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Muslim Women's Lived Experiences and Intersectional Identities

A Global Perspective

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To the resilient Muslim women worldwide,
whose strength and stories inspire this work.

Preface

In a world where the narratives of Muslim women are often oversimplified or silenced, this book seeks to amplify their voices and illuminate the complexities of their lived experiences. Through diverse perspectives and scholarly insights, this book highlights the intricate layers of identity negotiation, empowerment, and resilience among Muslim women across the globe. From self-definition to digital presence, from faith to fundamental rights, each chapter offers a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted identities that shape the lives of Muslim women today.

Our journey in compiling this book has been both enlightening and humbling. We have been privileged to engage with the rich experiences shared by contributors from various backgrounds and disciplines. Their scholarship, passion, and commitment to advancing understanding in this field have been truly inspiring. As editors, it is our hope that this book serves as a catalyst for dialogue, reflection, and positive change. May it challenge stereotypes, foster empathy, and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable world for all.

The idea for this book stemmed from a deep recognition of the gaps and misrepresentations in the existing literature about Muslim women. Too often, their stories are told through a narrow lens, failing to capture the depth and diversity of Muslim women's experiences. We wanted to create a platform where authors could share their own stories and perspectives, offering a richer, more authentic portrayal of their lives and those around them. This book aims to break down the monolithic representations and highlight the dynamic, intersectional identities of Muslim women.

We have seen firsthand the powerful impact of sharing stories and fostering understanding. Each narrative, whether it was about overcoming adversity, finding faith, or navigating digital spaces, adds to the collective Muslim women's experiences. By bringing these stories to light, we hope to empower Muslim women and provide readers with a deeper appreciation of the complexities and nuances of their lives.

Furthermore, this book is a response to the growing global interest in issues of identity, gender, and faith. In a time of increasing polarization and misunderstanding, we believe it is more important than ever to foster conversations that bridge

divides and build empathy. By showcasing the resilience and agency of Muslim women, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and respectful discourse on identity and culture.

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia — Puspa Melati Wan
Baltimore, MD, USA — Saiqa Anne Qureshi
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia — Rosila Bee Mohd Hussain

Acknowledgments

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

Alhamdulillah, we have been granted the opportunity to publish this book with the guidance and blessings of Allah.

We would like to express our deepest appreciation to the respected authors who have contributed their invaluable insights to this volume. Your dedication and scholarly rigor have illuminated the critical issues explored in this book, and your efforts have significantly enriched the discourse on the multifaceted experiences and views of Muslim women.

Our sincere thanks go to all the participants who have been fundamental to the development of this work. Your willingness to share your stories and perspectives has provided the foundation upon which this book is built.

To our families and friends, your support and encouragement have been our pillars of strength throughout this journey. Your patience and understanding have enabled us to navigate and complete this project well. We are eternally grateful.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the panel of reviewers whose meticulous feedback and constructive criticism have immensely contributed to refining the content and ensuring its scholarly integrity. Your dedication to quality assurance has been invaluable in shaping this publication.

Finally, we acknowledge all those who have indirectly supported this endeavor. Your contributions, though perhaps unseen by many, have been crucial to the successful completion of this book.

Thank you all for your commitment, your insights, and your support. This book stands as a testament to our collective effort and shared dedication to the important issues faced by Muslim women around the world.

With gratitude,

Puspa Melati Wan, Saiqa Anne Qureshi, and Rosila Bee Mohd Hussain

Introduction

There is a growth in both women's studies and Islamic studies departments and educational programs at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels considering the lives of Muslim women. This book sets out to serve those communities with a well-rounded, internationally inclusive, cross-disciplinary text to support them. Current texts about Islamic women are congregated in historical works, focused on the impact of women in early Islam, or in more modern work, which focuses either on Islamic majority countries or on immigration destinations ("The West"), focused on Western Europe and North America (the USA and Canada).

Otherwise, there are chapters about Muslim women interspersed in wider women's studies narratives and anthologies. This work focuses on the life course and lived experience widely across geographies. It also encompasses unique and modern issues brought to the forefront, which are more rarely discussed. That includes pressing issues about empowerment and Me Too, intersectionality including faith, identity, disability, the digital self and virtual presentation, career development, and transgender identity and faith. It also includes a wider discussion of feminism, focused on an exploration of the "whole self," including a presentation on maternal care and illness and parental identity. This unique contribution demonstrates our commitment to cutting-edge work in academic spaces, and elevating the voices of diverse scholars, across disciplines and geographies.

The discourse on religious inclusivity and gender equality has been well established over the years and across nations. Institutionalization of efforts via national policies and laws as well as support toward international agenda such as the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Beijing Declaration, and religious and gender inclusivity in 2030 sustainable goals is among the indicators of progress toward ensuring that every individual should be well protected and supported in their personal development and well-being. However, Muslims are not a monolith, nor are women. When considering faith, migration, class, sexuality, and other variables, the issues confronting women are often understudied and under-evaluated.

Gender issues are often highlighted in terms of gendered poverty, illiteracy, and political repression, in addition to a lack of power, autonomy, and status within institutions and society at large. These issues are arguably further exacerbated by religion and culture being taken into the equation. Thus, many writings have been published to reflect this double and triple jeopardy confronted by Muslim women. In addition, media and public opinions often highlight sensational stories and stereotypical views of Muslim women that are represented in unflattering binary images of oppressed or dangerous. Further mentioned issues in the public media highlight the simplistic write-up such as on clothing and headgear of Muslim women; voting rights and lack of accessibility; familial decisions; and the substandard role of women in the household which then frames Islam as the underlying source of these "problems."

As much as the abovementioned issues are an important precursor to the discussion surrounding Muslim women, the argument that Muslim women are the oppressed majority has been overly simplistic and does not reflect the realities of the majority of Muslim women. This book aims to put forth a global perspective based on intersectionality embodied by Muslim women addressing questions such as the following: Who are these women? What are their stories and experiences? How do they personify faith and play their social roles? And how they manage the day-to-day spheres to balance their identity in the community, workplace, home, and faith. Thus, the discussion of the authors in this book will further highlight the varied experiences and realities of Muslim women through the inclusion of the interpretation of the Quran, the Islamic teachings by religious leaders, the societal expectations, and cultural imposition that Muslim women experience across different societal settings.

Authors are also varied in the way they formulate and discuss such experiences which would provide a more holistic lens toward what is perceived as feminism, oppression, and liberation; what is considered as imposing or personal choice; how Muslim women define themselves and renegotiate their sense of identity; how do structural constraints limit or serve as an empowering mechanism for agents of social change; how do Muslim women adapt and move forward with the current state of affairs and technological advancement; and how has the additional intersectionality of generation, class, sexuality, and migration status affected their self-definition, lived experiences, and ways to manage their daily challenges.

This book expands the current narrow discourse of Islam as a source of oppression on Muslim women, who are socialized and brainwashed into accepting their "second-class" status in the patriarchal world, who needed to be "saved" and "empowered" in order for them to be liberated and succeed in this material world. It is also the aim of this book to provide a platform where authors of different gender, class, ability, culture, and experiences come together and provide their varied interpretations and analysis of the "lived experiences" of Muslim women.

Additionally, the writings exemplify the diverse lens and experiences of Muslim women living in a predominantly Muslim nation compared to those living as a minority in their own nation. The contextual readings and alternative interpretations of Islamic teachings and practices would also provide important insights into the

discussion raised. The writing angle in this book will also be varied, i.e., analysis with references to the Quran, autobiography piece, interview record, and a critical analysis looking at culture, social structures, and personal experiences both lived and observed. Contributing authors are also encouraged to include an end section to outline their recommendations, wish list, or suggestions for readers to understand the complex realities of Muslim women as well as to serve as a guide for practitioners and policymakers to support global Muslim women.

Below is a quick overview of the book sections:

The Label: Self-Definition and Imposed Identities

This section highlights the complex interplay between how Muslim women perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. The chapters in this subsection examine a range of topics, from the intersection of culture, religion, and agency in the lives of Minang Muslim women navigating divorce to the nuanced literary identities of Muslim women writers in Malaysia. The contributions explore how feminist perspectives are shaped under an Islamic lens and the symbolic representation of women in cultural narratives. Additionally, the negotiation of identity through changes in marital status and surnames among South African Muslim women highlights the ongoing struggle between self-definition and societal expectations. Collectively, these essays offer a rich, multidimensional view of the challenges and triumphs faced by Muslim women in defining their identities within diverse cultural and social frameworks.

Presentation of the Self: Adjustment and the Digital Space

The section "Presentation of the Self: Adjustment and the Digital Space" explores how Muslim women navigate and present their identities in an increasingly digital world. The chapters cover a range of topics, including how Malay Muslim women embrace or resist digital changes and the portrayal of a Muslim transgender woman's struggle in Malaysian print media. The evolving norms of Muslim names and their impact on identity are examined, as is the role of social media in shaping religious identities in a Muslim nation. Additionally, the experiences of Muslim female migrants in non-Muslim societies highlight the complexities of belonging and identity in digital and physical spaces. These essays provide a comprehensive look at how digital spaces influence and transform the self-presentation and identity negotiation of Muslim women.

Agent of Change: Empowered and Resilient

This subsection presents the stories of Muslim women who have emerged as powerful agents of transformation and resilience in their communities and beyond. Through a series of insightful chapters, we explore the resilience of Muslim women living with HIV, shedding light on their unique challenges and strategies for coping and thriving. The dialogue with Francirosy Campos Barbosa, an Islamic intellectual, activist, and academic, showcases her experiences and insights as an agent of change in Brazil. We also include the Islamic perspective on amicable divorce, coparenting, and post-divorce harmony, offering guidance and support for Muslim women navigating these challenging transitions. Finally, we explore the practice of traditional medicine and healing among female pengobat (shaman) in Pulau Penyengat, Kepulauan Riau, highlighting the invaluable role of women in preserving and transmitting local wisdom. These chapters celebrate the resilience, agency, and transformative power of Muslim women as they navigate and shape their communities and societies.

Conversion: Faith and Self-Identity

In this subsection, we explore the profound transformations experienced by women who have embraced Islam, examining how their newfound faith intersects with their sense of self and identity. Through a series of compelling chapters, we look into the experiences of Chinese Muslim women in Malaysia and China as they navigate the delicate balance between tradition and faith. We also explore the lived experiences of converted Japanese Muslim women, shedding light on how Islam becomes an integral part of their everyday lives. We also examine the identities and life choices of Filipino women who have embraced Islam, offering insights into the diverse paths and motivations behind their conversion journeys. All these chapters demonstrate the complex and deeply personal process of conversion, highlighting the ways in which faith shapes and reshapes the identities of women across different cultural and geographical contexts.

Basic Rights: Birth, Health, and Employment

The readers will be exposed to the lived experiences and challenges faced by Muslim women in accessing fundamental rights related to birth, health, and employment in this subsection. Through a series of thought-provoking chapters, we examine the experiences of Bangladeshi Muslim female migrant workers in Malaysia, shedding light on the realities of labor migration and the barriers they encounter in accessing healthcare and social support. We also explore the impact of Arab culture on the

practice of violence against women in Libya, highlighting the urgent need for cultural sensitivity in addressing gender-based violence. Additionally, we highlight the embodied experiences of Malay Muslim women challenging societal discourses surrounding childbirth and maternal care, as well as the Islamic perspective on female circumcision and its implications for women's health and rights. Finally, we present an autoethnographic analysis of clandestine breast cancer among Muslim women, shedding light on the taboo and stigma surrounding women's health issues in certain communities. These chapters offer critical insights into the intersection of gender, religion, and human rights, urging for greater awareness, advocacy, and action to ensure the rights and well-being of Muslim women worldwide.

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Part I
The Label: Self Definition and Imposed Identities

Beyond Divorce: Unraveling the Intersection of Culture, Religion, and Agency in Minang Muslim Women's Lives

Puspa Melati Wan, Evelynd, and Miza Izwanis Mangsor

Introduction

An ethnic group indigenous to the Indonesian highlands of West Sumatra is called the Minangkabau people. However, their cultural influence is not limited to Indonesia; it also exists in neighboring Malaysia, where there are sizable Minang communities. The Minangkabau people are predominantly Muslims and are known for their distinctive matrilineal society, which gives women important responsibilities in family and communal decision-making as well as emphasizes the maternal line of succession (Elfira, 2023). In Minangkabau societies, females are often perceived as strong and independent women and are placed on a high social status, recognized by both men and women. Female lineage is the source of inheritance, property, and family names. Land and property are traditionally owned by women, and matrilocal marriages result in husbands moving in with their wives. Because of this matrilineal arrangement, women now frequently possess significant social and economic power in the society (Elfira, 2023). The strong social support within the Minangkabau communities, in both Malaysia and Indonesia, is also an important feature of this community (Hartati et al., 2021). It is known that the support network among the members of this community extends beyond the immediate family members to the entire community through which women are able to fall back on when in

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need of emotional, financial, as well as practical support (Putri et al., 2022). These social settings and structures serve as an interesting dimension to the understanding of marriage experience and divorce management among Muslim women.

In Malaysia, though the Minangkabau communities can be found in several different states (i.e., Selangor, Malacca, Perak), the state of Negeri Sembilan is the home to the majority of Minangkabau population (Britannica, 2012). These Minang women have made significant contributions in the spheres of business, politics, and education. As for Indonesia, the center of Minangkabau community is still in West Sumatra, where the population gathers around the provincial capital of Padang. Yet, the Minangkabau people are also present in other regions of Indonesia, such as Jakarta, where they have developed thriving societies and cultural establishments. Rich traditions, a strong feeling of community, and a distinctive matrilineal system are the main characteristics of Minangkabau society and culture (Elfira, 2018; Hadler, 2009). Though similar traditions and communal and matrilineal emphases are also evident among the Minangkabau diaspora in Malaysia, the Minang individuals may modify their customs to conform to the larger Malaysian framework (Mundayat, 2016) and to navigate gender standards of the country.

The Minangkabau people in Malaysia and Indonesia have managed to maintain their cultural identity while also adjusting to the sociopolitical landscapes of their respective nations. Islamic principles have an impact on many facets of life in Malaysia, including marriage and divorce. For instance, Minang women's divorce proceedings are impacted by Malaysia's interpretation of the Islamic Family Law Act, which regulates issues including marriage, divorce, and child custody for Muslims. Although Islamic ideals are likewise important in Indonesia, there are differences in how Islamic law is interpreted and applied. For example, divorce procedures in West Sumatra would combine Islamic law with customary laws from the Minangkabau community due to the presence of adat law in the area (Elfira, 2023). Both in Malaysia and Indonesia, the Minangkabau people continue to preserve and celebrate their cultural legacy despite the difficulties posed by modernization and globalization. These factors affect women's empowerment and general standing within their respective civilizations, highlighting differences in societal structures and regulations (Abdullah et al., 2014).

Brief Overview of Malaysian-Minang and Indonesian-Minang Muslim Women

Women have important and powerful responsibilities in both Malaysian and Indonesian Minang cultures. In social situations and family decision-making, women frequently hold influence. Minang women are often entrusted with significant obligations related to upholding peace within the family and guaranteeing the survival of customs and traditions. Minangkabau traditional proverb says, "Limpapeh rumah nan gadang, umbun puruak pagangan kunci, pusek jalo

kumpulan tali, nan gadang basa batuah." *Limpapeh* itself means the middle pillar of a West Sumatra traditional house "rumah gadang," which is an analogy of the salient role of a mother in a family (Sismarni, 2011). The proverb explains that mothers in Minangkabau are the "key holders" *(pagangan kunci)*, the core (*pusek jalo*), as well as highly appreciated (*basa batuah*) in the society.

Another term of a mother's role commonly used in Minangkabau is *Bundo Kanduang*, which is not only regarded as the authority of properties in matrilineal bloodline (Sismarni, 2011) but also as the leadership of the households as well as in the public sphere (Febriyeni et al., 2023). *Bundo Kanduang* holds ethical principles in terms of family management, such as educating the children to be morally upright and with strong character (Munir et al., 2022). In terms of parenting approach, the role of *Bundo Kanduang* has been said to be derived from a legend of Malin Kundang. The mother applies the pattern of "learning by doing" which then becomes "learning by experience" to nurture and educate Malin, her son, to be skilled, hard-working, and resilient (Thahar, 2018).

Though the status, gender roles, power structures, and influence of women in Minang society may have changed over time, the core of Minang culture and matrilineal heritage is still widely valued and recognized (Elfira, 2023). Higher education and chances for professions outside the home are now more accessible to Minang women. This in turn affects the role that women play at home and in the community. Minangkabau women also pride themselves on their economic independence and involvement in entrepreneurial activities. This economic autonomy can provide women with resources and opportunities they need to play their role within the traditional roles and societal expectations (Dilova et al., 2022).

Contextualizing Divorce Among Malaysian-Minang and Indonesian-Minang Muslim Women

Divorce is a challenging and often stigmatized experience for Muslim women, especially in patriarchal societies. Women are often blamed for the failure of the marriage; though there are cases as such, the contributing factors of divorce may stem from either or both. Women have also been reported to face social ostracism and financial insecurity as a result of divorce. To exacerbate the post-divorce experience, in many Muslim-majority countries, women have limited rights when it comes to divorce from legal and social barriers (Gouda & Potrafke, 2016).

Looking at the various divorce cases (divorce lawsuits) filed at the West Sumatera Religious Court, there were 5946 divorce cases in 2014. A more recent statistics as shown in Table 1 below shows the percentage of population according to regency/city and marital status. The data reveals that in most cases, when there is an increase of marriages in these areas, there is also an increased trend of divorce reported. In fact, it is interesting to note that in the case of Padang Panjang, the decrease of marriage still shows an increase in divorce cases, while in the case of West Sumatra