This Special Issue has its genesis in a Ford Foundation-funded Institute held at the University of Massachusetts Boston from 12–16 September 2007. The Institute, titled ‘Engaging Islam: Feminisms, Religiosities and Self-Determinations’, brought together 29 scholars and activists from around the world to discuss challenging and provocative issues relating to the intersectionalities of Islam, feminism, secularism and democracy. The participants (10 invited keynote speakers and 19 competitively selected panel presenters) came from and focused their work on a variety of locations, including Bangladesh, Bosnia, Egypt, France, India, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Syria, Turkey and the United States. The discussions drew on the vibrant exchange of perspectives underway within academic and activist networks of transnational feminism. This exchange seeks to disrupt unproductive binaries between secularism and religiosity and to disprove the absolute links often drawn between secularism and democracy, on the one hand, and religiosity and authoritarianism, on the other. It also challenges the negative representations of Muslim women that play a role in imperialist and globalizing projects and that are sometimes found within feminism itself.

Seminal works such as Edward Said’s Orientalism (1979) have indelibly established the long Euro-American history of racializing Arab and Muslim societies. Feminist scholarship has then highlighted the gendered production of colonialist and neo-colonialist discourses and their uses in consolidating current imperialist projects (Ahmed 2005; Lazreg 1994; Abu-Lughod 2001, 2002). In colonial discourses, Muslim women have long been considered as the measure of their societies’ civilization and regard for freedom by the West, and the site of cultural preservation by male authorities in their own societies (Deeb 2006; Moghissi 1999). Their dynamic and
pluralistic realities have too often been rendered invisible or obscured by Orientalist and cultural-nationalist representations globally and locally. Those feminist scholars studying religious texts, in particular, have argued that secular feminist scholarship has been complicit with these Orientalist representations, treating the coupling of faith and feminism, particularly in Muslim nations and communities, with suspicion and condescension (Barlas 2002). More recently, of course, Muslims have become the ‘pariahs of the world’ and the notion of Islamic fundamentalism has acquired a forceful ‘explanatory power’ (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002: 348). It is in this context, and particularly with regard to the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, that influential feminist theorists of transnational politics have noted the enlisting of global feminist discourse in the service of empire (Mohanty 2006; Ware 2006).

By focusing on diverse feminisms in the Muslim world and their changing relations to Islam, in this Special Issue we hope to gain more nuanced understandings of how Muslim women negotiate and respond to intersecting forces of imperialism, patriarchy, globalization and rising religious extremism in diverse contexts. Muslim feminist movements are not exclusively about challenges to patriarchy; they are also about resistances to economic globalization and imperialism. Amina Jamal (2005) reminds us, drawing on the work of Deniz Kandiyoti and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, that to understand Muslim feminisms requires careful attention to historical context and to the differing ways in which women negotiate their relationship to the state and to Western constructions of autonomy, self-determination, rights and identity. The recent victories of Islamic parties in Turkey (2007) and Palestine (2006) have injected fresh energy into analyses of the intersections between religion and politics and religion and feminism, and they have exposed yet again the multiplicity of views as to what constitutes feminism.

Berna Turam’s article in this volume, for example, examines how vocal secular feminists in Turkey have taken up the cause of the state and staunchly protested the public wearing of headscarves by their religiously observant sisters. With two articles on Turkey (the second is by Damla Isik), this Special Issue addresses a rich terrain of interrelated practices and sociopolitical and cultural conditions in a nation often seen as located culturally on the threshold of Europe and Asia. The other three articles feature Bangladesh (Fauzia Ahmed), India (Srimati Basu) and the United States (Mitra Rastegar). Together, the five articles encompass a breadth of nations in which Islam and Muslim feminisms are active forces, and they de-link the usual association of Islam with the Arab world. Before reviewing the articles in more detail, however, we first engage with the existing literature on the intersections of feminism and Islam, exploring in general terms what a feminist lens can offer before focusing on the specific issues of Muslim women’s experiences with regard to faith, rights and democracy, on the one hand, and globalization, neoliberalism and imperialism, on the other.
WHY A FEMINIST LENS ON ISLAM?

Committing to a feminist lens offers us vital insights into constructions of gender and broader intertwined issues of power and inequality within Islam. It allows us to examine Islamic feminisms as forces of resistance, as survival strategies, as foundations for identities, as stimuli for cultural production, and as impetus for psychological and political self-determinations. A feminist lens on Islam also facilitates the unpacking of power relations within and between transnational and local feminist scholarship and praxes, and helps us to imagine and forge more equitable and honest feminist solidarity practices.

The complexity of analysis made possible by a feminist lens is evident, for instance, in the studies of Hamas (the Islamic resistance movement in Palestine) by Islah Jad (2005) and Amal Amireh (2003). Both offer nuanced and complex investigations of Hamas and show the centrality of Israeli occupation to the resurgence of Islam and patriarchy. They seek to decouple Islam from an automatic evocation of patriarchal oppression by examining the ways in which the Occupation emasculates masculinity and therefore contributes to a compensatory assertion of patriarchy. Jad (2005) and Amireh (2003) point to the invocation of the Palestinian woman as reproducer and mother – the vehicle in which Palestinian males will be conceived and nurtured to populate and overwhelm by sheer numbers the Israeli-controlled landscape. Amireh (2003) notes that the sexuality of the Palestinian woman was seen as vulnerable to deployment in the cause of the Israeli occupation. Palestinian women were used by Israeli forces to seduce Palestinian men and recruit them as collaborators with the Israelis (by threatening to expose their sexual transgressions with the Palestinian women if they did not agree to collaborate). Thus, argues Amireh, Palestinian men realized that to counter their vulnerability to seduction ‘two things were necessary’:

a militarization of the intifada and the redomestication of women. The collaboration scare and the ensuing militarization of resistance were accompanied by an aggressive campaign to veil Palestinian women and to remove them from public space . . . Veiling allowed men to assert their power over women by controlling women’s bodies at a time they felt their own male bodies were being violated [by the Israeli forces and prison interrogators].

(Amireh 2003: 760)

In recent work, as yet unpublished, Jad (no date) shows how an immersion in Islam is seen by the men of Hamas to give them the necessary strength to withstand Israeli torture. She writes:

In a booklet addressed to its militant members the movement declared that those who proudly defied their interrogators would be rewarded as though they had died for the glory of Allah. But those who broke under interrogation would never know forgiveness, for they were more than just damaging the existing organization . . . An iron will, the handbook preached, was all one needed
to withstand deprivation, whippings, electric shocks, and threats: ‘We must remember that the enemy’s strength is naught compared with Allah’s grace’.

(Jad no date)

Jad has also written of the systematic way in which Hamas has Islamized Palestinian nationalism and constructed the new modern Islamic woman as one who is ‘highly educated, outspoken, moltazemah (veiled), and modern . . . The veil is seen as a signifier of modernity, since it is different from traditional dress’ (Jad 2005: 177). She observes that Hamas articulated its ‘formal position on gender’ in 1988 (2005: 181) and has, since then, engaged in public forums about the balance between motherhood and activism, shari’a law and women’s rights. In her analysis of the growing influence of Hamas, particularly in Gaza, Jad echoes many observers who see the Islamic party as filling a vacuum by providing basic services such as education, health care and housing. Thus, Jad makes it impossible to separate the increasing Islamization of Palestinian society from the conditions of Occupation. Her feminist approach establishes convincingly the complex interplay among the forces of Israeli occupation, Islam, patriarchy, women’s rights and gender relations.

FAITH, RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

The West views Islamization with alarm, seeing in it an unwelcome link between religion and politics. However, as Abdou Filali-Ansary’s analysis (2003) reminds us, the relationship between faith and politics within and beyond Muslim communities is complex and cannot be viewed simplistically and uniformly as a negative development. Specifically, Filali-Ansary describes a rich tradition of dialogue and dissent within Islam – ‘the breadth, intensity, and sustained character of the debates that have been going on within the Muslim world for over a hundred years, a phenomenon for which there is no contemporary equivalent in any other religious or cultural community’ (2003: 22). This claim underscores most significantly that Islam matters to those who follow it, and it matters not just in an ancillary way, as one facet of a multifaceted life, but rather because it informs and pervades the entirety of one’s way of being in the world. In this regard, Hirschkind and Mahmood’s (2002) resistance to the insistence in the West that religion be confined to the private sphere is worth recalling. The public and the private are, in reality, quite ‘porous’, they note, adding that only certain forms of public religious expression (i.e., expressions of Muslim faith) are deemed problematic by Western societies (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002: 351). In Mahmood’s (2003) ethnographic fieldwork among the women of the mosque movement in Egypt, she finds that:

the distinction between the subject’s real desires and obligatory social conventions – a distinction at the center of liberal, and at times progressive, thought – cannot be
assumed precisely because socially prescribed forms of behavior constitute the conditions for the emergence of the self as such and are integral to it.

(Mahmood 2003: 857)

Likewise, Lila Abu-Lughod’s (2006) contention about what it means to be religious is salient: ‘to know implicitly that you are in the realm of truth about being, about life, about the world, and about morality and to belong to a community built around that’ (2006: 1625). Abu-Lughod cautions against the unquestioned acceptance of the ‘deep secularism’ of liberal feminist thinkers who pit women’s human rights against religious freedom (2006: 1624). She critiques the work of Western feminists such as Susan Okin and Martha Nussbaum for their ‘socially eviscerated notion of religion’ (2006: 1625).

In the context of Pakistan, Amina Jamal (2005) notes that:

‘secular’ for Muslim feminists is a politically charged concept that refers to a contingent relation between state and citizen... It can mean a total separation of politics and religion... or it can entail state intervention to protect vulnerable citizens... Muslim women appear to call into play the role of the state as mediator between religion and politics, and the nature of this role could vary in different contexts.

(Jamal 2005: 69)

Pakistan is a Muslim-majority country, so the call of feminists there for the dismantling of Hudood Ordinances (Islamic laws regulating adultery, rape and the consumption of alcohol) was made with a view to forcing the state to treat all its citizens (women and men) in a uniform way and within the context of the discourse of full citizenship. Zainah Anwar (2005a), however, argues that ‘[r]ejecting religion is not an option for most Muslim women. We are believers, and as such we want to find liberation, truth and justice within our own faith’ (2005a: 232). Anwar is Executive Director of Sisters in Islam, an organization of professional Muslim women in Malaysia who promote the rights of women within an Islamic framework. The work of this organization is exemplary regarding the question of reconciliation of religious, civil and international human rights laws. Sisters in Islam turns to the Qur’an to find the justifications for women’s rights. Anwar noted in a conference on Islamic feminism in 2005 that groups like hers are ‘reclaiming’ Islam for themselves, insisting on a version of it which centuries ago made the revolutionary move of granting women ‘the right to own, inherit or dispose of our own property, the right to divorce, the right to contract agreements’ (Anwar 2005b:). As Azza Basarudin (2007) confirms in an as yet unpublished manuscript:

in the case of [the] Malaysian polity, [the] discursive hermeneutics of Qur’anic exegesis is a strategy born out of necessity, and of the unwavering belief in the unfulfilled promise of gender egalitarianism in Islam. This method of claiming rights offers Muslim women strategic access to participate in religious discourse; in a state where Islam is the battlefield for patriarchal laws and public
Elsewhere in the world, too, Muslim women are making inroads into the world of Qur’anic scholarship and so asserting their authority to advocate for their own rights through a firm grounding in Islamic law. For example, in 2006, fifty women in Morocco were awarded diplomas as imams (religious leaders) by the Islamic Affairs Ministry.

Madhavi Sunder (2005) troubles the seeming disconnect between human rights law and religion by suggesting that, ‘religion *qua* religion is less the problem than is our traditional legal construction of this category’ (2005: 266). Challenging the precept ‘Religion is the Other of Law’, her research demonstrates how women in Muslim societies are engaged in rethinking and reconciling the two in their daily lives through dialogue within the context of religion rather than outside it. Anthropologist Sally Merry has posited that, although culture is often seen as an obstacle to realizing women’s rights in transnational legal platforms, local communities’ perception and articulation of social justice occurs in very different terms. Global human rights law can be an important resource for local social movements even as its application can involve complex processes of translation. Similarly, local stories are appropriated into international human rights language reflecting the ‘double consciousness’ of activists who operate in both transnational and local spheres (Merry 2006: 3).

Interestingly, it is regarding a different, Muslim-majority, geographic context (Bangladesh) that Dina Siddiqi’s research on Alternative Dispute Resolution courts or *shalish* indicates that religious authorities historically were never integral to such institutions. In a paper presented at the Engaging Islam Institute, Siddiqi (2007) argued that religious voices were brought in primarily to bolster the opinion of local elders or to mitigate ‘intractable religious problems’. In recent decades, however, the composition of elites in rural communities has undergone transformation leading to concomitant shifts in the composition and role of the *shalish*. For instance, newer power arrangements include the patronage of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and *mastaans*, or local ‘muscle men’ empowered by party politics (Devine 2008). These newer entities have served to weaken the hold of village elders and landowning aristocracy at a time when socio-economic shifts have made rural communities less dependent on agricultural work. As a result of availing themselves of alternative sources of patronage, marginalized groups have gained access to different mobilizing venues to defy the power of older social hierarchies. In this context, NGOs in particular appear as a threat to traditional power-holders, who in turn have sought out religious leaders to reinforce their own waning authority. Additional factors like the Islamization of politics at the national level and the proliferation of *qawmi* [people’s] *madrassahs* [religious schools], which are financed through ‘Eastern aid’ and...
are known to be more orthodox than the state-sponsored madrassahs, have also enabled local religious leaders – previously not so prominent in the power structures – to become increasingly integrated into social and political spheres. The change in the global media’s characterization of Bangladesh from an historically ‘moderate’ Muslim nation to one on the brink of ‘fundamentalism’ has occurred within this context of shifting social and political landscapes. Feminist critiques of such categorical representations show how religious and cultural practices are defined and deployed selectively by various entities in society for diverse social and political struggles and agendas.

GLOBALISATION, NEOLIBERALISM AND IMPERIALISM

The nexus of religion, development and neo-liberalism also infuses Lamia Karim’s (2004) work on Bangladesh, this time with the focus squarely on NGOs as agents of modernization and democratic social change. Shifting focus to the political economy of capitalist development allows Karim and others to highlight the intersections of colonialism, capitalism, race, class and gender as they discipline disproportionately the labor and the public and private lives of the poor of the third world and women of color. In the context of global Islamophobia, NGO-led capitalist initiatives are celebrated for modernizing and ‘empowering’ poor Muslim women by facilitating their entrance into the market economy as producers and consumers. Karim, however, questions the championing of micro-credit as the ‘magic bullet’ solution to poverty alleviation, based as it is on a progress narrative that obscures the new kinds of social hierarchies and political allegiances being produced locally and globally. The celebration of micro-credit for empowering poor Muslim Bangladeshi women and freeing them from the clutches of indigenous patriarchy occurs simultaneously with the vilification of Muslim men as oppressors and Islam as pre-modern and misogynist. The global neo-liberal discourse of micro-credit does not resonate with the local realities of Muslim women.

Karim’s insistence on viewing NGOs and their vaunted effectiveness against the backdrop of local conditions is particularly helpful when considering the role of NGOs in the context of colonialism. The NGO culture is alive and well, for example, in Palestine, but there is also a noticeable despondency among the workers and volunteers about the ultimate effectiveness of NGO intervention. The Israeli Occupation and its stranglehold on meaningful development must be factored into analyses in order to appreciate the net effect of NGO initiatives. Viewing NGO work through the critical lens provided by Karim prompts us to ask to what extent the NGO presence risks sustaining the Israeli Occupation rather than effectively empowering the Palestinians to tackle, let alone defeat, the conditions of colonialism (Jad 2008: 99–108).

Moreover, both Karim (2004) and Siddiqi (2006) shift the focus from indigenous patriarchy when they point to the ways in which the ‘competition’
of development NGOs with the local clergy and rural elites leads to further exploitation of poor women. As Karim explains:

The work of development NGOs that targeted women as their beneficiaries challenged the authority of rural patriarchy and changed the dynamics of rural power by introducing the NGO as a new patron into the community, and at the same time, by mainstreaming poor women as labor and consumers into the economy. While these NGO programs have created limited opportunities for women and their families to earn a living, they have also created parallel conditions of violence and domination against poor women who are willed into this process not as informed agents but as clients of these NGOs. (Karim 2004: 301)

We have to be careful here not to reproduce a binary opposition between Western feminism as represented by NGOs, on the one hand, and Muslim women as non-feminist clients or anti-feminist critics, on the other. Feminist contentions in the 21st century do not simply involve ‘Western’ and ‘Third World’ feminists in mutually exclusive struggles – if they ever did – but encompass individuals, communities and nations who often come together in complex, even contradictory ways to forge alliances that defy easy categorization.

Amina Jamal (2005) has illuminated the tricky waters navigated by feminists as they steer between neo-imperialist and ‘fundamentalist’ discourses of Islam with regard to women’s status in ‘Islamic contexts’. At a time of militarized war and US empire-building it becomes ever more important to examine carefully the ways in which feminisms are deployed and to strive towards a feminist politics that is free of imperialist collusion. Thus, in discussing the fundamentalization of Pakistan during the years of President Zia ul Haq’s rule, Jamal urges us to consider the global economic, political and historical contexts within which economically despairing young men in Pakistan were socialized into enacting a rigid and inflexible Islam. Jamal’s analysis underscores the constructed nature of fundamentalism, belies the notion of an Islam inherently antagonistic to diverse interpretations, and points to the costs of Western policy toward ‘Islamic contexts’.

Of course, Muslim women and men do not only live in Islamic countries but also within the West and within the heart of Empire. In this regard, Jasbir Puar (2006) has written eloquently about the collusion between queer and nationalist rhetorics in the US to produce an image of the idealized multicultural gay-friendly society, in tension with ‘Orientalist terrorist others’. In such rhetorics, domesticated homosexual bodies provide justification to further nationalist projects that create an aura of US exceptionalism with regards to multiculturalism. Gay Muslim bodies are also co-opted into constructing the image of the progressive welcoming West, where diverse sexual orientations are embraced. Other feminist scholars have drawn similar connections between a ‘global’ feminism that is actually specific to the US and that thrives on locating women’s oppression elsewhere while obfuscating domestic inequities among women (Farrell and McDermott 2005). Both imperialist
feminism and homonationalism are thus deployed in the service of Empire to produce an exceptional US superior to the Orientalist other.

Similarly, Evelyn Alsultany’s (2007) analysis of promotional advertisement campaigns both by the US government and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reveals the limitations of strategies to promote the image (both at home and abroad) of a tolerant country in which Muslims are included as full citizens and enabled to prosper. Mahmood Mamdani’s (2004) trenchant critique of the construction and deployment of the good Muslim/bad Muslim divide by nation-states is worth remembering here. States offer their version of who constitutes a good Muslim and in so doing identify characteristics of a compliant citizenship that will be rewarded. American Muslims, Alsultany’s (2007) analysis underscores, are encouraged to ‘serve the nation through military service [and] work for the government’ (2004: 607).

Taking another example from a Western state, that of Canada, Sherene Razack (2007) analyzes the fierce public debate there in 2004–5 over the proposal from Muslim leaders to use faith-based arbitration (legal under the Arbitration Act of Canada, and used by Jewish communities to adjudicate in matters of commercial dispute and divorce). Specifically, the proposal was to decide family matters according to *shari’a* law. Razack argues persuasively that when feminists (Muslim and non-Muslim) in Canada vociferously declared their opposition to the application of *shari’a* law within the context of the Arbitration Act, they were playing into the hands of a state and a majority population that had already constructed the Muslim man as oppressive and dangerous, and Muslim communities as barbaric: ‘feminist responses helped to sustain a form of governmentality, one in which the productive power of the imperilled Muslim functions to keep in line Muslim communities (Razack 2007: 6). We are reminded that context is everything: the Pakistani women opposing *shari’a* law in the form of the Hudood ordinances, discussed above, did not have to worry about the state co-opting their language in order to police Muslim men. Such, however, is not the case in Canada, a Muslim-minority country. Razack’s discussion points to the risks incurred by feminists who call for the privileging of secular practices over *shari’a* law, especially in the current climate of the hypervisibility of Muslim communities as hotbeds of terrorism

In sum, the authors of the literature we have reviewed here, as well as the authors of the articles comprised in this Special Issue employ a highly nuanced approach to complex issues. They are meticulous in avoiding simplification and in eschewing the desire for ‘cognitive consistency’ (Baxter 2007: 738). In their modes of engagement they could be seen as heeding Abu-Lughod’s (2002) exhortation to be mindful of the complexities inherent in doing scholarship on Muslim societies when the readership for this work is primarily in the West. Abu-Lughod enjoins researchers to be aware of how they frame their narratives, especially those analyzing sensationalized practices like honor killing. The West’s tendency to see the Muslim world as static and unchanging obligates scholars, she emphasizes, to pay careful
attention to complicating and situating their analyses of Muslim societies, and Muslim lives, in nuanced cultural, political and historical frameworks.

OVERVIEW OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The five articles included in this Special Issue show in different ways the pluralist and diverse terrain of Islamic feminisms as they manifest themselves and interact with the complex context shaped by imperialism, patriarchy, globalization and the negotiated meanings of Islam. Mitra Rastegar and Berna Turam focus particularly on the role of the state, and specifically its claim to secularism and the implications of such a claim for feminist politics. Mitra Rastegar’s article, ‘Constituting “American Islam”: Secularism, Patriotism and the Gender Litmus Test’, shows how the US government enters into the discourse on Islam and professions of faith in order to delineate those forms of worship and performances of religious identity that it finds acceptable. Rastegar offers a valuable complication of the US government’s attempt to position its discourse on Islam within the rhetoric of multiculturalism and diversity. She shows how the purportedly secular State is actually continuously engaging with religion, seeking to construct versions of faith that meet its own political, imperialist interests, especially in the context of the war on terror. Rastegar demonstrates, through analysis of a number of official speeches and documents, how the US has been active in advocating and shaping a ‘reformed Islam’, one that it claims can (only) truly exist in the free and tolerant United States and which is best capable of fighting terrorism and ‘untrue’ Islam.

The place of women in this reconstructed debate is central. The pseudo-secular US nation-state projects itself as protecting the real and free pious Muslim woman, depoliticizing her hijab (headscarf) while guaranteeing her ability to wear it as her legitimate private right. This shifts the focus from the patriarchal family as the locus of Muslim life in the US to the ‘devout, but liberated, Muslim women who speaks for herself’. In the context of such a state-promoted discourse, Rastegar argues that Muslim American women play a key role in either upholding or challenging this rhetoric of an exceptionalized American Islam. Her article thus offers a valuable intervention in the debate about the engagement of all secular states with religion and enables, for example, a more complicated understanding of the situations in France and Turkey, with their fierce historical commitment to secularism. In this context, Saba Mahmood (2006) has rightly observed that:

Apart from the constitutive role that religious movements and institutions have played in crafting the political culture of these nations [the United States, France, and Britain], . . . the ongoing regulation of religious life through juridical and legislative means suggests a far more porous relationship than the doctrine of secularism suggests.

(Mahmood 2006: 325)
Berna Turam’s article, ‘Turkish Women Divided by Politics: Secularist Activism versus Pious Non-Resistance’, takes us to Turkey, to a different domain where the secular state shapes the feminist-Islam debate, albeit inadvertently. Long considered a moderate Muslim nation by European and United States governments, Turkey presents the world with the paradox of a Muslim-majority country (over 90 per cent of Turks are Muslim) banning the use of the hijab, or headscarf, in public institutions of higher education. Moreover, the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, from the Islamic party currently in power, has been more democratic and has facilitated closer ties with Europe than his secular predecessors. Thus Turkey, as a nation, disrupts in compelling fashion the equation of secularism with democracy and religiosity with authoritarianism. It is marked, instead, by an ‘authoritarian secularism’ (Mabokela and Seggie 2008). On 30 July 2008, Erdogan and his Islamic party, though they narrowly missed being banned from political activity for five years, were nonetheless warned by the Constitutional Court of Turkey that their policies were undermining the secular principles of the Turkish republic articulated in 1923 by its founder Kemal Ataturk. The Islamic party’s public financing was severely restricted.

In Turkey, then, the state has refused to engage with Islam, let alone reform it. Further, the democratic arrival of Islamic parties to power was perceived by secular feminists and others to pose a serious threat to the secularism of the state, a threat that became increasingly fixated around the issue of the hijab. Turam shows how the secularist feminists picked up where the undemocratic state has left off, as these women led the attack against the right of observant Muslim women to cover their hair in public institutions and functions. The observant Muslim women, meanwhile, have largely been reluctant to dialogue either with secular feminists or the state in raising women-specific issues, prompting the question of whether the politics of non-engagement by Muslim women could be considered to constitute a feminist response. The issue of disengagement from the public political sphere in turn sheds new light on the contested debate within feminisms on the different form and content of women’s resistance, and the extent to which the politics around the hijab can mask larger questions related to class, citizenship rights and equality.

Turam’s argument about the political non-engagement of Muslim women offers a useful counterpoint to Sema Genel and Kerem Karaosmanoglu’s (2006) study of headscarves in Turkey as expressions of individualism, rather than a form of collective subordination to religion. They observe that: ‘since the early 1990s, Islamic identity in urban Turkey has emancipated itself from a feeling of “minority” … and has achieved an empowered feeling of self-confidence, declaring itself openly on the streets of modern upmarket districts within the city’ (Genel and Karaosmanoglu 2006: 473). No longer can the secular public ghettoize observant Muslims in the new uniformly consumerist Turkey, as the Islamists have gained economic power...
and purchasing capacity. Islamic capital has created alternate spaces of consumption, where luxury may be enjoyed without compromising religious beliefs. The new Islamic Turkish woman revels in the choices open to her in these ‘alternative shopping malls . . . alternative restaurants, alternative newspapers and TV stations, and alternative holiday resorts’ (Genel and Karaosmanoglu 2006: 478–9), where one can purchase special swimsuits and enjoy the comfort of a non-alcoholic entertainment space and gender-segregated beaches. Genel and Karaosmanoglu are optimistic that young headscarved women are forcing a reconceptualization of what it means to be religious and observant. Their presence as purchasers and their visible independence as consumers of capitalism’s diverse goods are prompting their secular sisters to see them anew. Turam’s article in this Special Issue thus adds to the analysis of Genel and Karaosmanoglu in providing us with a kaleidoscopic vision of Turkish society at this particularly volatile moment of national character formation.

Srimati Basu’s article, ‘Separate and Unequal: Muslim Women and Un-uniform Family Law in India’, engages with the question of how to reconcile legally the religious rights of minorities within ‘secular’ institutional practices that promise equality to all citizens. By focusing on India, where the author collected rich and original empirical ethnographic data, Basu exposes the dilemma of how best to protect Muslim women’s rights in the context of a secular multiethnic state in which Muslims are a minority facing racism and prejudice. This is a question that pertains not only to India, but affects multiethnic states globally, as evidenced by discussions in Canada and Britain on the relationship between state law and the religious law of minority communities, particularly as they affect women. Basu argues that while Muslim personal family law has been used, challenged and advocated by different parties in an attempt to protect community rights, its impact on women’s individual rights cannot be assessed in dissociation from the context of who gets to define these laws, the degree of patriarchal control within the community, and the economic and political position of the community within the state. Basu’s article shows, in an echo of the work of Razack (2007) discussed above, that though scholars and feminists may insist that women should not have to make a choice between their community and their gender rights, the reality for Muslim women in different countries today is not that clear-cut. Their situation is intensely contested and their rights, as much as their identity, are continuously being negotiated.

Muslim women are increasingly asserting their agency through their activism as much as through their piety, seeing in Islam a positive force for dealing proactively not just with the state but also with the impact of globalization, be it on labor politics and/or patriarchal structures. Damla Isik’s article, ‘On Sabir and Agency: The Politics of Pious Practice in Konya’s Weaving Industry’, located in Turkey, analyzes how economic actions and relationships are situated and given meaning within the context of pious ethical practice. Isik traces ethnographically how the Muslim woman uses
sabir, the practice of patience, to remain in the labor market, albeit the informal one, as a means to empower herself and her family in a context of unequal economic relations with the merchant who has subcontracted her work. Isik shows how exploitation and empowerment coexist in the construction of women weavers’ identity. These informal working situations, she argues, are impacted as much by women’s pious choices (not imposed behaviors) as by economic forces.

Finally, Fauzia Ahmed’s article, ‘Hidden Opportunities: Islam, Masculinity and Poverty Alleviation’, further challenges the patriarchal interpretation of Islam as an obstacle to poverty alleviation and gender empowerment. Ahmed shows how Bangladeshi women use Muslim spirituality as a tool for gaining mobility and access to the labor market. Her paper is particularly insightful in discussing the role that Islam plays in the construction of different masculinities. Muslim masculinities are rarely appreciated, let alone understood, although they directly impact on, as well as are shaped by, Muslim female empowerment. They are key to understanding how men can influence other men in improving women’s agency and changing patriarchal structures. And they are particularly important in understanding how to improve the effectiveness of development programs geared towards female labor empowerment.

Feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) has argued that much of the literature on globalization has marked the centrality of race, class and gender in critiquing global capitalist development, but that racialized gender still remains largely an unmarked terrain. The political economy of capitalist development brings into sharp focus the intersections of colonialism, capitalism, race, class and gender as they discipline disproportionately the labor and the public and private lives of the poor of the third world and women of color. Together, Ahmed’s and Isik’s analyses defy hegemonic representations of poor Muslim women either as ‘empowered clients’ or as victims of globalization and development schemes, and they illuminate how these women negotiate and (re)shape formal and informal economic spheres through their multi-faceted participation.

As editors of this Special Issue, we believe that these five articles provide a glimpse into the rich landscape of scholarship on Islam, feminism and self-determinations. Taken together, they represent an important contribution to the ongoing, vibrant and context-specific work of women around the world as they engage with Islam, the state and other structures of power.

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Notes

1 Qawmi madrassahs in Bangladesh are historically linked to a religious institution established in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, following the failed Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in British India. Thousands of madrassahs are attached to this institution across South Asia. These are privately funded by Gulf Arab states and Bangladeshis residing in the Middle East and the UK, unlike the state-funded Aliya Moderesin Madrassah, and they follow the orthodox curriculum of the Deoband institution. Initially established as an anti-colonial enterprise, the Deoband school and Qawmi madrassahs teach primarily religious texts and adhere to orthodox interpretation of the shari'a. For a detailed discussion see Karim (2004).

2 In this context, Sabiha Sumar’s 2003 film Khamosh Pani, screened at the Engaging Islam Institute, shows that in contrast to younger men in Pakistan, their elders practiced a more compassionate Islam. See, e.g., Arora 2005.

References


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