

Muslim Women Stereotyped: Deconstructing Common Myths

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Abstract

In this paper, I use global education theories and principles to deconstruct common myths regarding Muslim women and the Islamic treatment of women. This paper demonstrates how global education theory and principles can be used to deconstruct and reframe the myths and misconceptions perpetuated on Muslim women. The three major themes explored – female circumcision, polygamy, and subordination – are embedded in a single case and serve as a rich illustration of the usefulness of applying global education principles. They have been developed over the past thirty years to deconstruct and reframe western myths and misconceptions regarding Muslim women.

Keywords: Muslim women, global education, myths about Muslims, myths about Islam, misconceptions about Muslims, misconceptions about Islam

Introduction

For far too long, Muslim women have been stereotyped as passive creatures who are submissive to the interests, whims, and fantasies of men. Indeed,

[t]he prevailing images of Arab Muslim women in the occidental world seem to shift between dual paradigms, between either the image of salient beast

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of burden, or that of a capricious princess, the half-naked . . . or the shapeless figure of woman behind the veil.¹

These dichotomous caricatures draw on certain cultural practices that pre-date Islam and have an underlying basis that is antithetical to the essence of Islamic teaching. These caricatures deny the true richness, diversity, and humanity of Muslim women. As a Muslim woman and as an academic, I seek to highlight the need for discussion around and research into Islam's authentic character and its great respect for women. As some observers argue, the binary of "the West versus Islam" is losing whatever meaning it might once have had, as there now exists a great deal of research work on the hybrid or blended identities of Muslims born and raised in the West. Muslim researchers need to move beyond "the West is our enemy" paradigm, which requires a careful exploration of alternative narratives of Muslims, Islam, and the West. The need for this type of discussion and research is particularly acute in the field of education. I therefore draw upon global education principles to expose the need for educators to address the relationship between Islam and women.

This paper is part of a larger research study that discusses common western stereotypes and myths held regarding Muslim women and the Islamic view of women. Here, I focus on and then debunk three common myths using critical analysis and various global education principles (e.g., anticipation of complexity, knowledge of global history, relational holism, and the development of double consciousness). Many of the relevant myths center on the themes of female circumcision, freedom versus subordination, and polygamy – and all of them fail to acknowledge the essence of Islam.

One of this paper's main objectives is to demonstrate how global education theory can be used to teach about – and to deconstruct stereotypical images about – the "other." It therefore revolves around the idea that education is not truly global unless students actually learn about and from the "other." Indeed, "[i]f global education is to be truly global, it is critical that students learn from the experiences, ideas, and knowledge of people who are poor, oppressed, or in opposition to people in power."²

This paper confirms that global education can remove or at least lower the boundaries between "us" and "them" – between races, religions, cultures, and communities. The global classroom must have an honest commitment to those who do not share one's own skin color, ethnicity, or creed. On a more specific level, this paper demonstrates that global education theory can deconstruct stereotypical images of Muslim women, a classic example of the "other." The analysis presented below will show whether (1) global education

theory can help deconstruct myths about the “other,” (2) some global principles are more useful than others for interpreting data, and (3) some myths are more easily deconstructed via global principles than others.

The information provided herein is directed toward helping educators who wish to design and implement better ways of promoting understanding the “other.” Global education offers an incredible potential for breaking down the misconceptions and other barriers that divide groups. Moreover, it “can also help in restructuring attitudes and behaviours around a new perspective without diminishing the strengths of [different] cultures.”³

Islam versus Culture

On various issues, Islamic teaching has been confused with some of its adherents’ cultural practices. This is particularly so as regards the subject of gender and women’s rights in Islam. As A. Hamdan indicated, gender is largely a matter of how femininity is imprinted during one’s adolescence and childhood within a cultural rather than a religious context.⁴ Indeed, “Our culture tells us what to see; our early childhood socialization instructs us how to look at the world; and our value system tells us how to interpret what passes before our eyes.”⁵ It is been indicated that

[w]omen, though assigned different roles to play in society based on sex, are not taught a different value system. It is women’s overall acceptance of the value system of the culture that leads her to passively absorb sexism and willingly assume a pre-determined sex role.⁶

This statement applies to some Arab Muslim women who refuse to believe or comprehend that gender biases exist in their culture, along with extremely rigid, narrow, and literal interpretations of religious texts.⁷

It is important to acknowledge that a great deal of scholarship shows the extent to which the West’s culture is intertwined with the roots of Islam. This longstanding relationship includes the phenomenon of medieval Muslim civilization passing many ideas and tangible items to the West via al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia), among them architecture, poetry, and the scientific basis of the camera, as well as a renewed awareness of and interest in Aristotle, Plato, and other ancient philosophers.

“Islam” is not a culture, but a religion with a global following. In many cases, Islamic tenets were mixed with other customs and traditions that gradually became shrouded with an air of sacredness, as if they were Islamic in nature. This paper distinguishes between cultural practices and Islamic teaching.

Female Circumcision

Islam is often criticized for its supposed encouragement of female genital mutilation (FGM), also known as female circumcision or clitorodectomy, which continues to be practiced in some parts of the Muslim world. This practice, which involves the partial or complete removal of the external female genitalia, periodically receives coverage in the western media in combination with highly inaccurate characterizations of Islam. Yet, as shown below, this practice cannot be attributed to Islam. In fact, I endorse the growing stream of thought among Muslims worldwide that FGM is more of a cultural practice than a product or reflection of the Islamic tenets to which all Muslims should practice or adhere to, such as the “five pillars.” The way FGM is practiced in certain parts of the world, as will appear in the discussion below, violates every value embedded in global education.

By embracing the global principle of anticipation of complexity, non-Muslims appreciate the complexity and ambiguity of the issue of circumcision. This anticipation refers to the inclination to look beyond simplistic explanations of complex ethical issues, to see phenomena as being part of a constellation of interrelated factors, and to realize that some global issues are not fully understood because of the complexity of events.⁸ As a global teacher and learner, I apply these principles of global education to reframe an especially violent and heinous act perpetrated against young girls in some parts of the world.

G. Pike and D. Selby’s principle of the temporal dimension helps us reassess this issue.⁹ It holds that the past, present, and future are in a dynamic relationship rather than in a linear succession of separate blocks of time with a fleeting instant caught between them. What we consider the “present” necessarily refers backward and forward in time. Female circumcision has a history that affects its present practice. Its various types originate from African tribes that brought FGM to Egypt through diffusion or through “Pharaonic” survival. As discussed below, this practice’s historical roots are an important element of many arguments that this practice is, in fact, not Islamic. According to a pilot study performed by two gynaecologists, female circumcision has four degrees or levels: (1) the labia minora are removed and perhaps the tips of the clitoris, (2) the labia minora and part of the clitoris are removed, (3) the whole labia minora and the whole clitoris are removed, and (4) “Sudanese” circumcision, in which the labia majora, the labia minora, and the whole clitoris are completely removed. The first degree is known as “Islamic” circumcision, while the third and fourth degrees, which involve the extreme mutilation of a woman’s genitalia,¹⁰ are known as “Pharaonic” circumcision.

Some sources suggest that “Islam has been used to justify the mutilation of women’s genitals in a brutal rite of passage that leaves girls in pain, prone to a lifetime of health problems.”¹¹ It has been argued that a prophetic hadith exists, although its authenticity has not been proven, that the Prophet told a midwife: “Reduce the size of the clitoris but do not exceed the limit, for that is better for her health and is preferred by husbands.”¹² This hadith appears to indicate that circumcision is premised on being better for a woman’s health, as well as on enhancing her conjugal relationship with her husband. The Prophet’s possible saying “do not exceed the limit” clearly implies that one should not remove the entire clitoris. While this apocryphal hadith might be construed as indicating his encouragement of FGM, it could also be interpreted as being optional and letting the parents decide.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi reflects this view: “Muslim countries differ over the issue of female circumcision; some countries sanction it whereas others do not. *Anyhow, it is not obligatory*” [emphasis added].¹³ Another Muslim scholar has remarked: “Female circumcision is [said to be] demanded by the Islamic faith. *This is not an absolute truth that has been practiced by all Muslims, as has been emphasized by Islamic theologians, and the practice is rarely seen in the cradle of the Muslim religion in Saudi Arabia, and in other neighbouring Muslim countries*” [emphasis added].¹⁴ Indeed, female circumcision is not practiced in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Tunisia, Iran, and Turkey. By no means does this alleged hadith authorize or endorse unrestricted and complete female circumcision.

Some scholars also point to another possible prophetic hadith: “Do not overdo it, because that [clitoris] is lucky for the woman and dear to the husband.” From this statement (much like the one mentioned above), it could be understood that “female circumcision is not required, and if performed it should be slight.”¹⁵ On the other hand, the way in which some African states perform it is inconsistent with this statement. Furthermore, given this hadith’s lack of any proof of revelation, its authenticity is uncertain; therefore, it cannot be attributed to Islam. Although this practice’s origin cannot be imputed to Islam, some western writers nevertheless believe that Islam oppresses women to such an extent that “no one can deny the lack of women’s rights under Islam, regardless of Muslim apologists’ passion to the contrary. The widespread practice of female genital mutilation in Muslim countries, alone, signals the reality of women’s oppression.”¹⁶

Many Muslims believe that female circumcision is actually non-Islamic. Some Muslims who oppose FGM on religious grounds believe that this practice violates the Islamic principle of respect for human nature and individual

security. This view is reflected in E. W. Fernea's discussion of Islamic feminism: "The way that circumcision is done in parts of the world is not accepted by the religion of Islam because it is an alteration of God's creation."¹⁷ Others who oppose it for religious reasons rely on historical arguments. This controversy lends weight to the principle that people's exploration of ideas should include the origins and past patterns of worldwide affairs (global history).¹⁸ Present worldwide concerns and issues are central in global education, which alludes to the temporal dimension.

According to Aziza Hussein, president of the Cairo Family Planning Association and a campaigner against female circumcision for thirty years, "[FGM] is a custom that predates Islam, a cultural practice."¹⁹ Rana Kabbani suggests that "it is an African practice which has nothing to do with Islam."²⁰ Female circumcision regularly receives historically oriented criticism from Islamic scholars. For instance, several of Egypt's most respected scholars condemned it during a conference held in Cairo on September 5, 1994. It was emphasized that "Prophet Mohammed did not circumcise his own daughters."²¹ The growing scholarly consensus around FGM's non-Islamic origin is contributing to positive change. For instance Fernea, during her search for Islamic feminism in Egypt, stated that, "As I write in the spring of 1997, efforts to eradicate female circumcision continue."²²

The global principle of knowledge of global history helps us understand that female circumcision is rooted in the pre-Islamic period, as well as the media's flawed coverage of it. According to D. Horan,

Although female circumcision was practiced for centuries before the advent of Islam, attempts by Egypt's secular government to stamp out the practice have met with the fierce resistance among conservative extremists, particularly since the circumcision of a 12-year-old girl was broadcast on the U.S. Cable News Network in 1994. The broadcast, which showed the girl whimpering before the operation and then screaming as a local barber circumcised her, catapulted into prime time an issue that had, until then, been quietly and carefully addressed in women's clinics across Egypt.²³

This broadcast engendered worldwide criticism of the "barbaric religion" of Islam. The media did not clarify – and in fact obscured – the distinction between a traditional cultural act and an Islamic teaching. Reporters in the West mistakenly assumed that female circumcision is an Islamic teaching, which incited widespread criticism of Islam. In this regard, one must emphasize that female circumcision is also found within some small Jewish and

Christian sects, a fact rarely mentioned in the media. Moreover, Muslims who practice it generally view it as being more of a hygienic issue.²⁴ But presenting these facts interferes with the neat formula that all Muslims are barbaric.²⁵ The global education principle of resistance to stereotyping can sensitize students and people in general to reject such caricatures.

Such resistance requires that we not focus on a limited range of a given people's characteristics. Anticipation of complexity mandates that we look beyond simplistic explanations of complex ethical issues.²⁶ We have to embrace the global principle of anticipation of complexity both to understand female circumcision and to put ourselves in the position of its victims. M. Merryfield's principle of decolonizing the mind urges those oppressed by FGM to question the assumptions of their oppressors and of those who claim that such acts are aligned with Islamic precepts.²⁷ When studying world issues, students should examine where the norms, assumptions, and underlying beliefs come from and what effects they have on people's lives. R. Case's inclination to empathize is another principle of global education,²⁸ one that enables us to place ourselves in the predicament of "others" and contemplate female circumcision from the oppressed's perspective. In fact, it is our responsibility in global education to see the world through the eyes of the "other." In addition, Merryfield's principle of developing a double consciousness can be applied to help us understand this practice.²⁹

As G. Pike suggests, global education seeks to heighten cross-cultural awareness and broaden consciousness about different issues.³⁰ This action would help reduce the common misconceptions surrounding female circumcision. For example, 75 percent of Egyptians live in extreme poverty and have little chance of obtaining access to education or medical services. They are, therefore, not typically aware of the dangers associated with this practice. In my opinion, this knowledge would be useful both to westerners and to those Muslims who circumcise their daughters. Open-mindedness, another global education principle, cautions us not to base our beliefs on a partial consideration of the available evidence. Female circumcision cannot be linked to the essence of Islamic teachings on women; in fact, a great deal of evidence indicates the contrary and, furthermore, that Islam considers this practice detrimental to a woman's wellbeing. The principle of open-mindedness strongly suggests that people should make up their minds only after a fair hearing of all sides. Proving that female circumcision did originate with Islam would expose this particular misconception and encourage a greater understanding of the truth.

Freedom versus Subordination

The West views Muslim women as “docile, male dominated, speechless, veiled, secluded, and unidentifiable beings.”³¹ Western feminists stereotypically depict them “as existing on the margin of their society.”³² Moreover, it is claimed that “[i]n family matters, and in society, women are subordinate to men by virtue of their more sheltered life.”³³ As a Muslim woman, I agree with A. Ahmed’s suggestion that “the Western misconception that Muslim women are helpless prisoners in the home needs to be corrected.”³⁴ On a similar note, R. Amiri emphasizes that “[t]he Western world has contributed to this perception by centring on the place of women in its depiction of Islam as repressive and backward.”³⁵

Westerners, who typically claim that Muslim women are oppressed and subordinated and live on the margins of society, are imposing their own notion of freedom upon the latter group’s position. From the standpoint of global education theory, applying the principles of perspective consciousness and non-chauvinism allows us to condemn this practice. One must acknowledge that both groups have significantly different understandings of freedom. Many westerners perceive freedom as the condition of being politically free, of not being confined and held in servitude – without hindrance or interference, and able to move and act without restriction.³⁶ On the other hand, the freedom that most Muslim feminists are seeking is the rights of women proclaimed within the Qur’an. Muslim women have a distinctive identity and do not want to be followers of or constrained by westerners’ view of freedom. For many of these individuals, freedom includes practicing one’s faith freely – not least wearing the hijab without suffering personal condescension or societal discrimination.³⁷ They believe that freedom involves liberation from being controlled by base human desires and from being ruled by man-made ideologies.

The ongoing controversy surrounding the hijab is perhaps the most prominent example of the West’s misrepresentation of Muslim women. This controversy can be seen in the angry response of M. Spooner, a Muslim woman, upon learning that the city of Quebec’s suburbs recently passed a bylaw banning it: “It is appalling to think that a Muslim woman could be subjected to possible police interrogation, required by law to explain herself for practicing her religion.”³⁸ In this regard, it should be noted that “[w]omen who dress in the hijab may be seen as submissively attired, but they may be enjoying tremendous personal freedom. Independence is a state of mind and a manner of living one’s life, not the style of the dress.”³⁹

The legal and rhetorical assault against the hijab exemplifies stereotyping – judging the cultures of others from the standpoint of one’s own prejudices. This practice needs to be resisted by westerners who regularly use the prism of their own culture to categorize Muslim women as second-class citizens. The underlying aim of such categorizations is to “establish the superiority of Western women’s lives and Western culture.”⁴⁰ The global principle of non-chauvinism helps avoid imposing one’s values on someone else and helps caution non-Muslims to resist viewing others prejudicially or discounting unfairly the interests of those whose interests are incompatible with one’s own.

Recent studies by Hamdan (2005, 2009) about the narratives of Muslim women living in Canada showed that they found that adhering to Islam provided them with a safeguard to achieve their educational goals while embracing their Islamic identity.⁴¹ If the majority of Muslim women already enjoy their ideal status as Islam intended, why would they crave western-style freedom? Western values attract some young Muslim women, especially those who are desperate or eager for immediate or superficial freedom, who then often go on to lose their identities. The mere fact that some western values contradict Islamic teachings does not mean that Islam and the West are “clashing civilizations,” nor does it make the West superior. Many Muslim women wish to embrace the western view of freedom, but this is mainly because they confuse the “true” Islamic teaching based on the Qur’an and the Prophet’s narrations on the one hand with some cultural practices that disrespect and marginalize women on the other.

The emergence of Islam ruptured the traditional gender relationship in pre-Islamic Arabia (500-600 CE) that treated women as objects. Contrary to the West’s “caricature of Muslim women as oppressed prisoners of religious dogma”⁴² (as discussed by Fernea), the Qur’an accords high respect to them, as do the Prophet’s authentic narrations. The latter record many revealing incidents from the early Islamic era; two of them are in the context of the “occasions for revelation” of two Qur’anic verses on women:

(a) It was related that Umm Salama, a wife of the Prophet (PBUH), was in her room with her maid combing her hair, when she heard the Prophet calling for a community gathering for an announcement in the mosque: “O people!” Her maid says, “You don’t have to go; he is calling for the men, not the women.” Umm Salama replies: “Indeed, I am one of the people.”

(b) Umm Salama went to the Prophet and wondered: “Why are the men being praised for their sacrifices in the hijra and not the women?” Hence, the revelation of verse 195 of chapter 3: “And God has heard them and re-

sponded: verily, I suffer not the work of any worker of you, male or female, to be lost, you are one of another...”

(c) Narrated is the incident of a group of women complaining to the Prophet that the Qur’an only mentions the wives of the Prophet and not women in general: “Men are mentioned in everything and we are not; is there any goodness in us to be mentioned and commended?” Hence, verse 35 [33:35]: “Verily, Muslims, men and women, believers, men and women, dutiful men and women, truthful men and women, patient men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, chaste men and women, those who mention and remember God – men and women –, for all those God has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.”⁴³

These verses provide great insight into women’s status in the sacred texts and in the early days of Islam. In particular, Q. 33:35 clearly articulates the principle of gender equality that has enabled Muslim women, over the course of history, to play a pervasive and persistent role in shaping political decisions and determining the course of political events. For example, “During the Prophet Mohammed’s life, women participated effectively in public life, they led delegations, mediated and their judgments on political matters were highly valued.”⁴⁴ The Prophet respected and actively sought their opinions. For instance, he consulted Aisha, his youngest wife and a wearer of hijab, who became the main transmitter of some 2,210 hadiths. Her knowledge of such material equipped her to challenge some of the falsified hadith that diminished the role of women.⁴⁵ In fact, she was so renowned for her brilliance and knowledge of the Qur’an, Arabic, mathematics, and medicine that Muslim men traveled from Iraq, Syria, and Egypt to seek her guidance.⁴⁶ Aisha also served as her husband’s political advisor and continued to provide leadership after his death. She even led an army during the famous battle of al-Gamal (“the Camel”).

Umm Salama, another wife of the Prophet, was considered a leading authority on her husband’s life and teachings and, in effect, served as a chief advisor to the head of state.⁴⁷ Khadija, Prophet Mohammed’s first wife, actively supported him and became his confidant and companion. In addition, his granddaughter Sukaina was an especially active political leader.⁴⁸ It can be credibly argued, therefore, that these women were “feminists” in the sense that their active engagement in public life was integral both to the foundation and growth of the first Islamic community and of Islam itself.⁴⁹

Historical documents reveal that the Prophet’s wives, daughters, and granddaughters were far from being the only powerful women in the first Is-

lamic community.⁵⁰ Early Muslims knew of prominent Muslim female physicians (e.g., Zaynab, Rafidah, Umm Muta, and Umm Kabsha) who were experts in medicine and surgery,⁵¹ as well as such female warriors as Nusyaba, who achieved distinction during the Battle of Uhud. Women's high status carried forward into the golden age of Islamic civilization, which lasted until 1198, and witnessed unrivalled intellectual achievement in all fields. However, their political, economic, and educational freedom rapidly declined under the early thirteenth-century Mongol onslaught. Over the subsequent centuries and during the Ottoman, French, and British conquests, some religious scholars began to interpret the Qur'an in extremist ways that opposed women's rights. Applying the principle of knowledge of global history allows us to appreciate the subsequent and continual failure of people to realize how women had functioned before the Mongol armies appeared.

Over successive generations, most Muslims came to believe that extremist interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah (the Prophet's sayings and actions) represented the essence of Islamic teaching. These extremist interpretations, coupled with social pressure, have significantly limited Muslim women's educational and social freedom throughout the Islamic world. The level of freedom they enjoy is a negative function of the indigenous extremists' strength. The case of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan is an infamous example of extremism's detrimental effect on women – of how some governments have used Islam to oppress and suppress them. In Afghanistan, women have no political rights. At present, in many Islamic countries Muslim women may enjoy a considerable degree of educational or economic freedom, but not freedom from a social or political standpoint. While governments in countries like Egypt, Syria, and Jordan do not officially prohibit women from political participation, they certainly do not have the same degree of power and opportunity to engage in political activities as do their male counterparts.

There are several especially common misconceptions about the role of Muslim women in her society. In general, the West perceives an association between their secondary role on the one hand and the physical and the symbolic gender segregation on the other.⁵² Critics mistakenly claim that Islam mandates such segregation and that, as a result, women are second-class citizens. A related myth is that Islam forbids women to participate in political or administrative jobs or even to be involved in the public sphere. While it is true that social pressure and non-Islamic traditions restrict many educated and skilled Muslim women to such careers as teaching and nursing, attributing these restrictions to Islam misrepresents the religion's authentic and intended form, for there is, in fact, no conflict between Islamic teachings and women's

active participation in society. Seemingly convincing justifications for limiting their roles have arisen from and been perpetuated by extremist positions that have no basis in the Qur'an.⁵³

I use *extremist*, even though the literature typically uses *fundamentalist*. The latter term is misleading when applied to Islamic extremism because its actual meaning refers to the idea of emphasizing the core principles of any particular subject – an idea that is not in itself wrong and is, in many cases, an appropriate starting point for acquiring a profound understanding of the subject. In the case of Islam, *fundamentalism* is certainly legitimate, at least insofar as it pertains to the detailed study of Islam's foundational texts (viz., the Qur'an and Sunnah), the sincere attempt to draw responsible conclusions therefrom, and to apply them to real-life situations and problems. On the other hand, this term is popularly applied to Muslims who adopt an overly literal interpretation of Islamic scriptures, which includes reading verses out of context.

Muslim women are increasingly realizing that extremist or radical interpretations do not reflect Islam's authentic principles and thus distort their choices. For example, as discussed above, their seemingly pervasive inability to exercise full political freedom has no connection with core Islamic teachings. These extremist positions were developed in order to present an artificially narrow pro-man perspective. The extremists' fear of women's freedom largely comes from the concern that accepting male-female equality will cause men to lose their power and hence their identity. It is important to acknowledge that some interpretations of Islamic law that negatively affect women's role did not emanate from modern "extremists," but from traditional *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) developed centuries ago. Some critics have seized on this fact to bolster the argument that early Islam oppressed women. Not only is this approach ahistorical, as shown above, but it also reflects a lack of knowledge and critical reading of Islam's foundational texts.

Although this interpretation has been corrected, it continues to be contested by many contemporary Muslims. Growing numbers of progressive Muslims are reinterpreting the Qur'an, Sunnah, and Hadith in light of the conclusions reached by progressive Muslim scholars. The growing trend of Muslim scholars developing in-depth and nuanced *fiqh* and readings⁵⁴ of the foundational texts is helping to clarify the facts that Islam's essence accords a high status to women and that the disrespect directed toward them originated in the distortions introduced into Muslim society via non-Islamic cultural practices. As discussed by Alghamdi, many western scholars now acknowledge the disparity between past and present attitudes toward women.⁵⁵ In fact, N.

Shilling has documented many relevant narratives⁵⁶ by comparing the status of women in the Qur'an with their almost diametrically opposed current status in Muslim societies.⁵⁷

Despite their continued subordinate position, there are growing reasons for optimism. The elections of Benazir Bhutto (prime minister of Pakistan, 1988-90; 1993-96), Khaleda Zia (prime minister of Bangladesh, 1991-96; 2001-06), and Megawati Sukarnoputri (president of Indonesia, 2001-04), as well as the appointment of Tansu Çiller (prime minister of Turkey, 1993-96), are very encouraging for Islamic feminism. Many educated Muslim women now hold leadership positions not only in their countries of origin, but also in international organizations. For example Saudi-born Thoraya Obaied, who studied in Cairo and the United States when Riyadh restricted women's education, became an executive director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), held the rank of Under-Secretary General of the United Nations,⁵⁸ and was one of the first thirty women appointed to Parliament by King Abdullah. These female Muslim leaders are embracing the spirit of Islamic teachings on freedom, just as the Prophet intended. In applying the principles of valuing the voices of the marginalized and of resisting stereotyping, students in North America – as targets of media stereotypes and an exclusionary curriculum – can become more aware of the common prejudices toward Muslim women's history in terms of their ability to obtain access to education. Women who reach high positions in their own countries can influence and improve the world's viewpoints on Muslim women's status. In addition, the global principle of participatory action allows non-Muslims moved to take action to advance women's rights in Muslim countries to do so.

There appears to be a growing consciousness, both within and without the Islamic world, of the tendency of dominant groups to impose their worldviews on others; Merryfield terms this growth in consciousness the "decolonizing of the mind."⁵⁹ In this case, his concept applies to two levels of decolonization from intellectual dictatorship: that the "West is best" and the extremists' literal interpretations of Islamic scriptures. This type of decolonization helps people become more aware of how powerful groups force their worldviews upon the lives of oppressed people to the extent that the former's perspective become entrenched and accepted without question, instead of being continuously and critically examined.⁶⁰

D. Selby emphasizes that one must study the interfaces between the various issues that link Muslim women's freedom, as viewed by Westerners, with the freedom that women are granted by Islamic ideals.⁶¹ This necessity flows from his holistic principle of global education, which states that the whole is

related to the parts and that the parts are attached to each other.⁶² In reality, all types of freedom are interrelated and interconnected so that one part can be enjoyed only when the other parts – and hence the whole – are also enjoyed. Selby’s principle of relational holism⁶³ allows us to argue that if each part of the typical western idea of Muslim women is deconstructed and analyzed, then the fact of their subordinate role cannot be overlooked.

Applying the temporal dimension enables us to deconstruct the myth of Islam’s supposed restrictions on Muslim women’s political participation.⁶⁴ The temporal principle emphasizes that the past, present, and future are in a dynamic relationship, as opposed to a linear succession of discrete blocks of time, and thus what we take to be the “present” necessarily refers backward and forward in time. In this instance, the status of women as effective participants in society is strengthening and re-emerging, as seen in the cases of Bhutto, Zia, Sukarnoputri, and Çiller. Although they did not significantly influence the status of Muslim women during their time in office, the precedent that they set might encourage more women toward Islamic feminism.

Some of the criticism levelled against how Muslim women are treated is heavily influenced by stereotypes perpetuated by the media, biased assumptions and individuals, and a lack of cross-cultural awareness. Resistance to such stereotypes is a global education principle that offers the potential to help reduce misconceptions. Cross-cultural awareness, another global education principle, revolves around learning about other cultures.⁶⁵ My case study strongly suggests that investigating the interwoven issues connecting Muslim culture and its treatment of women (interconnectedness) would reduce ignorance and promote a greater understanding of the position of Muslim women from the perspective of authentic Islam.

Linking knowledge of history and the contemporary world is another approach to teaching about Muslim women. Global education may emphasize global connections across time and space regarding the struggle between Islamic extremists and western “liberators” for control over Muslim women. In addition, by infusing contrapuntal cultural studies into global education, curriculum students can examine the power wielded by those individuals and organizations that frame the knowledge presented to students; contrapuntal cultural studies focus on the interaction and integration of cultures, including the dynamic processes through which the colonizer and the colonized were changed while being exposed to each other’s lifestyles, technologies, and so on. C. McCarthy encourages educators to study the historical and contemporary heterogeneity of human interactions and lives.⁶⁶ Moving the center from colonial to global thinking will include all cultures, including those considered

“Third World” or “underdeveloped.” Indeed, “[m]oving the centre means including content from all world regions from the perspective from diverse people in those countries.”⁶⁷ This undertaking includes taking positive steps to understand the interwoven relationships connecting culture, power, and knowledge construction. For instance, it is important to understand how Muslim women’s position has changed over history – from the pre-Islamic era to the time of Prophet Muhammad, and from Islam’s golden age up to today. Students need to experience the knowledge, voices, and ideas of people who are different from them (double consciousness).

Polygamy

A number of western researchers engage in unfair statistical analysis comparing women in the West and women in developing countries, particularly those in Islamic societies, by focusing on legal institutions affecting Muslim women (e.g., marriage, divorce, and inheritance) without understanding Islamic jurisprudence and Islam’s foundational texts. This disregard of an essential prerequisite for any meaningful study results in prejudice and biased conclusions.⁶⁸ Muslim women stereotyped as slaves to male sexual indulgence is reflected in the typical western images of the harem, the veil, and female circumcision.⁶⁹ However, a fair and balanced reading of the foundational texts reveals that these documents neither humiliate women nor encourage their humiliation. In other words, they do not promote or even mention the degradation of women as a legitimate or appropriate practice.

One of the most controversial issues here is polygamy, a frequently misrepresented practice in western minds, literature, and argument. Given the fact that male sexual indulgence affects large parts of western culture and that westerners tend to think that everyone sees the world as they do, it is not surprising that many or even most of them assume that polygamy is practiced to strengthen male sexuality. After all, pornographic films and magazines are produced mainly to indulge male sexual appetites. Western views of male sexuality are superimposed upon Muslim practices, thus serving as “the framework” for understanding the culture of the “other.”

My personal interactions confirm the high degree of misunderstanding. Wherever I travel, when people find out that I am a Muslim the most typical first question is “Is that the religion that allows a man to marry four women?” This question reflects a lack of knowledge about Islam and, even worse, a lack of interest in obtaining the relevant facts. Somewhat better informed critics draw on selected Qur’anic verses (and on the fact that Abu Bakr, Umar,

and some other Companions had multiple wives) to argue that Islamic law encourages polygamy. Some commentators even employ half-truths and gross distortions, such as “The Qur’an justifies treating woman as nothing but an object for sexual desire and sometimes even an ordinary object would be treated better. Suras in the Qur’an seem to pop up conveniently, so that Mohammed can justify his perverted sexual actions.”⁷⁰

Contrary to encouraging polygamy, Islam actually restricts multiple marriages. The most notable restrictions are limiting the maximum number of wives to four and that each wife be treated equally. In fact, Q. 4:3 forbids polygamy if a man doubts his ability to treat them justly: “Marry the woman of your choice in twos, threes or fours, but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one. This will make it easier for you to avoid injustice.” This verse has been interpreted to favor men having only one wife; indeed, the Qur’an is the world’s only religious book that states “marry only one.” The requirement of fair treatment is emphasized again in Q. 4:129: “In no way can you treat your wives in an unjust manner, even though you may wish to do that.” Clearly, there is a significant difference between *allowing* polygamy with a mandatory condition (viz., just treatment) and *mandating* it as a practice. Islam neither mandates nor promotes polygamy; rather, it adopts the pragmatic approach of acknowledging and governing this practice’s longstanding existence.

In contrast to the Islamic maximum of four wives, prior to Islam’s appearance some men in the region – including many of the earlier prophets mentioned in the Qur’an and in the Bible – had dozens or even hundreds of wives: Prophet David had 100 wives, and Prophet Solomon is said to have contracted 700 marriages. Solomon, as 1 Kings 11:3 proclaims, “had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines.” Prophet Abraham first married Sarah, the mother of Isaac (the progenitor of the Israelites) and then Hagar, the mother of Ishmael (the progenitor of the Arabs). Hinduism does not restrict the number of women a man can marry.⁷¹ Polygamy was once common among African and Australian tribes and seen in ancient Egypt, China, and Persia.

A brief historical review of Muhammed’s marriages shows the rationale for polygamy in certain contexts. He married his first wife Khadija when he was twenty-five and remained monogamous until her death approximately twenty-five years later. “Mohammed’s later marriages,” as suggested by Esposito, “were due to political reasons [associated with the establishment of the Islam] and partly to his concern for the wives of his companions who had fallen in battle defending the Islamic community.”⁷² Islam acknowledged that frequent warfare was causing a shortage of men, a need that could, in some

cases, be met by polygamous marriages so that women could secure husbands and that the Muslim population could be maintained. For example, the deaths of many Muslim men during the Battle of Uhud resulted in a significant number of orphans and widows.

The idea that polygamy was not and is not intended to be the norm remains strong in the Islamic world. For instance, Fernea interviewed Fatma, a young Turkish Islamist woman who stated: "I have studied these issues [polygamy]. I have looked carefully into the chapters of Islamic law, as outlined in the Quran. It is clear to me that polygamy is not a normal state in Islam."⁷³ Rather, it is a pragmatic and strictly controlled response to exceptional circumstances. Egyptian modernist Mohammed Abduh (d. 1905), who believes that Islam did not recommend polygamy as an absolute but only under certain historical and social conditions, also stressed this idea.⁷⁴ The factors set out above largely explain why most Muslim families are monogamous. Indeed, "[m]ost non-Muslims assume that, since polygamy is permitted in Islam, it must be common, but in fact, it is rare."⁷⁵

Only a minority of Muslim men misuse this permission, and largely because of particular cultural practices that are unrelated to Islamic teachings.⁷⁶ For example, some of the Arab men who marry multiple women have no intention of satisfying the Qur'anic requirements. Moreover, many women live in fear that they will be subjected to an unequal polygamous marriage. On the other hand, despite the fact that Islam, in its essential form, guarantees women considerable rights, the societies in which Muslim women live do not always acknowledge or implement those rights.

This case confirms that achieving the global education principle of perspective consciousness requires that one view polygamy through the prism of Islamic ideals.⁷⁷ Before passing judgment, one must read and understand the applicable Qur'anic verses and prophetic hadiths, as well as the historical and political contexts, in order to move beyond one's own culture or nationality and examine such issues globally. Only by doing so will one be able to take into account the beliefs and experiences of Muslims and the Islamic faith (*viz.*, the inclination to empathize). One cannot ignore the fact that many stereotypical images have some basis in reality. However, stereotyping polygamous marriages narrows the field of vision when assessing the women involved in them and violates the global education principle of open-mindedness. The principle of resistance to stereotypes requires one to be skeptical of limited accounts of people, cultures, or nations (*viz.*, important features are ignored) or that depict little or nothing of their actual diversity. This principle challenges non-Muslims to avoid accepting such myths and seek clarification on polygamy and other practices.

The principle of open-mindedness offers great potential for helping non-Muslims avoid negative judgments regarding polygamy. Moreover, embracing the global education principle of anticipating complexity will help them appreciate this practice as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, to look beyond simplistic explanations and appreciate the many intertwined factors of such complex issues. The global education principle of cross-cultural awareness makes us responsible for accepting the fact that while ideas and practices are widely known at the level of myths, prejudices, and tourists' impressions, their reality typically is not deeply and truly known. Such understanding requires one to comprehend and then accept the basic human capacity for creating unique cultures in order to compare such ideas and practices across cultural frontiers.

The Ease of Reframing Themes from a Global Perspective

Deconstructing female circumcision is relatively straightforward because it has its own distinctive characteristics and hardly overlaps with the other themes. However, polygamy and the freedom/subordination of Muslim women are far more challenging to reframe. Applying the range of global principles to these themes reveals that the latter are truly complex and intertwined. One cannot talk about polygamy without incorporating freedom/subordination and vice versa. This section addresses each theme by setting out nine challenges that are inherent in their development.

The first factor, as suggested above, is the late-nineteenth-century discourse of colonial history co-opted by male colonialists to attack Muslim societies. As feminist Arab historian L. Ahmed suggests, male imperialists were well-known opponents of feminism who led the rhetorical attack against what they asserted to be the degradation of women in the colonized Islamic societies and the foremost champions of unveiling.⁷⁸ Although the veil became the most visible symbol of Muslim women as second-class citizens, the Earl of Cromer (d. 1917), who promoted such notions, contradicted himself and undermined his own credibility by discouraging the training of women as doctors. "I conceived," he explained, "that through the civilized world, attendance by medical men is still the rule."⁷⁹ In most western myths, the veil symbolizes Muslim women's subordination and degradation.

The second factor is the existence of Muslim authors who supported the imperialist assumption that the hijab oppressed Muslim society in general and Muslim women in particular. Qasim Amin (d. 1908), a well-known Egyptian writer who helped disseminate the idea that Muslim women must be unveiled,⁸⁰ was only one of many Muslim writers who supported imitating the

West to attain its level of civilization. However, such western writers as Mary Wortly Montagu (d. 1762), who actually traveled to Islamic countries during the eighteenth century, attacked the western belief that Muslim women have no rights.

The third factor is the fact that Muslim women in some societies are being oppressed by social pressure fuelled by extremists. Before examining this social pressure, however, some key successes should be acknowledged. According to UNESCO statistics from 1996, the percentage of female faculty members in universities or equivalent institutions was 30% in Egypt, which exceeded France (28%) and Canada (22%). These statistics also show that the percentage of women enrolled at the third level of engineering in universities or equivalent institutions was 17% in Syria; the equivalent statistics were 8.4% in the Netherlands, 9.65% in Canada, 10.66% in Spain, 7.7% in the United Kingdom, 11.7% in Algeria, and 12.7% in Egypt.⁸¹ More recent UNESCO statistics from 2005 indicate the following numbers for female graduates in science: Bahrain, 74%; Bangladesh, 24%; Brunei, 49%; Kyrgyzstan, 64%; Lebanon, 47%; Qatar, 71%; and Turkey, 44 percent. These numbers compare very favorably with the United States at 43% and Japan at 25 percent. Interestingly, UNESCO nominated Samira Ibrahim Islam, the first Saudi full professor of pharmacology (1983), as a Distinguished Scientist of the World for the year 2000.

Nevertheless, despite their growing access to education and to such traditionally male-dominated professions as engineering, journalism, and teaching, not all Muslim women are sharing in this new freedom. The above percentages are in no way representative of their experiences throughout the Muslim world. In fact, some extremists like the Taliban are seeking to restrict women's education to Islam's basic teachings. Unfortunately, their efforts to do so extend beyond Afghanistan: "Fundamentalist leaders banned or severely limited education for Afghan women in the refugee camps in Pakistan."⁸² Many extremists believe that "education spoils women. The only knowledge a woman needs is how to be a wife and a mother."⁸³ Yet they are unable to cite any Islamic texts or statements made by the Prophet or mentioned in the Qur'an to support their view – because such texts or statements do not exist.

The fourth factor is the link between polygamy and the subordination of Muslim women in many western myths. As detailed above, many westerners assume a connection between the Islamic sanction of polygamy and women's oppression, even though Islamic teachings actually restrict the former – a fact that, regrettably, even many Muslims are not prepared to accept. The fifth factor that makes women's freedom/subordination a complex theme is its connection with the hijab and polygamy. According to Pike and Selby, global education

assumes that all issues are interconnected.⁸⁴ From a global perspective, therefore, it is important to avoid examining an issue in isolation. For example, the hijab cannot be examined without discussing freedom, and polygamy cannot be examined without discussing the freedom/subordination of Muslim women.

The sixth factor is that over the course of history, women have been silenced and their voices have been excluded from religious discourses. Thus male religious leaders have historically been the only ones to articulate and disseminate positions on Muslim women's education and status.⁸⁵ As a result, male-biased views are taken as the norm. The seventh factor is the reality of Muslim women being caught between ethnocentrism and extremism. While the ethnocentrism of many westerners leads them to impose their particular notion of freedom on all women, regardless of their nationality, religion, and cultural context, extremists try to impose their own narrow and literal interpretations of many Islamic texts on Muslim women.

The eighth factor is the ongoing internal debate within and among groups of Muslim women – conservatives, feminists, fundamentalists, and extremists – regarding the hijab, which provides an added layer of complexity to these themes. This internal debate could be viewed either as a healthy sign or as a sign of confusion and uncertainty. The question of whether “to veil or not to veil,” and the hijab's centrality in virtually every discussion of the Islamic treatment of women, have been asked throughout history. Whenever there is a discussion of Islamic doctrine and women, there is almost invariably a huge controversy around the hijab. However, I believe that the core Islamic texts are both clear and definite on the hijab. For me, it is the measure of Muslim woman's commitment to Islam and to God.

It is worth noting that this paper does not rely on my personal conviction that there is no one “real Islam.” The authentic Islamic texts clearly favor women's rights, and yet there is great diversity in the interpretations relating to many issues, including gender. Some of them argue that “real Islam” requires not just head coverings but also face coverings (*niqāb*). This is the position of the Saudi Salafis who insist that the latter covering is an aspect of “real Islam” and that women need a male guardian (*maḥram*) to travel outside their country. In Turkey and elsewhere, wearing the hijab is considered an Ottoman tradition and is therefore considered optional.

Much like the diversity of opinion that exists in other religions, every Muslim group or sect claims that its version is the correct and authentic one. However, this does not mean that all opinions are equally reasonable. As demonstrated in my assessment of the various Qur'an verses and hadiths cited above, those interpretations that oppose women's rights are significantly at

variance with the letter and spirit of Islam's foundational Islamic texts – a view that is certainly espoused by those Muslim feminists who argue that Islam does not oppress women.⁸⁶ Greater awareness of global education principles can help all people, not just westerners, appreciate the complex religious, historical, and social issues surrounding these major controversies. This type of understanding would help correct the simplistic and highly inaccurate notion that Muslim women will be “liberated” only by adopting the West's culture and abandoning their own religious beliefs. The West and Islam are certainly distinct and cannot be understood without acquiring an accurate view of their respective contexts. Indeed, “[n]o custom, belief or behaviour can be understood out of its social and cultural context.”⁸⁷ Moreover, these two civilizations are not in competition with each other and neither one can be considered superior to the other.

Conclusion

According to most stereotyped western beliefs, I am a downtrodden, submissive slave forced into the veil, at the beck and call of a superior male, and incapable of entering the civilized world simply because I am a Muslim woman. Muslim extremists, who suggest that Muslim women's search for freedom has been detrimentally impacted by western ideologies, are also wrong. The freedom that many Muslim women are seeking is the opportunity to exercise the many rights granted to us by Islam. Our freedom is embodied in Islam's essence and thus does not need to be learned from the West. I believe that most westerners recognize that not all Muslims' actions are necessarily representative of Islam, for the global Muslim community is by no means homogenous.

As Selby suggests, one must view the whole as a collection of interconnected parts and analyze the interlocking factors that form this whole.⁸⁸ Each theme discussed and analyzed in this case study is an element connected to the same context. Applying the principles of global education to deconstruct and reframe some of the most common myths confirms the legitimacy of defending the Muslim woman as an honorable individual. Those Muslims who treat women as second-class citizens distort the authentic picture.

As a correction to the popular media's grossly oversimplified, negative, and stereotypical image of Muslim women as passive victims, this case study stresses the latter's contributions over time and place and documents their importance in effecting change and progress. I have attempted to explain how the global misconceptions over Muslim women and their treatment in authentic Islam may occur.

Selby notes that if everything stretches out in all directions, then ultimately there is no distance between things (relational holism).⁸⁹ This principle emphasizes the fact that women's economic, educational, political, religious, and social freedoms are all interconnected. Islam is a religion of practice and therefore far more than a rule book that prescribes rigid obligations. Even though there are rules and systems that we should apply to our lives, Islam is a living religion that deals with humans as a whole. The holism recommended by most global educators and philosophers is also a main characteristic of the true Islamic teaching. People are seen as being comprised of mind, spirit, and body. The Qur'an and Hadith do not indicate a preference for one part over the others. Thus Islam strikes the perfect balance between life's material and spiritual aspects by informing every aspect of daily living, especially for Muslim women (e.g., menstruation, divorce, pregnancy, and breastfeeding). In short, Islamic texts do not render women invisible or forgotten, despite the fact that they are often marginalized in Islamic societies. In authentic Islam, women are the foundation of society and many teachings contained in the Qur'an and Hadith are closely connected to them.

The viewpoints I have outlined above address widespread assumptions about Muslim women and reveal the need to differentiate between tradition and authentic Islamic teachings. Unquestioning adherence to tradition is not what Islam is about. The new generation of Muslim women has been taught authentic Islam and thus cannot be fooled by extremism. Our generation was taught the real Islam and about the world in general, thanks to better access to knowledge through a variety of sources: traveling abroad, watching international television channels, accessing the Internet, and reading diverse literature. Some of these sources were not available to earlier generations. Largely as a result of this exposure, our generation is becoming increasingly conscious of how oppressors have corrupted Islamic principles and imposed their ideas and thoughts on us. We are gradually decolonizing our own minds. Moreover, our generation is becoming more aware of changes occurring all over the world, including the global feminist movement. New generations are becoming better equipped to understand these changes, are standing up for their rights, and are becoming more courageous in fulfilling their goals.

R. Hanvey's definition of a global education perspective is a blend of elements, each of which acknowledges that each individual possesses certain understandings and attributes to varying degrees.⁹⁰ As a result of this study, I am refining my own understanding of global education theory. Three principles which resonate strongly with me emerge mainly from Merryfield's⁹¹ and Case's⁹² theories. *Cross-cultural awareness* is at the top of the

list, for it illustrates the importance of understanding and appreciating all cultures and backgrounds. For me, as a global educator, it is particularly important that I stress the point that cultural diversity is essential to human development and individual fulfillment. *Open-mindedness* is the second defining principle on my list, followed by (and lastly) *resistance to stereotypes*.

Merryfield's concepts of cultural imperialism and of decolonizing one's mind are among the foundational principles that I have used in this case study.⁹³ Both the western and the extremists' stances contribute to restricting and distorting the meaning of the freedom that Islam gives to Muslim women. The colonization of their minds arises from the imposition of ideas and beliefs that have nothing to do with Islam. The colonization of minds results from westerners imposing their way of life as well as from the widespread uncritical embrace of the western way of life. The media has helped both westerners and extremists guide – and in many ways increase – the struggle of Muslim women. Westerners typically bring up the issues of women and the hijab whenever there is a conflict between Islam and the West. These outlets, therefore, end up leading an offensive war against Muslim women instead of clarifying the misunderstandings – an approach that advances the imperialists' and the extremists' goal of promoting their own objectives.

This work in no way attempts to degrade western values and lifestyles in favor of Islam. Rather, it presents several common western stereotypical views of Muslims and Islamic values as being inferior and explains how several global education principles can deconstruct and reframe these stereotypical images. As a Muslim woman, my argument is focused on Islamic teachings because I have studied in detail the rights and responsibilities that Islam gives to women. This knowledge strongly impacts my personality and helps me resist the pressure of being relegated to a socially determined position. I learned early in life that my decisions were no less important than those of a man. This kind of challenging spirit gives me the strength to fight for woman's rights as Islam intended, and this includes using global education theory and principles as indispensable tools.

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