promised in the Shari’a law of Islam [20]. In many areas of Pakistani culture a pre-Islamic tribal law over-rides Islamic principles. In addition, many men assume hegemonic rights over Muslim women, exploiting their bodily integrity, their labour, and their ability to deliver sons. Female infanticide is widely practised in situations where an additional female would be an economic burden for a family. Anonymous research students provided Adam-Bagley with data on the surviving practice of stoning women to death, if as a result of rape, they become pregnant. “Honour killing” of females is widespread, the murder of young women who have offended a family’s social status by a liaison with a male from an inferior “caste” (Hindu norms of caste and dowry still prevail in much of Pakistan).

In rural areas educational systems are underfunded, and many children (especially females) will be withdrawn after only a few years of primary schooling. Health systems are underdeveloped, and death rates of children and young women are high. A case study of Lahore identifies the widespread practice of the prostitution of both young girls, and young boys. The conclusion is that the chronic poverty of Pakistan contributes to the corruption of values (and the denial of Islamic principles) in many areas of society and culture.

8. Exploring the Gap between Religious and Higher Order Values, and “Everyday Values” Expressed as Discrimination against Girls and Women

In the final chapter Adam-Bagley [21] tries to draw together the strands of a complex argument involving different kinds of empirical and value analysis. Drawing on the peace-making ideologies of three world religions (Islam, Judaism and Christianity) argues for a co-operative model of citizenship and social justice which should be applied both in plural societies, and in predominantly Islamic

cultures. Trying to explain why ordinary citizens so frequently ignore or violate the spiritual and ethical principles to which they have a nominal allegiance, Adam-Bagley draws on the work of the anthropologist Edmund Leach, on the three-fold (and often conflicting) impulses towards social action in which higher values, pragmatic values, and selfish or atavistic impulses interact. Adam-Bagley further draws on work on *extrinsic* versus *intrinsic* attachment to metaphysical systems, religious beliefs and values. Only a minority (but often a crucially important third of the population) have intrinsic commitment to secular humanistic, or religious values which may guide interpersonal conduct, and a just and stable political order.

This chapter also focuses on the *alienation* of Muslims, both men and women, in European societies—an alienation which results from high levels of Islamophobia, and employment discrimination. A social psychological analysis of this alienation shows that it takes various forms, ranging from retreat from society, social despair, striving harder to achieve, and in a small minority of cases aggression against the wider society, including terrorist actions. Adam-Bagley presents a case study of the 2017 Manchester Arena bomber, Salman Abedi whose mental illness was exploited by terrorist groups.

Adam-Bagley then considers the case of Gaza and the futility of continuing violence, giving case histories of men and women whose families have been diminished or destroyed by continuing warfare, but who seek forms of forgiveness and peace-making. Islam is appraised as a fundamentally peaceful religion, in which the citizen's duty is to acknowledge the equality of the genders, and to seek compromise and peace-making rather than violent rebellion.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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