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What All Americans Should Know about Women in the Muslim World: An Introduction

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Abstract
This brief introduction to the "What All Americans Should Know About Women in the Muslim World" series provides information about women in the Muslim world, why they are important for Americans to understand, some challenges that arise in the study of Muslim women, and what these particular papers bring to bear on the topic.

Keywords
Islam, women, Orientalism, feminism, women's movements

Disciplines
Anthropology | Gender and Sexuality | Islamic Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Politics and Social Change | Race and Ethnicity | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Sociology of Religion

Comments
This is an introduction to the What All Americans Should Know about Women in the Muslim World project from several years of Professor Amy Evrard's course, *ANTH 218: Islam and Women.*

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What All Americans Should Know about Women in the Muslim World: An Introduction

by Amy Young Evrard

For years I had hoped to write a book about women in the Muslim world and translate their diverse and complex worlds, practices, beliefs, experiences, challenges, and hopes into terms that all Americans could understand. When I tell a stranger that my research has been on women's rights and Islam in the Middle East/North Africa region, I invariably get a (sometimes heated) response that Muslim women have no rights, status, happiness, freedom, independence, and so on. Given the United States' deep entanglement in the Islamic world these days, I have often thought that there is no more important topic to write about for a popular audience.

But the demands of teaching and research throughout and beyond the period of earning tenure at Gettysburg College have made this goal seem increasingly unattainable. In the meantime, I have regularly taught an anthropology course entitled "Islam and Women". The students bring a variety of backgrounds and experiences to the course. Some know nothing about Islam and women, while some know a little. Some have Muslim friends and family members or are Muslim themselves, whereas some have never interacted with any Muslims. Some are religious, while some do not understand why religion is important to anyone, much less a Muslim. Some have thought a great deal about the complexities of issues related to women, while others have not. Although not all students in the class are American, they all live in the United States and are subject to the pervasive images of Islam and women that exist in the American media and public discourse. In short, the students as a whole have useful expertise and perspective to bring to the table.

Noting the quality and thoughtfulness of the final papers I have received each semester, it finally dawned on me that I did not need to write *What All Americans Should Know about Women in the Muslim World*. My students were already writing it! So in Spring 2015 and Spring 2016, for their final assignment, I asked students to write a potential chapter for a series of that title. I told them that I

would select the best or most compelling chapters to include in this series to be published in *The Cupola*, an open-access platform for sharing the best work of Gettysburg College students, faculty, and staff. Although all of the papers provided a good response to the assignment, those included in this series are the most appropriate in terms of the information they convey and the perspective they present to the audience.

The following introduction provides information about women in the Muslim world, why they are important for Americans to understand, some challenges that arise in the study of Muslim women, and what these particular papers bring to bear on the topic.

Who Are Muslim Women?

The most important thing to know when reading this set of papers is that there is no typical Muslim woman. The starting point of many of the papers is that Americans tend to have a singular picture of the Muslim woman in mind: veiled from head to toe, submissive to men, carefully hidden in the house, uneducated, and perhaps fanatically religious. In fact, to address one of these stereotypes, a woman's decision to veil varies greatly across the Muslim world. There are only two Muslim countries where women are required to veil in public, Saudi Arabia and Iran, although in many Muslim societies and communities this is a common practice. Veiling can represent class and marital status; traditionally, veiling was a sign of higher-class status (although this has changed) and something that women tended to do as they grew older. Now veiling is also a sign of identity and resistance among younger women. In some societies veiling takes the form of a covered head and long robe, while in others a headscarf is more common. Some women veil because they feel Islam requires it; others feel that religion asks women (and men) to be modest but not necessarily to veil. Some women feel that veiling protects them from unwanted male attention and sexual harassment, while others feel that women cannot be equal to men as long as there is any requirement or

expectation that they hide their bodies. In short, there are a variety of perspectives on this issue held by Muslim women themselves. Generally Muslim women are perplexed that non-Muslim Westerners make the veil such a focus of attention when there are other, much more serious issues to be addressed for women around the world, whether Muslim or not: education, development, legal reform, violence, and so forth.

Muslim women also represent a wide variety of ethnic and national identities. Although many Americans may build their image of the typical Muslim women on what they know of the Middle East, most Muslims live outside the Middle East, with Indonesia being the most populous Muslim-majority country and with substantial Muslim populations in South Asia and Africa as well. As Islam spread throughout the world beginning in the seventh century, ethnic groups and societies adapted to new Islamic laws, traditions, and practices in different ways. Likewise, Islam mixed with but did not wipe out local customs. Thus we see a wide range of customs and laws that affect women's lives across the Muslim world. For example, there are Muslim ethnic groups such as the Minangkabau of Indonesia that are matrilineal (meaning that identity and inheritance are passed from a mother to her children) and did not take on the patrilineal aspects of Islam (which generally standardized a system by which name, inheritance, and religious identity are passed from a father to his children). Many scholars and Muslims argue that the family and cultural system instituted by Islam was an improvement over others existing in the Arabian Peninsula and greater region at that time, which included female infanticide and unregulated slavery. In the early years after the death of Mohammed, attitudes toward women and the family were heavily - and negatively - influenced by the cultural practices of empires conquered by the Muslims, where women were bought and sold as slaves and influential men kept women in harems (Ahmed 1992). In short, Islam, like any other religion, grew and continues to exist within cultural contexts, and there is a dynamic relationship between religion and culture. Thus Islam may look quite different to a Saudi woman, a Nigerian

woman, an American woman, a Malaysian woman, and a Swedish woman who has converted to Islam.

Additionally, there are multiple sects of Islam. The major split familiar to Americans is that between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, which began as a dispute over the succession to Mohammed's leadership of the community and has now become a set of cultural and political differences that, in some places and historical periods, has led to violence. There are sub-sects within these, or groups that follow different emphases within Islam. For example, Sufis are the mystical practitioners of Islam who seek oneness with God through a variety of practices, including the famous meditation movements of the whirling dervishes. Sufis are seen as heretical by certain more orthodox Sunni groups and have faced persecution in some places, whereas in other societies Sufism has been infused into mainstream Islamic practice. In short, then, Islam may look quite different to Muslim women in Syria today, for example, depending on whether they are Sunni, Shi'a, Alawi, Druze, Sufi, or from another sect or sub-sect within Islam. Additionally, of course, many self-identified Muslims are what we might call "secular", seeing Islam as a cultural identity but not necessarily a religious one. It is possible to find a Muslim woman who does not practice Islam but wears a headscarf because it is culturally or politically meaningful to her, just as it is possible to find a devout Muslim woman who does not cover her head at all.

Muslim women comprise some of the most educated and least educated people in the world, as well some of the wealthiest and poorest women in the world. This is the area of most extreme variability across the Muslim world. For example, among Muslim-majority nations, Tajikistan has a 99.7 percent literacy rate for women, whereas its neighbor to the South, Afghanistan, has a rate of 24.2 percent, with Egypt representing the middle rung at 65.4 percent (CIA World Factbook). Likewise, in the Arabian Peninsula alone, Saudi Arabia has some of the richest women in the world (many of them in the royal family, but also business leaders such as Lubna Olayan, the CEO of one

of Saudi Arabia's largest conglomerates). Its next door neighbor Yemen, by contrast, was ranked lowest of all nations included in the Global Gender Gap Index Report (World Economic Forum 2014), largely due to poverty, which affects maternal health, women's labor participation, and literacy. These vast differences in education and income, as well as religious sect, ethnicity, and numerous other factors discussed above, suggest an important question: is the category "Muslim women" even a useful one?

What is the Role of Islam in Women's Lives?

The major argument of this article should be apparent by now: there is great diversity among Muslim women. That diversity exists when it comes to the various roles that Islam plays in women's lives as well. Some women are devout Muslims, some women are secular Muslims, some women are atheists and only culturally Muslim, some women want nothing to do with Islam, and for some women Islam is one of many reference points that guide their choices and actions. This diversity can be illustrated in many issues related to women, for example the diversity of women's movements around the Muslim world (defining "women's movements" as any kind of organized effort to address concerns of women *as* women).

One category of women's movement comprises organizations that justify their calls for legal and political change through international, secular sources such as CEDAW (the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women), instead of or in addition to Islamic texts. These women may be devout Muslims as individuals, but they see some value in positioning women's rights outside of any religious framework. This broad description fits the women's rights organizations that I wrote about in *The Moroccan Women's Rights Movement* (2014). These movements are often termed "feminist" or "secular feminist", although these terms are not

perfect ones because "feminism" is a complex term that means different things to different people and is not always accepted by women's groups in the Muslim world.

A quite different category of women's movements includes organizations that justify their calls for legal and political change through Islamic sources, such as the Qur'an and the Hadith (the compilation of accounts, from a variety of sources, of the words and actions of Mohammed). Such women's movements are commonly termed "Islamic feminists". There is great diversity within this category as well. For one, these organizations may be more or less political; some are attached to an Islamist political party or movement, and others are independent of politics and more focused on personal piety among women and improving their family and community life. Both of these types of movements exist in Morocco as well. Many such groups are centered on the act of interpreting the Qur'an and the Hadith and trying to form interpretations that have not been tainted by the masculinist or even misogynistic traditions through which they have been interpreted in the past. They tend to be critical to varying degrees of *fiqh*, which Westerners gloss as "shariah", the compilation of centuries of efforts by Islamic legal scholars to form laws and recommendations based on their interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith. In other words, many such women's groups are reformist in nature, seeking to throw out old interpretations and reinterpret Islamic texts for contemporary applications.

Still other women's movements in the Islamic world are not primarily about legal and political rights at all; instead, they focus on such issues as development, poverty, educational and work opportunities for women, health, and other on-the-ground issues. For individuals and organizations in these movements, Islam may be important or not. For example, many Islamist groups channel a great deal of money into building schools and hospitals and providing seed money for entrepreneurial activities, as a way of addressing poverty or filling in the gaps where state welfare programs end. Within such groups, there is great attention to requirements of charity and kindness

within Islam. By contrast, there are women's groups growing out of a socialist political tradition who draw on Marxist thought to affirm the need to rally women and men around poverty and unemployment issues. These actions and discourses draw on Islam very little, if at all. And there are lots of women's groups in between.

For many Muslim women, accusations by Americans and other outsiders about Islam's subjugation of women ring false; instead, they see women's problems as the result of poverty, conflict, political oppression, lack of economic opportunities, and a wide range of other factors that have little to do with Islam itself. For some, Islam is the solution to these problems: if the Muslim community becomes more pious, demands political leadership that truly reflects Muslim values, and enacts Muslim forms of justice and charity, then all will be well. For others, Islam does not offer a solution to these problems, which must be addressed instead through legal, political, and economic reform. For others still, Islam is one of the causes of these problems, as men and governments are able to use interpretations of Islamic texts and traditions to oppress women (and men).

Islam can play a variety of roles in this one particular area of social and political life: women's movements. Likewise, we can imagine the diversity in how individuals, families, and communities feel that Islam is or is not important to their daily choices, actions, and relationships.

Why Should Americans Know Anything about Women in the Muslim World?

The U.S. is part of the Muslim world - an important part. Although it is difficult to know for sure because the U.S. census does not record religious affiliation, the most recent research carried out by the Pew Research Center places the Muslim population at around 3.3 million, or around one percent of the American population (Mohamed 2016). This community plays a much larger role in the American political and social imagination than these numbers might suggest, however, with seemingly continuous coverage in the media and online of American fears of Islam and its presence

in the U.S. Some of those fears relate to what may be taught in Islamic schools and at mosques on Friday afternoon, as well as the construction of additional mosques and Islamic community centers. Others are about shariah courts and how Muslims may increasingly demand that their community be ruled by shariah - or that it be imposed eventually on all Americans. Non-Muslim Americans notice veiled women - or hear about controversies surrounding the veil, such as when a Muslim woman wishes to have her driver's license photo taken with her headscarf on - and fret about them.

What many Americans do not realize is that Islam has existed in North America for centuries, beginning with the arrival of enslaved persons from Africa (Diouf 2013). Some of them struggled to continue to practice Islam; others converted to Christianity. A much later wave of African-descended people in America adopted Islam during the 20th century, many of them drawn to the Nation of Islam and its reversal of racial essentialism. Black women were attracted in particular ways to Islamic discourse within this period, feeling that Islam would strengthen men's roles within their families and de-objectify women as sexual objects (Rouse 2004. Most members of the Nation of Islam converted to mainstream Sunni Islam beginning in the 1970s and emphasized the racial equality at the heart of Islam's ethical system. They blended more fluidly into communities that included non-African-American Muslims, including those from immigrant communities. Today the majority of U.S. Muslims are recent immigrants or their descendants, with many of them arriving in the U.S. since 1992 (Mohamed 2016). Immigrants from Iran, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, and other countries have formed large Muslim communities, particularly in Southern California, Michigan, New Jersey, and Texas. These Muslims tend to mirror or slightly exceed the average American in terms of education and income level.

The United States is also an important country in terms of serving as a place where many Muslims have been much freer than in their home countries to express publicly their critical perspectives on Islam or the politics of Muslim-majority countries. The United States has become

important in nurturing ideas about Islamic reform. Particularly among academics, books and papers are published that call for new interpretations of Islamic texts and criticize Islamic fanaticism or the misuse of Islamic doctrines by authoritarian governments. Hundreds of books have been published in the last couple of decades by and about women, discussing the relationship of Islam and women.

And, of course, the United States plays an important role in the Muslim world through its foreign policy, military interventions, distributions of aid, and other actions and policies. There is no way to address all of these interventions in this brief introduction, and I feel certain that American readers are already aware of them and hold opinions about the benefits and drawbacks of each of them. What is more important to mention here is that, despite this inarguably significant role, American policy makers are, generally speaking, woefully ignorant of the Muslim world: its history, people, sectarian differences, and religious practices, and the lives and experiences of women. I hope that increasing knowledge of women in the Muslim world on the part of the American people themselves will help all of us do a better job of influencing and holding these policy makers accountable for their decisions.

What Are the Challenges to Understanding Islam and Women?

In 1978, Edward Said wrote a groundbreaking book entitled *Orientalism* that has been influential in many fields since, including studies of Muslim women. Among his many thought-provoking points, he claims that anyone in the West who seeks to understand "the East" (which includes what Americans refer to as the "Middle East" and the "Islamic world") does so through the lens of orientalism, which refracts these geographical areas of the world through the political, military, economic, and other interests of the West. When Americans think about Muslim women as today, in other words, our thoughts about them have been guided by historical and contemporary American projects in the Middle East and Islamic world: the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, for

example, or the long-standing desire to secure oil and oversight of national politics in Iran and Saudi Arabia, for another. In other words, according to this perspective, it is no coincidence that we have become acutely interested in the veiling practices of Muslim women, or the occurrence of such things as stoning of adulterers in Iran or female genital cutting practices of women in Egypt or the excesses of the Taliban in Afghanistan. We emphasize these things because we can then see our military, political, and economic projects as "saving" women or "civilizing" these societies.

Other perspectives present additional challenges to our understanding of Muslim women. Western feminists, for example, until somewhat recently the leaders and exemplars of global feminism, have pursued agendas of legal and political change that make certain practices carried out against women in the Muslim world seem particular egregious. Such feminists have long sought a particular type of "equality" requiring that identical laws be applied to males and females. This vision of equality has come into conflict with another type of "equality" espoused by many Muslim (and other) communities, in which males and females are seen as playing complementary rather than identical roles in the family and community. From this latter point of view, laws were developed in many Muslim-majority countries that set men as head of the household and tasked women with obeying and respecting their husbands. In exchange, men were legally required to provide for their wives financially. From the point of view of most Western feminists, these laws have allowed all manner of abuse to be carried out by men against their wives, so "Islamic law" became a target of their demands for change. The orientalist perspective addresses Muslim women as an exotic "other", trapped behind her veil and in need of liberation by American policies. Similarly, the feminist perspective emphasizes that Muslim women can be liberated through legal and political reform.

Another perspective that is key within the Islam and Women course is the notion of agency. "Agency" is one of those jargon-y academic words that is used everywhere but either left undefined by authors or subject to debate over numerous highly technical and specific definitions. Generally

the term refers to a woman's ability to act and make choices for herself. For Muslim women, choices are expanded and limited according to many contextual factors. One of these is her family situation, as a daughter or wife or sister whose choices depend in part on others. One of these is her community situation, where group norms and expectations may influence her choices to varying degrees. One of these is her education level and access to opportunities that allow her to be more or less financially independent. Another of these contextual factors is the political situation in which any particular Muslim woman lives, which may protect or limit the rights and choices of all citizens, including women. And we could go on from there. The point is that each individual woman's agency must be considered within her own set of circumstances, and can depend on her own assessment of her situation as well.

Of course, these questions about agency apply to all women and all men in the world, and it is important to remember that, for Muslim women, such issues may have a lot or little to do with Islam as a religion. The political situation of Muslim woman may be related to Islam, in that she lives within a society governed by Islamic law, or it may not be related to Islam, in that she represents a minority immigrant group subject to oppression and hostility by the majority. Family members may justify their control of her choices and mobility through their understanding of Islamic texts or through general cultural expectations that parents are in control of their children. A lack of educational and work opportunities can be related to expectations that some Muslims have about women's role in the family, but they are also tied, again, to socioeconomic and political structures. So one major challenge to understanding women in the Muslim world is to assess to what extent "Islam" is a factor in women's lives at all. Sometimes Islam is an important factor and sometimes it is a straw man, and sometimes Islam is so tightly interwoven with cultural, political, economic, and other phenomena that its exact role cannot easily be worked out.

Another important contextual factor to be considered is conflict. Millions of Muslim women are living in conflict zones, leading to a congeries of issues, including poverty, lack of infrastructure, and instability. Conflict anywhere in the world tends to breed violence against women, whether sexual assault by military personnel or rebels, domestic violence at the hands of husbands who are angered and frustrated by their own victimization in conflict, or poverty that results from losing a male head of household to death, capture, or imprisonment. Research has shown that conflict can lead men to have a more conservative view toward women's roles in their community and to police women's mobility, sexuality, dress, and deportment. Thus many of the issues related to women living in conflict zones in the Muslim world may have less to do with Islam than with militarization and violence.

There is no doubt that Muslim women face a variety of issues that are of concern to students in the Islam and Women course. Given that this is the case, one of the challenges to understanding Muslim women that students in the course discuss most heatedly involves the idea that Muslim women need to be "saved". These are the kinds of questions that we consider together as a class, and that appear in many of the papers in this series, influenced by the work of anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2013, 2002):

- <u>What if women do not feel they need to be "saved"?</u> In other words, Muslim women may not feel there is a problem from which they need to be rescued by outsiders to their community.
- <u>What if women do not like what they are being "saved" *to*?</u> Muslim women may disagree with or about the proposed solutions to their perceived problems.
- <u>What if women feel that they can "save" themselves?</u> There are multiple social and political movements, intellectual projects, and individual efforts across the Muslim world to improve

women's lives and address the issues that Americans often raise about the plight of Muslim women.

- What are the costs of "saving" Muslim women? It is important to consider the effects of military, political, legal, economic, and other kinds of efforts to address women's issues. For example, Muslim women may feel that the harm of placing them in long-term, ongoing conflict outweigh the benefits of imposing legal and political changes that benefit them.

In sum, there are numerous challenges to the study of women in the Muslim world, both theoretical and practical. But Americans and others must try to understand women in the Muslim world nonetheless, given that the consequences of ignorance and misunderstanding have such dire effects on individuals and societies, including the United States.

What Do These Papers Contribute?

These papers make contributions at several different levels. First of all, they provide interesting and often surprising information about women in the Muslim world and certain challenges they face: in education, in medical care, in their marriages, in the law, in religious practice, and in political office. They include a range of countries from multiple regions of the world, including the Middle East/North Africa, North America and Europe, and South Asia.

Some of the papers examine the stereotypes and perspectives held by many Americans about Islam and women, how they are furthered by the media and political discourse, and how they affect Muslim women both in the United States and around the world. The media is an important purveyor of stereotypes about Muslim women. These students' lives are centered on media in ways that previous generations of Americans could never have imagined. Thus, students are both more inured and sensitive to media than older Americans, and very concerned about how most of what

they understand about Islam and women is filtered through various forms of media and communications technology.

Some of the papers are a platform for students to share their own process of thinking about issues for women in the Muslim world that particularly troubled them. In some cases, students attempt to make sense of an issue that was difficult for them to understand at first. In other cases, further study led students to feel increasingly that Muslim women do face particularly issues as Muslims and that Americans should not only understand but act to change these problems. Accordingly, some papers take a prescriptive stance, attempting to lay out a plan for change.

These papers provide information and perspective. Writing them was a starting point for these students, and I hope readers will take them as a starting point as well, an opportunity to begin to understand the complexity of the label "Muslim women". Readers may not agree with all of the students' analyses and conclusions (as I myself do not), but I guarantee that readers will learn a great deal from each of these papers. Given the United States' role and involvement in the Muslim world, its large domestic Muslim population, and its global leadership position, I believe it is the responsibility of all Americans to know more about Islam and the lives and experiences of Muslim women.

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