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Women's Studies International Forum 29 (2006) 417–430

WOMEN'S STUDIES  
INTERNATIONAL  
FORUM

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

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Available online 10 July 2006

## 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*.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> 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.

Some respondents and interviewees have requested anonymity, and this has been respected. However, where possible sociodemographic data has been included to contextualise their responses. Furthermore, unless stated otherwise, those interviewees cited in the article are female and Muslim. The third element of research derives from the transcripts gathered by Southampton Asian Women's Oral History Project ran by Southampton City Council between 1998 and 2002 ([Southampton City Council History Department, 1998–2002](#)). These interviews were anonymous, with limited demographic data included. The data set was limited to Muslim women who live in Southampton, and whose families (or the interviewee) were originally from the Indian sub-continent. These transcripts did not refer to any external sources as the women were recounting their life history without interruption, but by analysing the frequency and topics raised an assessment of rights claims can be made ([Grele, 1987](#)). These data sets enable corroboration of the claims made by the NGOs on behalf of Muslim women. The research additionally draws on secondary data that is already publicly available such as reports from the Government's Equality Unit, Muslim scholars' works, or polls conducted for national newspapers.

### **Publicly articulated Islamic identity**

Three key transformations mark the change towards an Islamic identity among Muslim communities: the Salman Rushdie Affair, the politicisation of the *hijab*, and the abandonment of the myth of return ([Eade, 1997; Kepel, 1997; Modood, 1992; Werbner, 2004](#)). However, this new Islamic identity is at once residual and self-conscious; it is newly articulated in the public space, yet it does not necessarily coincide with increased piety among Muslims ([Droeber, 2003; Lewis, 1994](#)). Furthermore, it is contingent, negotiated within the local as well as global contexts of everyday lives, such that at times this "Islamic" identity and rights articulation are in tension with other positions held by groups and individuals ([Baumann, 1996; Eade, 1997](#)). The emergence of new forms of community and identity is perhaps most visible in the determination of Muslim groups to separate culture from religion. This struggle is reflected in the 2002 ICM poll, which revealed that of those interviewed, 41% of those under the age of 35 preferred to describe themselves by religion alone ([ICM & The Guardian, 2002](#)).

The collective articulation of an Islamic identity is expressed through a revival of the idea of the *Umma*, the community of Muslim believers, which enables the development of a universal identity in Islam ([Bodman & Herbert, 1998](#)). The use of the term is not a return to

medieval political Islamic concepts, but a reinterpretation to address contemporary concerns within Muslim communities. The *Umma* reintroduces unity among an otherwise divided community, divided by class, ethnicity, age, and history among other categories. For example, the Islamic *Shari'a* Council of East London argues that a petition to legalise polygamy in the UK is legitimate because the British in their rule of India legalised it for the Muslim population there, the secretary arguing that "it's the same Muslims" (Interview: Islamic *Shari'a* Council, East London, 2003). The concept of *Umma* not only removes barriers within States, but also generates a globalised community, one which unites believers by a common fate and experience ([Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2004; 31 year old teacher, 2003; 27 year old solicitor, 2004](#)). The globalisation of the *Umma* is such that mobilisation on Muslim specific issues transcends national boundaries. The ICM/Guardian poll conducted in 2002 provides an interesting insight here, as it shows that international events were more frequently of "great concern" to the Muslims interviewed than British domestic issues ([ICM & The Guardian, 2002](#)). The revival of the *Umma* is in part because "Western civilisation is global—it's getting everywhere", thus the reinvention of the *Umma* is a response to globalisation processes and is enabled through globalisation (especially of travel and communications) (Interview: [Hasan, 2003](#); 31 year old Scottish help line advisor, 2003). For three of the NGOs interviewed the French government's proposal in December 2003 to ban the *hijab* from schools was particularly significant.<sup>3</sup> This proposal resulted in protests outside the French embassy by British Muslims identifying themselves and their rights as part of a pan-ethnic or transnational community. This was particularly evident through their placards and statements to the press. Through the *Umma* there is a displacement of space as the important mode of community identification. This revival can be seen to be the beginnings of a development of tools through which to negotiate and participate in discourses of civil society, where in the orthodox narratives there is a forced communitarian vision which lacks/prevents full Muslim participation in anything beyond parochial "Muslim affairs" (Interview: [Merali, 2004](#)). However, the *Umma* becomes meaningful through networks of interaction in local communities, as it becomes a "shoulder to cry on" (31 year old Scottish help line advisor, 2003). For another interviewee "sisterhood" and knowing Muslim women was a central pillar in her support network: "[it] restored my faith in humanity... Also I know the advice they give is Islamically ordained, and they love me for Allah's sake alone" (22 year old civil servant, 2003). By developing the concept of *Umma* as a

non-territorial Muslim community, Muslim women open up global spaces and discourses through which rights are demanded, in a strategy which is intrinsically modern.

Islamic strategies of rights are also negotiations within modernity. In their globalised modern condition the Muslims interviewed asked themselves indirectly what it means to be Muslim rather than relying on traditional authority of religious scholars and clerics to determine the content and meaning of Islam. In this sense, the strategies deployed are empowering as they formulate and articulate new senses of public identity. This new sense of consciousness is in many ways similar to the idea of self-reflexivity as explored by Giddens (1991) and to the idea of objectification developed by Eickelman and Piscatori (1996). Objectification and self-reflexivity express the ways in which Muslims are becoming increasingly conscious of their identity as Muslims and their reflection on that identity. Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) link the process of objectification to changes in forms of cultural production and structural social transformations, but in the final analysis objectification appears contingent on subjectivist developments and changes in Muslims' self-perceptions, rather than on structural or infrastructural change (Ismail, 2004). These strategies for actualising rights therefore centre on the reclamation and appropriation of the self. As one interviewee argued "Religion is your own identity... religion is first of all don't do bad things, don't hurt no-one and be honest" (57 year old South Asian bakery supervisor, 1999). She continued to describe religion in individualised terms based on behaviour. Another interviewee argued that "religion is more individual for women [than for men]—it's not group" (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999). It is the claim to a right to self-determination and self-authentication which grounds the development of Islamic strategies; for example, individuals' and groups' prioritisation of a religious identity in public spaces in order to move more freely within them (such as wearing a *hijab*), or to debate 'secular' political matters (such as the War in Iraq, or development-welfare issues). This is discussed later with specific reference to education and employment rights.

As a result of the separation between culture and Islam, the collective articulation of community and identity realised in the *Umma*, traditions are changing. Culture is being redefined to include the customs and habits of Muslims from all over the world. Part of the outcome of this shift in identities is the assertion of women's rights from within an Islamic context. This is achieved by initially separating culture from religion. As one interviewee stated "They [the Asian community] mix culture with religion... for me religion comes first, then my culture. I'm

Muslim first, then I'm Pakistani, they think they're Pakistani first" (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999). From this position it is possible to denounce those aspects of a culture which are perceived as oppressive from a women's rights perspective as non-Islamic. This was consistently expressed by the NGO groups interviewed. For example, as the coordinator of the Muslim Women's Help Line said: "There are points where there is a clash between culture and religion. Culture is engrained. The migrants brought their culture, but failed to bring or forgot their religious obligations beyond rituals" (Interview: Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004). She continued:

The second generation are learning more, through Islamic societies (especially University based ones), and there is a change in thinking and a realisation of diversity. We were only doing certain things because our parents did, not because it was Islamic" (Interview: Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004).

The separation between culture and religion also emerges as a consequence of rights awareness, as one interviewee argued "once people are aware of their rights, they are able to separate out culture from religion" (Interview: Qureshi, 2004). But, she and another interviewee argued, when violations of women's rights occur, Muslim women have a "back up: they can go to the Book" (Interview: Saleem, 2004). Additionally, not only is there a separation between culture and religion, but also religious identity is prioritised. Repeated in interviews is the suggestion that things "occur that are forbidden in Islam" and that these occur because of cultural accretions (Interview: South Asian human rights activist, 2004). One woman argued that "there are many rights in Islam but rights are usually ignored for cultural reasons" (40 year old housewife, 2003). Consequently, when violations of women's rights occur in Muslim communities they "are reflections of culture, not of Islam" (Interview: Saleem, 2004). However cultural traditions are not always phrased negatively, one woman said:

It's like leading double lives, when we go out we dress up in Western clothes, we speak English all the time, we have jobs and think of careers, but inside we are basically traditional Pakistanis. And some [Pakistani] values I do value, and I think a good part of our culture should be mainstreamed" (39 year old South Asian housewife, 2000).

Neither does Islam leave these discussions untouched. Interviewees attempted to differentiate between an authentic and legitimate Islam based in scriptural exegesis, and culturally tainted or corrupted expressions of Islam. As one interviewee said "Islam does not dictate

culture: culture is shared by those around you; it adds and takes away Islamic influences" (South Asian community activist, 2004; 22 year old civil servant, 2003). This is particularly evident during interviews when discussing rights in marriage and rights to employment, and is addressed later on. In this context the ability of the interviewee to locate rights in Islam was seen as central to its validity, thus interviewees referred to a "cultural Islam" as opposed to a "pure" culturally free Islam. The former was understood to tolerate the violations of Muslim women's rights while the latter was not (27 year old business development manager; South Asian human rights worker, 2004; South Asian community activist, 2004). Another interviewee stated: "[There are] culturally bound traditions that have unfortunately seeped through—and are now disguised as Islamic principles (God forbid)" (22 year old civil servant, 2003). And in particular, another argued, "the young [Muslim] women are often better educated about Islam than their parents, and are battling against a cultural type of Islam" (31 year old teacher, 2003). Whether this project to separate religion from culture is entirely successful or not is beyond the parameters of this discussion. However the desire to manage faith and culture suggests the beginning of positions which may accommodate new forms of discourse, identity and rights. This articulation of identity and its linkage to the acquisition of rights can be summed up by the following quote from one interviewee: "Young women are becoming more active in the faith, and they know what rights Islam gives them, and that Islam gives them the freedom they need" (Interview: Qureshi, 2004).

However these boundaries of identity and community (embedded in faith, ethnicity and geography) are not entirely autonomously determined. For example, an assumption held among those outside such communities is that to be Muslim is to be an Asian, and to be a foreigner. In an interview with the author one NGO representative recounted an incident that indicates the existence of these boundaries. The incident related to a female friend who had converted to Islam; there was a misunderstanding at a queue in a shop where one man told her "go to the back of the queue Paki". She had in fact gone to join her non-Muslim mother in the queue (Interview: Saleem, 2004). Here, the assumption that the female convert was Pakistani indicates that being Muslim is somehow alien to the UK. This example of racism is supported by studies by the Commission for Racial Equality which indicate that white British people "especially resented Asian, and especially Muslim, people, whom they see as importing a foreign culture into their country" (Commission of Racial Equality, 1998, p. 5). Recent terrorist activity has further

heightened the sense of boundaries and racism. One woman commented that "the media portray very negative sign about Islam, always linking it with terrorism etc. etc." (32 year old South Asian development worker, 2003).

### **Negotiating and transforming rights via an Islamic discourse**

In this section, this article looks at specific rights, and through examining the "Islamic" discourse in the UK shows how Muslim women are negotiating and transforming the understanding of rights. Two sets of rights provide the focus for the claims made above, and these are chosen to reflect both the public and private spheres of human activity and human rights strategies within them (Elshtain, 1981; Gavison, 1993). The two groups of rights examined are: the right to personal security and family, and the right to education and employment. All of the ten NGOs interviewed considered at least one of the rights examined here, and over half considered three of the four. The convergence between a rights-based language and an Islamic identity has resulted in a shift in practice concerning arranged/forced marriages and domestic violence. Addressing the second group of rights, it is the discursive strategies enabled through an Islamic identity which are examined. Examples highlighted in the article are the use of historical Muslim women as exemplars of behaviour, the re-interpretation of text, and an examination of faith in a post-modern economy.

#### *Right to personal security and family*

Dwyer (2000) shows in her research how young Asian Muslim girls were able to use religious terminology and symbols to resist parental pressures and to demand access to new opportunities, such as increased choice in marriage partners. This is also supported by the different data sets generated in this research. As indicated earlier, one of the most successful strategies adopted by Muslim women is to insist upon the separation of culture and religion in order to challenge traditional marriage arrangements. One interviewee argued that forced marriages occur because "they don't know better", and insisted that Islam permits assisted marriages but forbids forced marriages; but parental assistance in marriage choice is sometimes abused because of a lack of knowledge about Islam (South Asian community activist, 2004). Another interviewee argued

Forced marriages are wrong: both Islamically and under UK law. But it is often the cultural background of people that perpetuates these wrongs. They lack education and so seek to maintain their position

through upholding tradition” (Interview: Muslim Council of Britain, 2003).

The interviewees recounted occasions where young women had successfully resisted this pressure by insisting on the separation of culture and religion. All but one interviewee denied any direct experience with the issue of forced marriage. This interviewee said that a distant British-born relative was forced into a marriage with her Pakistani cousin. She then filed for divorce after 5 years of marriage once her husband’s British nationality had been confirmed, so as not to jeopardise family relations (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999). The interviewee was adamant that this was an exception, and that “Islam is clear: forced marriage is wrong”. In order to make this claim, Muslim women are locating Islam in the holy texts of Islam and denying authenticity to practices developed in Muslim history. This challenge to certain practices relies upon Muslim women being conversant in Islamic literature and scripture, and in order to publicly assert this position they adopt an explicitly Islamic identity and behaviours that purport to transcend culture. Many interviewed stated that the Qur'an and Hadith are their primary sources of inspiration for women’s rights, and one woman openly doubted the teachings of Mosque preachers, arguing further that if you are unable to read the Qur'an then it is impossible to challenge them (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999). Therefore, implicit to the success of Muslim women’s attempts to acquire rights from within Islam is a right to, and dependency on, education. Indeed it is British Muslim women’s access to State guaranteed education which enables this strategy. This is because compulsory education until 16 and adult literacy programmes provides the analytical and literacy skills to know Islam in this way. As one woman stated: “with marriage, even if parents arrange it, girls and boys choose. You can’t force them. But only [among] people who are educated, with open background does this happen” (57 year old South Asian bakery supervisor, 1999). Another interviewee argued that if *Shari'a* law was in place, Muslims would be properly educated about their faith and such problems would not occur (33 year old Scottish help line advisor, 2003). However on the wider issues of marriage it is clear that not all aspects of culture are denounced. For example, one woman recounts that her teenage daughter has told all her friends that she is not allowed a boyfriend, because “she can’t live like that before her wedding day”. The woman goes on to say that her daughter is “very sensible and aware of her own culture” (37 year old South Asian, 1999). Also there was

a high degree of agreement about limiting women’s possible marriage partners only to Muslim men (unlike Muslim men who may marry a non-Muslim). Only one woman explained this limitation on women’s rights to marital choice: because it is a husband’s responsibility to teach religion (45 year old translator, 2004).

The second area where Muslim women have begun to defend rights in marriage through an Islamic identity is over the issue of domestic violence. While the debate on forced/arranged marriages was discussed in every interview, and often as an example of the separation of culture and religion, issues of domestic violence were in comparison only rarely discussed. Current research about domestic violence shows that approximately 5% of “ethnic minority” women faced domestic violence at some point in 1995 (Home Office, 2003, p. 55; based on Mirlees-Black, 1999). As Kewley notes, the constraints upon women victims of domestic violence belonging to a racial or religious minority group are intensified, leading to a double jeopardy based on gender and race. There are a number of reasons leading to this double jeopardy; first, cultural and social isolation, second, the victim’s lack of knowledge of rights and of English, and third the victim’s immigration/residential status, potentially dependent upon her partner (Kewley, 2000, pp. 129, 141). This is not least because UK immigration rules which determine “bogus” or “sham” marriages dictate “both parties must demonstrate that they can maintain and accommodate themselves and any dependants without any recourse to public funds... couples will continue to be subject to a 12-month probationary period, at the end of which they must show again that their marriage is genuine” (Home Office Secretary, 1997; Kewley, 2000, pp. 140–141). As a result a woman attempting to leave a violent marriage may find her residency in the UK under review. However, the Home Office argues that changes introduced through the Family Law Act of 1996 have made significant improvements to Muslim women’s ability to tackle domestic violence (Home Office, 2003). The UK State is not monolithic, and Muslim women’s interaction with the State rarely occurs at central government level. Women’s experiences with local state agents also determine their ability to preserve bodily security and freedom from domestic violence. Local state agencies, in an effort to embrace multi-culturalism and anti-racism, are often reluctant to intervene where Asian women are concerned (even though the new powers of arrest have been granted) (Kewley, 2000). They are guided by the belief that the Asian community have their own internal mechanisms to resolve marital problems, and often deny Asian women the advice and help offered to other women (Mama 1996, in Kewley, 2000). However, as NGO groups working with Muslim women note, it is often these internal mechanisms, such as

those focused on honour (*izzat*) and shame, that lead many Asian women to seek counselling from them (Southall Black Sisters, 1994, cited in Kewley, 2000, p. 131). Additionally,

The problem with multiculturalism, however, is that it conceptualizes minority communities as homogeneous entities that have no internal divisions. Gender, class, and caste differences are obscured. It involves the state, in a subtle but pervasive way, in intervening to construct identities, and this involvement results in racist and anti-democratic effects. Such homogenizing constructions of minority communities are born out of the state's endorsement of community leaders. These leaders are un-elected, usually religious, and often conservative males, with little, if any, interest in social justice and equality. Yet they claim to be the 'authentic' spokespersons for the community and are the main power brokers, regularly consulted (usually informally) by the police and other state institutions. This multiculturalist contract between state and community leaders amounts to the former granting the latter a degree of communal autonomy (usually over the family and women) in return for acquiescence and preservation of the status quo" (Patel, 2004, on-line).

However, one interview where it was discussed without hesitation reveals that Muslim women are not powerless, that they develop Islamic identity-based platforms for resistance to and amelioration of their condition. The Muslim Women's Help Line (henceforth MWHL) is indicative of the process of women's agency in communities locally and nationally. It explicitly remains sensitive to the faith needs of Muslim women which use their service because it feels that existing secular services do not work according to religious considerations (Interview: Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004). The help line is run by Muslim women and enables Muslim women to determine their own choices by refusing to determine "what Islam says" (Interview: Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004). The founder of MWHL quipped in interview that the fee attached to drawing upon the resources of the help line is "to make use of your brain" (Interview: Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004). In this way, Islam itself is no longer fixed and determined by male religious scholars. Instead, in this case it is interpreted by women who are attempting to reconcile the needs of their faith with those of their existence. As a result of this perceived challenge to male authority, the MWHL initially met with some resistance from communities and husbands who feared that they

were "out to destroy families" (Interview: Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004). Consequently the organisation is astutely non-feminist in its use of language, practices and policies. Instead it focuses on the need to address Muslim women's social and emotional needs arising from rights violations (Interview: Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004). Confirming Eickelman and Piscator's (1996) insights, the MWHL draws upon the ideas of self-reflexivity and the management of Islamic faith in everyday circumstance.

Another strategy available to Muslim women in the UK is to adopt a revisionist position regarding certain verses of the Qur'an and other holy texts. This is particularly relevant with regard to domestic violence where the first reading of a verse in the Qur'an appears to legitimise a husband's violence against his wife. A revisionist reading proceeds accordingly "...as for those from whom you fear (nushuz) admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them" ([4:34] translation from Wadud 1999). This may be contrasted with the translation by Arberry "...And those among you who you fear maybe rebellious, admonish [them], banish them to their couches, and beat them" [4:34–35] (Arberry 1998). In response to this verse, a number of interviewees referred to the Canadian scholar Jamal Baadawi, who has shown how the verse in the Qur'an regarding the right of a husband to hit his wife, is a symbolic gesture (Interviews: Merali, 2004; Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004; Qureshi, 2004; Saleem, 2004). It is a way of demonstrating to a wife that their relationship has broken, and that it relates specifically to concerns about a wife's lewdness, and implications of sexual disloyalty. It is symbolic because further reading of the Qur'an shows that the husband is not allowed to leave a mark nor cut the flesh of his wife, that in fact he must not damage the skin in any way, and that only (the equivalent of) a toothpick may be used (Interview: Saleem, 2004). NGO groups and respondents to my research questionnaires and interviews argue that some men have removed the context of the verse to justify beating their wives (Interviews: Muslim Council of Britain, 2003; Saleem, 2004; 25 year old barrister, 2004; 31 year old Scottish help line advisor, 2003). The coordinator for the MWHL argues that "people have blown it out of hand (the verse) and have interpreted Hadiths out of context" (Interview: Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004). The context of revelation is also emphasised by Arshad, who stated, "It is necessary to look back at the contexts, but not so that you bring back the sand, the desert and what they (those in the Qur'an) ate, but to bring back the spiritual essence" (Interview:

Arshad, 2004). These attempts to resituate the verse in the context of revelation, and to limit the efficacy of the verses' literalism, suggests that Muslim women are negotiating from within an Islamic framework, perhaps because it serves as the most successful strategy for legitimately initiating changes in behaviour and belief in their own communities with minimal resistance.

#### *Right to education and employment*

Rights to education and to employment are articulated at different levels by Muslim women: from insistence on formal education, to a demand for religious knowledge, for financial independence through employment and for domestic work to be recognised as labour. Muslim women have shown great diversity in adapting Islamic mandates to facilitate their entry in employment and education.

Central to the Islamic conceptualization of women's rights to work and education is the idea of complementarity. Complementarity is defined as a way of understanding relations between the sexes as operating in harmony because the skills and natural attributes of each "complement" the other and operate in separate but equal spheres of activity (Rahman, 1980). Extending this concept to rights based discourses, its proponents argue that rights should "complement" the different duties towards society and "essential natures" of the sexes. Consequently, complementarity relies on two key arguments. The first argument asserts that the biological differences between the sexes determine how one should be a good Muslim. The second is that society should be ordered for the fulfillment of men's "regency on earth". From the biomedical perspective, women's biological qualities determine that in order to fulfill her role on earth a woman should become a wife and mother (Rahman, 1980). This leads to the idea of complementarity of roles and rights, as one interviewee argued: "But men and women are different physiologically, and they compliment each other, they bring different characteristics or skills to the family unit" (South Asian community activist, 2004). As proof of this difference, some of the interviewees noted women's lack of physical strength in comparison to men (27 year old business development manager, 2004; 33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999).

Rights and duties are said to reflect the capabilities and excellences of the two sexes. Another interviewee argued that "a woman is half a family" locating her identity as part of a family unit (31 year old Scottish help line advisor, 2003; also in Rahman 1980). Drawing on

the concept of complementarity, Muslim women argue that Islam presents women with a choice whether to remain housewives or to seek employment, whereas non-Muslim women are forced into (any) employment because their partners are not religiously obliged to support them. As one interviewee argued:

It is not that women should stay at home, but that it is a choice available to them. It is also a religious obligation on men to support financially their female relatives—wives, sisters and daughters. For women there is no comparable duty. Indeed if a woman works she can choose to spend it on her family but she has no obligation to do so, her husband or father has no rights over her money. To be free from financial worries in the early years of child care is a great benefit to women (31 year old Scottish help line advisor, 2003).

Another woman argued:

If you have separate duties, with men outside doing the work, earning money, and you're staying at the house, that's fine... but if you're working [too], you need to balance it, but in our culture it's not forced [working outside the home]... you can't push people to do things [men doing housework]... if he wants to help you that's fine... don't want our husbands to do the ladies' work... because then they'll expect us to do the manly and heavy work, but we can't because we are not made like that... so why not keep the balance, and whatever we're made for, and whatever we can do, we do that, and let them [men] do their job (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999).

This concept enables Muslim women to insist that their work as mothers and housewives is valued, and that it leaves them the choice to enter into employment and further education. By accepting an Islamic identity, complementarity offers Muslim women equal value and respect without insisting on equal treatment. The argument for complementarity as a framework for discussing women's rights and equality resists definitions that are premised on "sameness". Instead gender difference is valorised within the context of a gendered division of labour in the family and the community. As wives, sisters and mothers women are granted rights and duties in Islam (Interviews: Merali, 2004; Muslim Women's Help Line, 2004). Indeed for one respondent a Muslim woman's rights are embodied in her as she "act[s] in the best character as a sister, mother, wife, daughter and ambassador of Islam" (27 year old solicitor, 2004).

Therefore, through recognition and valorisation of women's "unique" and "natural" role in society and family, gender equity is promoted. Thus the relations between men and women are equitable and framed via Islamic constructions of motherhood, wifedom and sisterhood. Presented in this argument is a cohesive, logical and harmonious concept of women's place in society with predetermined answers to women's economic, social, ethical and psychological needs (Afkhami, 1999). Therefore, "we are equal in Islam, but we've got different duties" (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999).

The concept of complementarity, therefore, enables Muslim women to redefine the right to labour as one which incorporates domestic labour and motherhood in contrast to the dominant UK policy. The domain of the home as a "woman's place" is not conceived as inferior by the Islamic discourse in the UK but recognised as an important facet of Islam. It is where families' religious obligations are fulfilled and where fundamental religious education of children occurs, preparing both girls and boys for their future responsibilities. The role of mother and housewife is elaborated to the fulfillment of a religious role, which is seen by some informants as on a par with the more public religious role of men (Droeber, 2003; Longman, 2002). Identifying religious agency as mostly situated in the domestic or "private" realm grants women a "religious capital" that provides them a platform from which to negotiate their welfare and security. In some sense, interviewees suggested that women are empowered in the home. One interviewee recounted how, in consultation with her husband, after she married she did not get a job; she said she saw the decision as "a welcome relief" (39 year old South Asian housewife, 1999). Through the concept of complementarity, rights for women are seen as independent of women's inclusion in the formal economy. This is contrasted to the narrated history of women's rights in the West, where rights are understood to have been conferred upon women only as they became workers in the paid economy (Interview: Muslim Council of Britain, 2003). From the interviews, it is shown that in Islam women are seen as more than economic actors, and by privileging an Islamic identity rights claims are sought and legitimised beyond the formally defined economy. In this way complementarity may be understood as transforming the patriarchal bargain as formulated in advanced capitalist states.

Muslim women's strategies regarding the right to employment are not limited to the concept of complementarity, but include a reassessment of con-

temporary realities and history. Muslim women's economic activity should not be dismissed because of low rates in the formal economy as evident in government statistics (National Statistics Online, 2005). Indeed, despite conventions of *purdah*<sup>4</sup> which some writers attribute to the low Muslim female employment rates, the interviewees showed that Muslim women are by no means economically inactive, often working from the home, combining paid work with domestic activities, and often working in the grey economy (for example, by working unpaid in the family business) (correspondence with the non-Muslim coordinator of Southampton City Council's Asian Women's Oral History Project, Southampton City Council History Department, 1998–2002; Light, 2004). In interviews conducted by Brah (2001), Muslim women overwhelmingly supported the right to paid work regardless of their own economic position, representing a serious challenge to the dominant discourse which privilege male income. Identified in the interviews were two other key strategies to the right to employment, which depended upon a publicly articulated Islamic identity. The first is reference to women in the Qur'an and Muslim women in history. The second is to view rights to education and employment as supporting traditionally understood gender roles. These require the prioritisation of faith based identity over ethnicity in order to validate and legitimise the women's claims of Islam. If the respondent is seen and known as "Muslim" then claims of women's rights located in Islam are seen as more legitimate. This would explain the rise in manifestations of religiosity without the attendant increase in piety (Droeber, 2003; Lewis, 1994). With regards to the first strategy, historical figures and women referred to in the Qur'an and Sunnah provide challenges to the assumption that Islam requires women to abstain from the public sphere. Recently the North London Muslim Community Centre appointed a woman director, and in its public announcement said:

From the wives of the Prophet, Khadiya and Aisha, his daughter Fatima, famous mystic Rabi'a Basri, to the Queen of Delhi, Razia Sultana, and the philanthropist and aristocrat Begum Bhopal, Muslim women have been making great contributions in the fields of leadership, education and business, and by appointing a woman director we have not taken a radical step" (Zeena, 2003).

Of the NGOs interviewed, two made reference to the Prophet's wives, and five of thirteen communications among individual women also included the importance

of these women in influencing their understanding and demands for rights. One of the interviewees said of her faith that

... Islam is a very particular religion... [it] teach you what is your life and how you're going to do it... it is Islam (that) you have to cover your hair, you don't have to show your hair, you can talk with men and work with men. The Prophet's wives worked outside. Everything we can do..." (37 year old South Asian, 1999).

The legitimacy of this strategy requires the recognition of an Islamic history, a continuous path which Muslim women today can recount and draw upon in their identity and rights constructions. The concept of *Umma* is central as it provides the linkage between disparate places and eras. This was sometimes contrasted with the narrated history of women's rights in Europe and Christianity, which is perceived by the interviewees as recent and piecemeal (32 year old South Asian development worker, 2003; 25 year old barrister, 2004; 22 year old civil servant, 2003; 27 year old solicitor, 2004).

The second strategy identified by Brah (2001) requires acknowledgement of women's roles in both the public and private spheres. The Young Muslim Sisters argued that the roles of women in the public and private spheres of human activity are not mutually exclusive, because women are not confined to either motherhood or employment, but have a choice to do both (Interviews: Qureshi, 2004; Saleem, 2004). Another interviewee argued "In Islam women are allowed to work... Her role in the house is to raise and nurture the children, but this need not stop her from working, and in fact may make her better in her role, as the primary carer, work can provide... a different form of mental stimulus" (Interview: Muslim Council of Britain, 2003). In other words, employment makes women better mothers and wives. One interviewee after noting that in Pakistan a popular phrase is "a woman is a mother, wife or sister", she continued to argue that "Islam takes you further than that. Women can have both domestic and public roles—they can be leaders AND mothers" (South Asian community activist, 2004). Combining the two strategies, she continued with the example of Aisha, one of the Prophet Mohammad's wives, who was influential in her own right as she was a widow and childless (South Asian community activist, 2004).

The right to education for Muslim women is rarely challenged in the UK. Among the interviews Muslim women's educational achievements were noted, and their rights afforded to them in Islam with regard to lifelong learning were emphasised. In nine of the ten NGO

interviews this right was explicitly stated and located in religious texts. For the editor of the Revival Magazine based in Manchester, lifelong education was seen as both a right and a duty of all Muslims (Iqbal, 2004, male). However, some of the NGOs interviewed found resistance among traditional representatives of Islam and Muslim communities to their redefinitions of Islam, faith and women's roles. For example the Muslimah Graduate Society said that some resistance was encountered to the idea of creating a female Muslim graduate society because "women shouldn't be at university in the first place" (Interview: Muslimah Graduate Society, 2004). The right to education was also considered as a protection against violations of rights in marriage. It was seen as a survival strategy in a modern economy where the family may not be able to financially support an estranged wife. As one woman aptly argued "A degree is a must, but not necessarily for a career but if you've studied then you could support yourself, just in case" (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999). She continued:

I'm educated, and I know I can get a job and support myself, so obviously I'm not bothered by it (leaving a marriage/domestic abuse)... I know I can cope on my own... But these women (wives from the Indian sub-continent) because they are not educated, and they haven't been to European countries or anywhere (before marriage), it's totally different to them, so what do they do if they leave their husbands? They've no-one to turn to, their family are in Pakistan, and nobody tells them how they can get income support and things like... and here she can't work or anything like that coz she's not educated... they're stuck with their husbands no matter what (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999).

More debated with regard to the right to education within Muslim communities in the UK and in the British popular press is the nature of that education and the setting in which it should take place. In the research I conducted, Islamic single-sex schools and the issue of Muslim girl's school uniforms in state schools as ways of fulfilling educational rights were commonly referred to. In this article the latter is focused on, such that issues of identity, citizenship and rights are explored by considering the right (or otherwise) of young Muslim women to wear a *hijab* and *jilbab*<sup>5</sup> in schools. Claire Dwyer, among others, has done substantive qualitative research into the multiple identities and positions adopted by Muslim school girls (Dwyer, 1999). In the early 1990s the *hijab* debate in schools was thought to be resolved through the case concerning Harrington. Central to the community's

argument to allow their daughters to wear the *hijab* at school was that it represented preservation of modesty and religious obligation of all believing women (Werbner, 2004). Since the case of Harrington the majority of schools allow Muslim young women to wear the *hijab* and the *shalwar khamiz*<sup>6</sup>, in line with community requests and in accordance with preferred local government policies of multiculturalism.

At the time of my own research the *hijab* debate was reignited by recent changes in French law banning the *hijab* and any religious symbols. Muslim leaders feared that the UK would follow suit (Abdel-Halim, 2004). On a BBC *Panorama* programme a number of Muslim women were interviewed on a variety of issues including the *hijab*. They implied that their right to wear the *hijab* at school enabled them to pursue their educational rights (White et al., 2004). In light of the Muslim Council of Britain's report to Bernard Stassi on the French government ban of the *hijab* in schools, the representative I interviewed argued that "The right to wear religious symbols links with the right to participate fully in civil society and the right to express your identity" (Interview: Muslim Council of Britain, 2003). In my own interviews the right to education and the *hijab* were continuously linked. In eight out of ten NGO interviews the *hijab* was referenced to. It appeared to function in two ways, firstly as a symbol of Muslim women's right to express their identity as they wish in the public-political sphere, and secondly as a tool to access that sphere safely and legitimately (Interviews: Iqbal, 2004; Muslim Council of Britain, 2003; Qureshi, 2004).

### General limits to the Islamic identity strategy

Despite the overall efficacy of adopting an Islamic identity as a strategy to realise rights, five key limits to this strategy can be identified.

First, the material ability of households and communities to fulfill these rights is often limited because of the economic and social exclusion of ethnic minority communities. Robinson and others have shown how UK Muslim communities tend to be poorer than their white counterparts, having been badly affected by the decline in manufacturing (especially in textiles) in the UK (Botcherby & Hurrell, 2004; Carter & Jones, 1991; National Statistics online, 2005; Robinson, 1990). The creation of a Muslim community as opposed to an Asian or Pakistani one can also be argued to be a strategy for dealing with increasing poverty and unemployment, as it gives access to a wider network of support (Carter & Jones, 1991). Nevertheless, women's rights strategies are apparent in the articulation of an Islamic identity,

and it provides Muslim women in the UK with distinct tools.

Second, it depends on Muslim men and other Muslim women adopting the same normative framework and accepting the ideological commitments. Whether or not this is happening may depend on acceptance by Mosques of the revisionist positions put forward by Islamic feminists and the women activists in their communities. As one woman said in Southampton, the only religious events she knew of were run by "village people" whom she implied were ignorant of "real" Islam (33 year old South Asian housewife, 1999). Due to the limitations of the data set because of the lack of Mosque based interviews and the women interviewed not referring to them, it is not possible here to generate a conclusion.

Third, this strategy relies on an already prescribed notion of a "good" Muslim woman and man, and that those women who cannot easily be labelled as such are denied ready access to this strategy. This is because of the focus on refining the "correct" reading of the Qur'an rather than a post-modernist strategy. Although drawing on critical theory and post-modern strategies, those interviewed did not suggest that Qur'anic exegesis may operate without an essential truth claim. This may be because this would represent a direct challenge to the divinity of the text.

Fourth, this strategy also relies on local government and state agencies adopting policies of multiculturalism which prioritise funding for local faith-based initiatives, while keeping open the option of orthodox rights-based solutions. At present, in line with UK anti-discrimination laws, such funding is specifically targeted to ethnic minorities rather than those centred on faith based solutions (Blair & Aps, 2005, pp.9–11; Interview: Muslim Council of Britain, 2003).

Fifth, this strategy requires a relatively high degree of literacy and education in order to "read" Islam and rights in this way. For example, one woman distinguished between herself and others in terms of literacy and rural backwardness. On the issue of forced marriages, she said "It's not Islam, it's their culture [those that do it]; they come from the village or they don't read the holy book" (37 year old South Asian, 1999).

Consequently, as the first limit implies, the strategies identified here are only really available to the middle and upper classes, and second or third generation migrants who have benefited from UK education or education conducted in English abroad. Indeed the majority of those interviewed for the purposes of the research, including those representing NGOs, were from this group. As one woman said "The Asian community in Southampton is backward, not everyone but mostly

[they] are. Parents did same things their parents did" (57 year old bakery supervisor, 1999). This is also reinforced in the words of a woman quoted earlier who said that many young women know more about Islam than their parents (31 year old teacher, 2003). One of the NGO workers acknowledged that they had difficulty reaching non-English speaking Muslim women in their communities, or those who adopted strict adherence to conventions of *purdah*, and that to a significant degree they were "preaching to the converted" that is, to Muslim women who interpreted Islam and rights broadly in agreement with the NGO and who had similar sociodemographic backgrounds to the NGO workers (Interview: Qureshi, 2004). The coordinator of the Southampton Asian Women's Oral History Project also highlighted the fact that the women who agreed to participate in the project were already engaged in British civil society (the project originally drew participants from city library schemes) (Southampton City Council History Department, 1998–2002).

As a result the extent to which the strategies identified here are available to non-English-speaking Muslim women, or to women recently migrated from Indian sub-continent villages via marriage to British men, is unidentifiable. Therefore, when the interviewees in this research made reference to "other" women, it was through their filter as primarily middle class and second generation migrants. Additionally, in support of the findings of Kandiyoti (1987), the idealised way in which "sisterhood" and *Umma* is interpreted may mask class inequalities which enable some Muslim women to draw on the labour of other Muslim women in order to realise their rights.

### Concluding comments

The main conclusion of this article is that although Muslim women are not a homogenous group, the formation of an articulated "Islamic" identity in the public and private spheres by some Muslim women enables them to negotiate and acquire rights in new and transformative ways. Theorising this identity shift as a strategy does not detract from the genuine belief of the women and groups interviewed. What it does show however is that both Islam and rights are altered in this convergence. The attempt to form a culturally-free or pure Islam suggests a moving away from an exclusive concept of faith and ethnicity to one which includes an inclusive normative element, and it is further possible to argue that rights have moved from an abstract legalist moment in these women's lives towards a more "everyday" or

"embedded" formation. This tendency of rights to acquire a more socially embedded character is further displayed in situations where the Islamic identity strategy is co-opted as part of alternative strategies to manage other concerns, such as survival and welfare. This may occur, for example, if a marriage fails. This flexibility reinforces the argument that rights discourses have become embedded within British-Muslim Islamic identities.

Additionally, adopting an Islamic identity as a strategy to realise rights in the UK operationalises the theoretical developments of Islamic feminists. A number of strategies located in an Islamic identity emerged through the rights-centred case studies: use of a continuous past, reference to and reinterpretation of the holy texts, manipulation of existing gender roles and expansion of these roles. These strategies become possible through the public articulation of an Islamic identity, through the increased speed and efficacy of communications and through the private avowal and reflection of being Muslim. Islamic strategies concerning women's rights are embedded in attempts to reconstruct and reinterpret what Islam means and what it means to be Muslim. In the re-writing of Islamic discourses and concepts, Muslim women have accessed a rights discourse that manages their lives in a secular non-Muslim majority space. The right to be free from domestic violence and the right to marital choice are inherently concerned with women's relations as wives, mothers and daughters and can be therefore addressed from within an Islamic framework which prioritises these female identity markers over others. Similarly by reinventing educational and employment rights of Muslim women with gender particularity, Muslim women who adopted an Islamic identity were able to draw upon a wider range of actors from whom to seek rights and expand the contexts in which rights could be demanded. In other words the public–private divide, so often assumed in human rights talk, was transcended in the recognition of an Islamic gendered identity.

### Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this article was originally presented at the British South Asian Studies Association Annual Conference in Leeds 2005. This research would not have been possible without the financial assistance from the ESRC. The author thanks Southampton City Council's Asian Women's Oral History Project team for their support in this endeavour. Additionally, the helpful comments from the anonymous reviewer and Santi Rozario are gratefully acknowledged.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A *hijab* is a covering of the head, such that the hair, ears and neck are not visible.

<sup>2</sup> *Shari'a* is the term commonly applied to the assumed body of Islamic religious law.

<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing the French government has now banned the *hijab*, and other religious symbols from French State run schools.

<sup>4</sup> *Purdah* is understood here as a system of seclusion, especially in terms of social seclusion in order to avoid interaction with men.

<sup>5</sup> A *jilbab* is a long loose fitting over coat.

<sup>6</sup> The *shalwar khamiz* is traditional dress among Pakistani and Afghani women including a long shirt or tunic and trousers.

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