Introduction

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Throughout the centuries, Muslim students have been known to travel great distances to learn from renowned scholars. One scholar whom students used to seek out, often undertaking long journeys in order to do so, was Aīsha bint abd al-Hādī (723–816), a woman scholar considered to be one of the most knowledgeable of her time about the *ḥadīth* (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him]).¹ One of her students was Ibn Hajar, famous for his book on *ḥadīth*, *Fath al-Bārī*. In fact, Ibn Hajar records having had fifty-three women teachers.²

Imam ash-Shafīʿī, one of the greatest scholars of Islamic law, used to attend the lectures about *ḥadīth* given by the renowned woman scholar Nafisa bint al-Hasan (d. 208/824)³ in al-Fustat (Cairo). Shuhda bint Abi Nasr Ahmad al-Ibari (d. 574/1178), who was described by biographers as “the calligrapher, the great authority on *ḥadīth*, and the pride of womanhood,”⁴ used to lecture to large audiences in one of the main mosques in Baghdad.⁵

These days, if a Muslim woman takes to the podium, it is not usually to teach others as an authority on the Islamic sciences. More likely, it is to give a lecture about the “rights of Muslim women,” among which she might mention a “right” to education. Such is the decline of the status and role of Muslim women in many contemporary Muslim communities that female education is something that needs to be *argued* for.

Knowledge of the *hadith*, which represent the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), is one of the most important branches of knowledge in the Islamic sciences. As a source of Islamic law and guidance, the *hadith* are second only to the Qur'an (which is considered by Muslims to be the divine word of God). There is an important connection between being able to acquire and pass on this knowledge and women's role in the community in other capacities. For to be an authority on one of the most important sources of sacred law is to be an equal partner in the maintenance and (re)production of a community at its most foundational level—preserving a political, social, and cultural community; its way of life, formation, and identity. To remove women from this aspect of community maintenance is to signal their subservience to men, and then to give this subservience religious sanction by maintaining that women have no part to play in this, the most important of roles.

As the title of this book signifies, *Muslim Women Activists* is not a book about contemporary women scholars of *hadith*, though I wish it were. Rather, it is a book about Muslim women who seek to restore their position in the community, as equal partners in its maintenance and (re)production with men.

The North American context renders the link between becoming an authority on an Islamic science and becoming an activist somewhat different from what it might have been in the premodern Muslim world, and also from what it might be in other contemporary Muslim communities, especially Arabic-speaking ones. For to become an authority in the religious sciences, a scholar needs first of all to be fluent in Arabic. Acquiring Arabic in the North American context is a challenge for most Muslims, even if one is a child born to Arabic immigrant parents. The next challenge is to find instructors qualified to teach Islamic sciences, and a further hurdle is to find the time to study the Islamic science—always an “extra-curricular activity” here, since in the Western context, one must acquire the schooling and the career path guaranteed to reproduce life here.

But civil society in the West provides a lot of avenues for people to be involved in activities outside the dominant ones of work and family. Some people involve themselves in sports or hobbies, and others devote themselves to some kind of volunteer activity aimed at helping someone or improving something. Still others dedicate themselves to more political causes, and join Greenpeace, Amnesty International, or a political party. Muslim women are no different from their non-Muslim counterparts in this regard, and it is Muslim women's activism that is the subject of this book.

“Activism,” as Rose Hamid reminds us in her essay, carries with it a negative connotation in mainstream North American society. So too in Australia, where I grew up. I used to be leery, as many people still are, of “activists”—they were the ones who were “troublemakers,” “complainers,” or “fringe radicals” out to destroy the fabric of decent society. My involvement in various causes for justice has changed the way I perceive activism, and in this book, I mean by activism something positive, good, and decent. While it is true that sometimes an activist has to be a “troublemaker,” it is also true that to stand up for what is right requires making trouble for those perpetrating injustice. How could it be otherwise? I think of activists as people committed to a “cause,” to something they believe will benefit humanity and that requires struggle and self-sacrifice (of time and resources). I see activism as doing something concrete for the sake of a social good. One of the blessings of living in the West is its open political and cultural environment; there are an infinite number of causes to which people have the freedom to devote themselves. Indeed some of these causes are contradictory—the right to life versus the right to abortion being a stark example.

In contemporary Western societies, Muslim activists have tended to focus their energies inward rather than outward. The center of attention has been maintaining an Islamic identity for the community and resisting the powerful centripetal force of assimilation into a largely secular environment. Thus fund-raising to build places of worship and then Islamic schools has been a priority. This has been changing over the last ten years, however. Converts, the second generation, and African Americans (whose practice and maintenance of Islamic communities in North America predates the large immigrant influx of the 1960s)⁶ are joining together for more outward focused activism: media and political advocacy, and social services. Having grown up in North America, these groups tend to understand the context better than the first generation of immigrants, and they have a confidence that allows them to contemplate activism outside their subcultural, subreligious milieu. Of course, the commitment to Islam held by the younger generation, coupled with the growing presence of converts in the Muslim community, is testament to the success of the efforts of immigrant and African American groups to preserve and pass on Islamic identities: the focus on mosque and school building was an essential ingredient that has paved the way for activism in other fields.

The relatively unchanged nature of the negative stereotypes of Muslims held by mainstream Americans and Canadians and perpetrated in the main-

stream media has compelled Muslim activists to reach out to their neighbors, colleagues, and fellow citizens to impress upon them the decency of Islam as a religion and the positive contribution the activists believe Islam can make to the fabric of North American societies. This has been especially necessary after the public demonizations of Islam and the rise in hate-related anti-Islamic crimes and Islamophobia in the United States and Canada since the tragic events of 9/11. Sadly, too much energy is spent by Muslims combating and dealing with negative stereotypes rather than working toward alleviating more pressing issues of social justice, like the poverty, homelessness, and drug addiction that plague most modern cities in North America.

Why focus on Muslim women activists? There are countless men as well as women who spend precious time and resources for various Islamic causes. My focus on women is deliberate, though not meant to deny or sideline activist work by Muslim men. But Muslim women find themselves in a “special” position in North American society that their male counterparts do not. First, the negative discourse about Islam as religion invariably targets the religion’s supposed oppression of its women. The traditional religious dress of Muslim women, the *hijab* (misnamed in the West as a “veil”) is the symbol of this supposed oppression. “The veil” comes to be a shorthand for the alleged backwardness and inability of the entire Muslim community to adapt to “modern” ways of life. Thus Muslim women who wear a headscarf (and the minority in North America who wear a face veil) are targets every time they step out into public space in a way that most Muslim men are not. (The men who wear the traditional Muslim head-cap may face similar public scrutiny, but their headgear is not held up in public discourse as a symbol of oppression.) Thus Muslim women, especially those who cover, face discrimination and harassment that is unique to them. Even those Muslim women who do not cover suffer from the negative stereotype of Muslim women: first their identity as a “non-scarf” wearing woman is effaced by the ubiquitous image of “the veiled woman,” and second, they are guilty by association: even if they dress like a “modern woman,” the mere fact of their being Muslim makes them suspect. Hence it is important to disrupt the negative stereotype of “the veiled Muslim woman,” the one who is supposed to be silently suffering due to her religion. What better way to do this than to invite activist Muslim women to speak about themselves and tell their own stories?

Another reason to focus on the narratives of Muslim women is that, again, unlike their male counterparts, Muslim women face barriers to their activism from inside their own community. As my opening has suggested,

Muslim women have lost their public roles as intellectuals, and along with this has been a restriction to the private sphere of the family. Such restriction has not necessarily resulted in the total subservience of Muslim women to men. As anthropological studies of different Muslim cultures highlight, women have retained a strong role in the community through their command over the extended family.⁷ Nevertheless, the loss of a more public role is to the detriment of women's ability to contribute more fully to their community and to be consulted over issues pertinent to its well-being. Unfortunately, as the narratives will reveal, many women waste far too much energy combating negative pressures from their own communities—about the right to speak publicly, to be involved in community decision making, and to participate in activities outside the home. One of the premises of this book, as of the women activists themselves, is that the denial of a more public role for women is one of the reasons the Muslim community is in a stagnated state of decline and mess. All the women contributors to this book reject restrictive interpretations of their role as Muslim women. They believe that the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) envisage a positive and active role for women outside their family and emphasize the importance of working hard to improve the world around them. They are reclaiming the heritage of the women in the first Muslim community: women like A'isha, who was consulted by all for her religious verdicts; like Ruqqayah, who set up a tent in the *masjid* to treat the wounded; and like Nusaybah, who sustained thirteen wounds to her body while defending the Prophet (pbuh) from attack. Thus the book presents the stories of women who have overcome (crucially often with the support of a father or husband) the patriarchal pressures that exist to keep women in the more private sphere of the family. I have given several speeches about this book to Muslim groups, and they—especially the young women—are all fascinated, captivated, and inspired by the authors' stories. The importance of this book for providing role models for an ultra-marginalized group cannot be underestimated.

Autobiography is one of the best ways to break down stereotypes. Autobiography presents the life stories of individuals. Each one of us is unique and has a different life story to narrate. In the West, as I have mentioned, there is a generic image of what it means to be a Muslim woman—oppressed, silenced, subservient—the placard of “the veiled woman” that serves to efface individuality and uniqueness. The autobiographical narratives of the seventeen women presented here in this book challenge this singular image, because they illuminate the women's unique struggles, dreams, goals,

triumphs, and challenges. In short, autobiographies by Muslim women individualize and humanize the ubiquitous poster image of “the oppressed Muslim woman.” It is not our intention, though, to claim to “speak for” other Muslim women. Studies of Muslim women in North America highlight the diversity among Muslim women, their different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, their different understandings of Islam, and the role they want it to play in their lives (if at all).⁸ Autobiography here serves to illuminate the possibilities and life stories of a few Muslim women. The narratives highlight the different ways it is possible to be Muslim and female in North America, drawing attention to the diversity of the female experience of Islam, while not claiming to be the definitive or authoritative version of such a female experience. Everyone has her own unique life story. One of the most important aspects of *Muslim Women Activists in North America* is that it is virtually the only book on the market that is a collection of first-person narratives from Muslim women: voices that are rarely heard in North America.

As the narratives will reveal, the book is also documenting a social history of Muslims in North America that has hardly been recorded elsewhere. The stories of the older activists are a record of the founding of institutions, such as the Muslim Student Association, that are now well established and well known. Some of the younger activists have grown up viewing the MSA as a venerable organization, even though, as Muniza’s story shows, the MSA is still in foundational mode in campuses across the country.

Many of the women activists in this book wear many “hats,” working where needs arise. Most of them are not professional writers, just women activists who agreed to share their stories with a general reading public. Some of the authors have achieved local or national prominence; others are working tirelessly out of the spotlight for the good of their communities. I hope that *Muslim Women Activists* helps open a channel for constructive dialogue between mainstream society and the now-maligned Muslim community.

Notes

Note on Transliteration: Since this volume is meant for the general reader, the transliteration of Arabic words into English has been simplified. The transliteration follows loosely the standard set by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, with some exceptions. Diacritical marks and the initial and terminal hamza have been left off. Sometimes the spelling of the Arabic word follows the more phonetic usage common in the Muslim community.

Only the specialists will notice this, and we hope for their indulgence for the sake of the non-specialist reader.

- 1 Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: Its Origins, Development and Special Features* (Cambridge, U.K.: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), p. 119.
- 2 The Islamic calendar began with the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) escape from Mecca to Medina, in the year 622 A.D.
- 3 A'isha Bewley, *Islam: The Empowering of Women* (London: Ta-ha, 1999), pp. 13–14.
- 4 Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature*, p. 119.
- 5 Bewley, *Islam*, p. 12.
- 6 See Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 7 See, for example, Janice Boddy, *Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), and Uni Wikan, *Behind the Veil: Women in Oman* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
- 8 See Shahnaz Khan, *Muslim Women: Crafting a North American Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

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