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Haleh Afshar

Strategic and Practical Pathways Selected by Women

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Edited by

Haleh Afshar
University of York, UK

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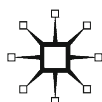

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Notes on Contributors

Haleh Afshar is Professor Emerita of Politics and Women's Studies at the University of York and serves as a crossbench peer in the House of Lords. She is also the Visiting Professor of Islamic Law at the Faculté Internationale de Droit Comparée at Strasbourg. In 2005 she was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to equal opportunities. In 2009 she was made a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. She was born and raised in Iran, where she worked as a journalist and a civil servant. She has served as chair for the British Association of Middle Eastern Studies. Since 1998 she has been working with United Nations Association International Services (UNAIS), where she served as chair and is its honorary president. She is a founding member of the Muslim Women's Network UK and is its honorary president. Afshar has written, co-authored, edited, and co-edited several books on questions relating to women and development, Islam, and Iran.

Alessia Belli has a BA in Political Philosophy from the University of Florence, Italy, and a Master's in Human Rights and Humanitarian Actions from the University of Siena, Italy. She has conducted field research in the occupied Palestinian territories on Hamas' identity, focusing on the role of women within the movement. She had several experiences in the Middle East doing research and dealing with various projects of cooperation to development. Her PhD in Politics, Human Rights and Sustainability was awarded by the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies at Pisa, Italy. The title of her dissertation was 'Multiculturalism and Identity: Muslim Women in Italy and the UK'. As a visiting researcher at the London School of Economics (LSE) and the University of York, she has worked with Professor Anne Phillips and collaborated with Baroness Haleh Afshar. She has been part of the team looking after the website www.euro-Islam.info, dealing with the perception of Muslims in the Italian media. She is also a member of the Commission for Equal Opportunities at Sant'Anna School, organizing and taking part in courses, projects, and conferences mainly focused on gender equality, managing diversity, and the reconciliation of work and family time (cultural and training initiatives). Her main research interests revolve around multiculturalism, the accommodation of cultural and religious diversities in Europe from a gender

perspective, processes of identity formation (relationship between cultural, religious, and political identities), citizenship, Islam with a focus on Muslim women in Western countries, religion, and secularism. Her work is highly interdisciplinary – at the intersection of philosophy, political theory, feminism, and sociology.

Jyothsna Belliappa completed her doctoral research at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York, UK. Her research interests include the sociology of work, personal life, globalization, modernity, the Indian middle classes, and gender. Her most recent work has been on women in the knowledge economy. She teaches Sociology and Gender Studies at Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore, India. Jyothsna co-coordinates the Aditi Teacher Research Project, which supports school teachers in using research as a tool for reflective practice.

Maria Holt is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Westminster, London. She has carried out considerable research on Muslim women and violent conflict in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, and has also conducted an oral history of the British colonial period in southern Yemen. In 2006–7, she received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to conduct a research project on the lives of Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon. Her research project is on 'Women and Islamic Resistance in the Arab World'. Recent publications include 'Keeping the Memory Alive: Palestinian Women in Lebanon Narrate Home, Homeland and Homelessness' in *Imagining Home: Migrants and the Search for a New Belonging*; 'The Unlikely Terrorist: Women and Islamic Resistance in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 3(3); 'Surviving, Resisting and "Becoming Modern": Experiences of Shi'a women in Lebanon', *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 3(4); 'Challenging Preconceptions: Women and Islamic Resistance' in *EU, the US and Islamist Movements: Strategies for Engaging Political Islam*; and 'A World of Movement: Memory and Reality for Palestinian Women in the Camps of Lebanon' in *Palestinian Refugees: Identity, Space and Place in the Levant.*

Jieyu Liu is Lecturer in China Studies at the University of Leeds, having previously been a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Glasgow. She is the author of *Gender and Work in Urban China: Women Workers of the Unlucky Generation* (2007), the co-editor of *East Asian Sexualities: Modernity, Gender and New Sexual Cultures* (2008) and the editor of *Social Transformation in China* (due 2013). Since 2011 she has been the principal investigator for a UK Economic and Social Research Council

(ESRC)-funded project on ageing in rural China, examining the impact of rural–urban migration upon familial support for older people.

Kate Maclean is Lecturer in Human Geography at King's College London and co-convener of the Gender Matters @ King's research network. She is a feminist geographer who works on gender, livelihoods, and informal economies in the 'global south', with a focus on women workers. She has published widely on microfinance, the used clothes trade, and the 'local development state' in Latin America. She has research experience in Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico, Mali, and Burkina Faso, and has lived and worked in Thailand, Catalonia, and France.

Elaheh Rostami-Povey is a writer and researcher. She is affiliated to London Middle East Institute, Centre for Iranian Studies, Centre for Palestine Studies and Centre for Gender Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her research focuses on Iran, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, in particular on gender issues in Iran. She is the author of *Afghan Women, Invasion and Identity* (2007); *Iran's Influence: A Religious-Political State and Society in Its Region* (2010); *Women, Work and Islamism, Ideology and Resistance in Iran* (1999 and 2011). She is the co-editor (with Tara Povey) of *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran*. She is the author/co-autor of numerous articles, some of which are 'Feminist Contestations of Institutional Domains in Iran', *Feminist Review Collective* (2001); 'Women in Afghanistan, Passive Victims of the Borga or Active Social Participants?', 'Development, Women, and War: Feminist Perspectives', *Development in Practice* (2003); 'Trade Unions and Women's NGOs in Iran', *Development In Practice* (2004); 'Afghan Refugees in Iran, Pakistan, the U.K. and the U.S. and Life after Return: A Comparative Gender Analysis', *Iranian Studies* (2007); 'Gender, Agency and Identity, the Case of Afghan Women in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran', *Journal of Development* Studies (2007). Her books and articles have been translated into Farsi, Arabic, Portuguese, and Korean languages.

Masoumeh Velayati is Lecturer in Gender and Development at Al-Maktoum College of Higher Education, Scotland. She holds a PhD from the Department of Politics at the University of York. She has a multi-disciplinary educational background in the fields of Islam and social science with particular focus on development, gender, and Islamic feminism. She is the author of *Islam, Gender and Development: Rural-Urban Migration of Women in Iran* (2011). She has also published articles in peer-reviewed journals. In addition to her academic background, she has also had experience of development through her work

in an international organization (UNAIS) on two important departments of fundraising programmes. She developed two programmes: 'Gender and Islam' and 'Development, Islam and the Muslim World'. The MSc Programme in Development, Islam, and the Muslim World has attracted international students to Al-Maktoum College of Higher Education.

1

Fluidities of Identities: Some Strategic and Practical Pathways Selected by Women

Haleh Afshar

Too often women are defined by ascribed identities that confine them to categories developed and used by others. These constrain their participation in the political process and access to economic and social resources. To succeed, women across the world continue to develop fluid identities (Abrahams 1996; Afshar 1989, 1994) that enable them to be effective both at the domestic and public levels. The static, negative identities ascribed to them place socioeconomic and political barriers in their path that may seem, at the first instance, to be insurmountable. The limitations that they impose mask, undermine, and devalue the rich diversities and the gamut of daily strategies that pave the paths of women across differing and fluid identities as they accommodate the needs of their daily lives. But, as the case studies in this volume indicate, for many women, identities are not merely choices (Sen 2009) or clearly delineated fragmented facets of selves. Identity can be ascribed rather than chosen (Parekh 2009), and women have to negotiate and struggle to move beyond the stranglehold placed on them by such ascriptions. Women recognize identities as dynamic and malleable and are able to use differing interpretations to move beyond the limitations imposed in the name of specific faiths, cultures, or socioeconomic norms. Many reconceptualize their understanding of self and move beyond boundaries that remain fluid, hard to define, and culturally and historically constructed and reconstructed within specific socioeconomic contexts (Baumann 1996, 1997). Different stages in life in terms of age, generation, and localities reassign new duties, responsibilities, and demands that involve the reconstruction of notions of self in these different situations. But women are able to strategize within the constraints by

reflecting seamlessly the different facets of their adopted identities across divides in order to function effectively in a variety of personal, political, sociocultural, and economic fora.

As the chapters in this volume illustrate, specific historical and economic contexts demand women to retain and function with differing identities without losing their sense of self or belonging. Women combine their paid and unpaid obligations and simultaneously fulfil their moral duties. Their strength lies in the ability to negotiate customs and cultures effectively, helping traditions evolve to meet the needs of the time. In periods of political conflict or rapidly changing economic circumstances that make impossible demands on resilience, time, and resources, women fall back on cultural strategies. The moral economy of kin and friendship networks nurtured over many years are relied upon to deal with the experiences of hardship (Afshar 1989). In such situations, a deep sense of family commitment often enables younger generations of women to work through intergenerational tensions and accommodate familial responsibilities. In the context of rapidly changing demands on women, who increasingly are combining their traditional domestic duties with income-generating as well as political activities, it is useful to consider the centrality of fluidity of identities that enables women to defy static labels and combine public obligations with moral duties, moving seamlessly between different – and at times conflicting – ascribed identities.

As the chapters by Jieyu Liu, Jyothsna Belliappa, and Masoumeh Velayati indicate, in times of change and uncertainty, mothers' and daughters' deep-rooted commitment to education and familial well-being becomes pivotal in enabling them to manage the transition between old and new. There can be a deep reciprocal cooperation and commitment to familial duties on the part of mothers and daughters. The respect and love for mothers as the guardians of the home and of culture and historical memories, as well as having the ability to intervene and help change the destinies of their daughters and shape their future. With their mothers' support and encouragement, younger women are able to move fluidly between public and private identities and accommodate the demands of home and workplace. This is often despite their ascribed identities as refugees, immigrants, or needy recipients of aid (a symbol of a past that is thought to have little relevance in the world of development credit and international business). As the chapters in this volume indicate, it is the moral economy of kin and the close interrelations built and nurtured by women that enable the young to work and the old to have an important role in the survival and functioning of the family.

Gendered state policies

The ability of women to function effectively as carers, workers, and good citizens is tightly contextualized within gendered policies by the government that ascribes identities to women that too often constrain rather than facilitate their daily lives. Often state policies on political participation and family planning can place severe restrictions on the opportunities that women have to decide their own destinies. On occasion, these may have unexpected outcomes. In China the one-child policy acted as an official barrier to the maintenance of the traditional ideology of *zhong nan qing niu* (preferring boys to girls). Moreover, some women turned the discrimination against the girls from their in-laws into a motivation for their daughters. Thus, when the 1991 reforms led to redundancy of many older workers, younger generations of women were able to step into the newly created jobs. Access to better education has radically changed the destinies of younger generations of women in India. The economic reforms of the early 1990s opened new pathways to employment, though the importance of mothers in enabling their daughters to have the time to participate in the formal labour market has made negotiation of respective filial and maternal duties and obligations less clearly delineated as they had been in the past. Rapid transformation was successfully achieved by evoking the moral economy. As Jyothsna Belliappa illustrates, Indian women mobilized their familial networks to create their identities as individualized workers in the transnational information technology industry. The fluidity of identities and recognized reciprocal obligations and duties between mothers and daughters enabled the younger generations to access lucrative jobs while they remained dutiful daughters and spouses. Similarly, the Islamification of the Iranian education system opened the way for migrant and slum-dwelling girls to attend school. The regulation of gender relations by emphasizing family values and accepted traditional gender practices created a sense of security that played an important role in educating and breaking some social barriers for many young migrant girls. With the approval of the family, they found avenues to better-paid employment. In addition, their understanding of the teachings of Islam enabled the younger women to negotiate for better treatment than their mothers or even their older sisters had received within the family. But effective, productive work – particularly where small businesses are concerned – requires funding. As the case study for Bolivia indicates, state funding can be hemmed in by definitions of micro credit in formal business terms that disregard the flexibility required by women that may prevent many from obtaining the initial loans; they may need very small loans

but require long term and flexible repayment arrangements As the case study by Kate Maclean indicates, the women constructed their own combination of the moral and the temporal economies. The 'solidarity group' approach to microfinance recognized as legitimate borrowers groups whose members acted as a 'social collateral' (Johnson and Rogaly 1997) and guaranteed one another's loans. But although this approach opened access, it also made significant demands on the time of women by requiring them to retain their traditional identities and fulfil their reciprocal social duties and obligations.

The politics of exclusion

The gradual historic move of women toward integration within the public arena is, too often, seriously curtailed at times of flux and conflict; it is at these moments that the personal and political responsibilities of women may come to the fore. Often women are excluded not only from the process but also from the discourse of battles, struggles, and the subsequent statehoods. In conflicts women are generally seen as victims and very rarely as heroes. Whether living as exiles or in refugee camps, they often have to carve out identities for themselves that expand the meanings of being a wife and a mother. Maria Holt explores questions about the nature of heroism and its relationship to identity formation for women involved in resistance struggles. She asks whether heroism has been conceptualized as being beyond the capabilities of women. Or is it something which, as a result of its fundamental character, is identified solely with masculinity? Holt argues that while the notion of heroism in the case of Palestine is a convenient construct to mask humiliation and disempowerment, it also can have the effect of excluding women from the respected narratives of nation-building. Elaheh Rostami-Povey's chapter outlines the different ways that diasporic Afghan women in Iran and Pakistan and those still in Afghanistan under the US-led invasion are constantly struggling to navigate fluidly across their social, political, economic, ethnic, cultural, and gendered identities. Despite their marginalization, they have invented different coping mechanisms to enable them to retain agency and give voice to women's demands at home as well as in diaspora. Exile became an important factor in reshaping their identities according to their diverse positions. Under the US-led invasion women are challenging the ways that they have been portrayed by Western powers and their media. They are seeking freedom from hierarchical and patriarchal domination in the hope of gaining a foothold in the processes of change in Afghanistan.

The *hijab*

The tensions between personal and public identities can be contained with fluidity where women have a recognized place in society. But at times, political tensions can pose difficult questions for women, such as when there seems to be conflict between their faith and their nationality. In the case of Britain, the rapid rise of Islamophobia has created an atmosphere in which Muslims as a whole and those living in the country in particular are portrayed as 'the other' and the enemy within (Rattansi 2000, Runnymede Trust 1997, WNC 2006). This 'otherization' has carved a divide between those for whom the faith is part and parcel of life and those who have been propelled to see it as a political choice – a choice made all the harder by the demonization of all Muslims in the post-9/11 and 7/7 experiences of rising Islamaphobia. Many cradle and converted Muslim women have adopted the hijab as a public badge of honour and one that they see as empowering. By choosing the hijab, they have embraced the communal identity of *umma* (the people of Islam). Though this publicly defines them as 'the other', it also helps them to move to social invisibility (Ellison 1952), to a contested but visually effective presence.

The public presence of adherence to the faith and choice of the hijab in the United Kingdom dates back to the 1970s and marks the intentional adoption of ascribed identities by Muslims in the United Kingdom (Afshar 1994 & 1988). They counter the gaze and use their faith to develop a distinct identity that, while rooted in familiar daily rituals, is both global and empowering. Their sense of belonging to the umma and their knowledge of the teachings of the faith and their Koranic rights enable these women to navigate effectively between the demands of their specific cultures and familial norms and the universality of the Koranic teachings. Thanks to the multitude of websites and the ever growing literature on women's rights in Islam, Muslim women are often able to understand the faith better than their parents. But within the family, the moral economy of the kin requires that they tread carefully and use tenderness rather than logic (Afshar 1989). Alessia Belli suggests that the political act of labelling Muslim women carries a complex dynamics that is often restrictive tool to constrain the political destinies of many Muslim communities in the West.

Yet Muslim women often adopt the label as a badge of honour and demonstrate their commitment by covering and wearing the hijab. Worn as a sign of faith, the hijab is also seen by many as an important personal choice that offers a non-violent method of protest. It provides both a personal anchor and a public form of resistance to subvert the

daily experience of Islamaphobia. However, this is not merely done to counter the prevailing prejudices but also as a positive, liberating step.

But in contexts of violent struggles, it is difficult to make choices. The Palestinian experience indicates that such havoc and complete upheaval destroy the histories from which women could construct an identity. When daily lives are drenched in despair, Palestinian women are left only with a sense of belonging and an imagined homeland not unlike umma. Similarly, as Elaheh Rostami-Povey argues, the continuing battles in Afghanistan have deprived women of the certainties of faith and culture. The violent and constant attacks on their lives and livelihoods force them to accommodate the far more complex realities of their lived experiences that largely hinder them revoking their ascribed identities. As Maria Holt argues, the reconstruction has been equally complex within localities as political struggles and economic transformations impact on the definitions and nature of heroism and its relationship to identity formation for women involved in the resistance struggles.

Even in Iran, where the hijab was imposed by decree and accompanied with a policy of segregated education, government policy has had surprising and possibly unintended consequences. The early statements by Khomeini and the early policies indicated an intention to use the hijab to control women and curtail their access to the formal labour market (Afshar 2001). In fact, Iranian women have completely subverted the policy by adopting the ascribed identity for a 'good Muslim' but contesting its meaning and reconstructing it as a liberating tool, while maintaining the label and its attributes in the public gaze. But initially, as Masoumeh Velayati's case study indicates, the state's imposition of the hijab, with its endorsement of family values and enforcement of traditional gender practices, created a safe environment and a sense of security. This in turn helped to reduce some of the migrants' and slum-dwelling families' fears of sending their daughters to schools. Better education enabled the younger women to achieve better-paid employment in the formal economy. In addition, their awareness of their rights as a result of their education and understanding of the teachings of Islam enabled them to demand better treatment than their mothers or even their older sisters had received within the family.

But Islam adopted by the state can at the same time impose constraints that limit women and may infringe on their human rights. In the case of Iran, the interpretations of Islamic law and what they would entail for women has been a highly contested area for over three decades. The *mohajabeh* (veiled woman) has remained the public emblem of the

Islamic face of the nation, but the debate about the identity of Muslim women has been at the heart of the sociopolitical struggles for liberation. For a quarter of a century, Iranian women – ably assisted by many male scholars and religious leaders – had instituted the return to the textual teachings of the Koran as fundamental in defining the roles and delineating the duties of women. But in more recent years, a fierce battle to return to traditions and assumed cultural norms has been pivotal in undermining the earlier achievements. The fear of intoxication by the West, 'Westoxification' (Al-Ahmad 1982), has re-emerged as a political ploy to return to interpretations of Islam that ascribe a submissive, silent identity to women and hinder their demands for anti-discriminatory politics. The resulting tumult and unrest has generated new divides and enhanced old enmities, but has also created new alliances. All sides in the conflict claim ownership of the faith and the Koranic teachings concerning women and their rights and entitlements. At the core of the raging debate is the question of the identity of Muslim women and whether and how far manmade laws have diverged from or adhered to the textual teachings of the Koran. As Haleh Afshar indicates, both sides of the divide are reconstructing identities that are highly contested. In Iran the activists are helped and supported by a number of leading religious leaders, most if not all of whom are related by birth or marriage to the campaigning women. These include Ayatollah Rafsanjani, who fathered the fiery Faezeh Hashemi; Ayatollah Taleqani, whose daughter Azam fought repeatedly to gain the right to stand for the presidential nomination; and Ayatollah Koolaee, whose daughter has been at the forefront of the Majlis struggles. The ties of kinship gave these women access to education, power, and support where needed, though the women also suffered when the tide turned against the reformists in Iran.

Thus, as the chapters in this book illustrate, women in diverse political, economic, and religious contexts have retained their long held commitment to their kinship networks and the reciprocal duties and obligations dictated by the moral economy. At the same time, the embedded lives of women within their families, networks, and solidarity groups has enabled them to function effectively on both domestic and public fronts. The battles have been hard, continuous, and sometimes tinged with defeat. But what remains is the hope that, in the very long run, the ability of women to move fluidly across the gamuts of ascribed and adopted identities, and to function effectively in seemingly impossible circumstances, will enable them to gain appropriate recognition for their socioeconomic success and their great contributions to their states.

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