Feminism and Multiculturalism
Feminism and Multiculturalism
How Do They/We Work Together?

Edited by

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Maria Lugones and Gail Garfield

(Left to right) Manizha Naderi, Robina Niaz, Nurah Ammat'allah, Jane Kramer, Katha Pollitt
The 2005 *America's Best Colleges* includes Queens College among the "Master's Universities" with the highest campus diversity ratings.

2005 *America's Best Colleges* rates Queens College's master's degree programs tenth in the nation among all public universities.
Queens College’s numerous honors programs have been attracting more and more of the city’s top students.

Maria Lugones and Gail Garfield
(Left to right) Eugenia Paulicelli (at podium), Maria Lugones, Gail Garfield, Joyce Warren, and Madhulika Khandelwal
INTRODUCTION:
FEMINISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

JOYCE W. WARREN

This book derives from a conference held at Queens College in Flushing, New York, in March 2005. The topic for the conference was “Feminism and Multiculturalism: How Do They/We Work Together?” It was particularly fitting to hold such a conference at Queens College, which is noted for its diversity—diversity of religion, ethnic background, class, and race. The college is in the Borough of Queens, the most diverse borough in the New York metropolitan area. The approximately 17,000 students at Queens College reflect the variegated culture of the county of Queens, which is the most diverse county in the United States. In 2004 forty-four percent of the students in the freshman class at Queens were from outside the United States. The students come from 140 different countries and speak more than sixty-six languages.

However, the questions that we are asking in this book about feminism and multiculturalism are not only relevant to the Queens community. They are questions that are being asked in many communities across the United States and throughout the world today. How do feminism and multiculturalism work together? How do we work together?

The question of women’s role in Islam has been increasingly debated in recent years, even within the Muslim diaspora. In Europe, for example, young educated Muslim women have made the news in their questioning of traditional practice. As Marlise Simons noted in the New York Times in December 2005, such women are “part of a quiet revolution among young Muslim European women, a generation that claims the same rights as its Western counterparts, without renouncing Islamic values.” Of particular significance is the women’s pursuit of education. High school teachers in immigrant communities in France have commented on the high motivation of Muslim girls, and the registrar at the Islamic University in Rotterdam noted that sixty percent of the students were women. “The motivation of the girls is very remarkable,” he said. Interviews with young women in France, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands revealed that many Muslim women are studying law or medicine or working in business, the media, or public service. And all agreed that education was essential for them as women. As the daughter of an
Algerian factory worker in France commented, “We all understood that education was our passport to freedom.” Many young women also are pursuing Islamic studies with the intention of interpreting the Quran for themselves. Dounia Bouzar, a French/Algerian anthropologist, summed up these intentions thus: “We must recover the religious texts and free them from an exclusively male interpretation that belongs to the Middle Ages.”

The interrogation of and dissatisfaction with the treatment of women that has been simmering within Islamic communities in Europe was evidenced by the publication in 2004 of three books by Muslim women in Germany: Seyran Ates, The Great Journey into the Fire; Necla Kelek, The Foreign Bride; and Serap Cileli, We’re Your Daughters, Not Your Honor. All three of these books critique a system that they assert leaves women vulnerable to abuse. The authors describe the oppression, isolation, and home imprisonment of Muslim women and girls in Germany, graphically illustrating their subjection to violence and brutal treatment which includes beatings, rape, and so-called “honor killings.” As Peter Schneider noted in his essay in the New York Times Magazine in December 2004, most Germans and the German government, in a mistaken respect for the “otherness” of a different culture, have allowed practices to continue in the Muslim communities that would be illegal elsewhere in Germany. The three authors, he said, are “fighting on two fronts—against Islamist oppression of women and its proponents, and against the guilt-ridden tolerance of liberal multiculturalists. . . [They] explicitly accuse German do-gooders of having left Muslim women in Germany in the lurch and call on them not to forget the women locked behind the closed windows when they rave about multicultural districts.”

As Necla Kelec writes in The Foreign Bride, “What I am asking of the Germans is nothing more and nothing less than equal treatment. I’m entitled to the same rights as any German woman.”

In addition to questions about women’s role in Islam, feminists have also focused increasingly on the question of what constitutes a feminist. In the 1980s, women of color, reacting against 1970s feminism as too narrowly defined, sought to establish their own identity. In the 1990s and today, however, women who share the feminist goal of equality (whether they call themselves feminists or not) have adopted the mantra of multiplicity or hybridity. Young women today, with the development of the Internet and the global movement of people across borders, are exposed to many more contradictions and complications in their lives than women were just twenty-five years ago. As Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake write in Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism (1997), “We are products of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism.” Third wave feminists, say Heywood and Drake, have been influenced by third world feminists, and what they find in their works are the “languages and images that
account for multiplicity and difference, that negotiate contradiction in affirmative ways, and that give voice to a politics of hybridity and coalition.\textsuperscript{6} Thus Gloria Anzaldúa writes in \textit{This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation} (2002)—a sequel to and expansion of the pioneering \textit{This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color}, which she co-edited with Cherríe Moraga in 1981: “Twenty-one years ago we struggled with the recognition of difference within the context of commonality. Today we grapple with the recognition of commonality within the context of difference.”\textsuperscript{7} The new \textit{Bridge}, she says, seeks inclusivity, an inclusivity that “reflects the hybrid quality of our lives and identities. . . . Living in multicultural communities and the complexities of our age demand that we develop a perspective that takes into account the whole planet.”\textsuperscript{8} In this book we explore cultural pluralities, their effect on women’s lives, and women’s role in questioning and/or shaping their identities.

We have divided the book into two parts: “Feminism and Islam” and “The Varied Voices of Feminism.” The first essay in Part I, “Feminism and Islam,” is by Nurah Ammat’ullah: “Making the Distinction between Faith and Religion: A Challenge to Secular Feminism.” Ammat’ullah differentiates between faith and organized religion, pointing out that there are large numbers of women around the world who find faith central to everything they do, including their activism. Having worked with Muslim women from Palestine to South Africa, she founded the Muslim Women’s Institute for Research and Development, a faith-based organization in the South Bronx. She concludes her essay by asking that secular feminists not be patronizing toward women of faith, particularly Muslim women.

In the second essay, “The Veil in Europe,” Jane Kramer, European correspondent for \textit{The New Yorker} magazine, discusses the 2004 ruling by the French government banning religious dress in public schools, a ruling which, she says, has been misinterpreted by Americans. She explains that, according to a 1905 French law, when children enter a public school, they are in the hands of the secular state. This law, she points out, was passed due to centuries of conflict between Catholics and Protestants. Noting that up until fifteen years ago, Muslim women in France were traditionally unveiled, Kramer explains that, following recruitment drives by radical Muslims that began in the 1980s, women and girls were pressured by young Muslim men who demanded that they wear the \textit{hijab}, or head covering, and schools were attacked and teachers threatened who did not conform to Muslim curricular demands. The violence she interprets as only the tip of the iceberg, reflecting longstanding governmental neglect of the Muslim immigrant situation.

The next essay is by Robina Niaz: “Western Feminists’ Perceptions of Muslim Women: Do They Help or Harm Immigrant Women?” The founder of
“Turning Point,” an organization for Muslim women and their families, Niaz stresses the diversity among Muslims and notes that many people lack an understanding of Islam and fail to differentiate between culture and religion. She discusses American hostility toward Muslims since September 11, 2001, and describes how women in the Muslim community are afraid to report domestic abuse because they are afraid of detention or deportation for themselves or their families. Niaz urges dialogue to promote greater understanding. The next essay is by Manizha Naderi, who came to the United States from Afghanistan in 1984 and is currently involved in Women for Afghan Women. In her essay, “Empowering Afghan Women in the Local New York Community,” she describes the efforts of the organization to provide workshops as well as legal assistance and job training for women.

The final essay in Part I is by Katha Pollitt, columnist for *The Nation* and prize-winning author. In her essay “Whose Culture?” she notes that if Americans are ignorant of Islam, they are also ignorant in general and cites the results of a significant poll. Moreover, she says, it is important to recognize that Islam is not the only religion in which fundamentalists have challenged women’s rights. Pointing to the increasing power of the Christian Right in recent years as well as the emphasis on multiculturalism, she warns of the threat to women’s human rights posed by “powerful currents of backward-looking religious” thinking even within the United States, a country founded on the premise of the separation of church and state.

Part II of the book is entitled “The Varied Voices of Feminism.” We have been unable to include here the essay by Maria Lugones, “Radical Multiculturalisms and Women of Color Feminisms,” because she had a prior commitment to another publication. However, Maria Lugones’s comments are included in the Question and Answer session at the end of Part II. In the first two essays in this section, Madhulika Khandelwal and Eugenia Paulicelli look at the question of “Dress, Gender, and Identity” from different perspectives. Paulicelli examines the significance of dress historically, exploring the relationship between dress and personal and national identity-formation. She notes that fashion and dress are important windows onto an understanding of cultures—the social, cultural, and political transformation of a given space (both public and private) at a given historical time. Khandelwal looks at the question of dress both from the perspective of an ethnographer of immigrant communities and from the personal perspective of an immigrant Muslim woman. Drawing upon her skills as an ethnographer as well as her own experience as an immigrant in New York City, she explores how women of different immigrant communities are practicing dress and comments on what is going on today in terms of the role of dress in identity formation and community formation.
The last essay is by Gail Garfield, “Researching Black Women’s Lives: A Closer Look at Violence against Women.” In an attempt to understand how gender, race, and violence are created in the lives of African American women, and how they give meaning to a woman’s sense of personhood, Garfield interviewed a selection of black women of mid-age over a six-month period. Diverging from the generally accepted male-centered focus in discussions of violence, she concludes that it was the women’s sense of violation as a result of their experiences of violence that shaped the meaning they gave to their experiences.

At the end of each part we have included the Question and Answer session from that segment of the conference. We opened the door to discussion, first asking if any of the panelists would like to respond to the other speakers or add anything to their original comments. Then we turned to the audience, placing a microphone in the audience and entertaining questions and comments. Printed here are those conversations.

In putting together the conference that led to this book, we began with the questions that formed the subtitle of the conference. How do feminism and multiculturalism work together and can they do so? These questions and others are asked over and over again in the essays printed here. Can multiculturalism coexist with feminist principles? Does respect for cultural traditions take precedence over women’s rights? Should outsiders interfere with traditional cultural practices, and if so, at what point and how should they go about it? How do transplanted cultures affected by or shaped by their transplanting? How do women of color create gender and racial identity in and outside of mainstream American culture? The contributors to this book help to provide some answers to these questions. They are in dialogue with each other, at times asking questions deriving from each other’s comments and at other times responding to others’ questions, giving different perspectives, and providing answers. But if readers do not find all of the answers they are looking for in these pages, they are certain to gain new perspectives on the questions. And sometimes that is the only way to begin to find answers.

Notes to Introduction


6 Heywood and Drake, Introduction, 9.

7 Gloria Anzaldúa, Preface, “(Un)natural Bridges, (Un)safe Spaces This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation, edited by Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

8 Anzaldúa, Preface, 3.
PART I

FEMINISM AND ISLAM
MAKING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN FAITH AND RELIGION: A CHALLENGE TO SECULAR FEMINISM

NURAH W. AMMAT‘ULLAH

I want to begin by speaking of a charge that I extend to secular feminists. I charge secular feminists to make a distinction between faith and religion in our discourses. I came to this point after some reflection. As a humble practicing Muslim woman and one with an undergraduate degree in Women’s Studies from the City University of New York (1994), I do not feel comfortable with the label feminist, primarily because of the challenges the label poses for me in my faith community. I ask the women who identify themselves as secular feminists, when we have encounters through the work that I do locally, nationally, and internationally, to acknowledge that organized religion is not the same thing as the faith that people hold within themselves and use to organize their lives around. An incredible number of people in the world, most of them women, place faith as central to the ways in which they view the world and to everything that they do, including their activism.

How does one talk about faith? Faith is the central intangible that my life is premised on, the tool/key that I’m convinced has opened many doors and that without which I would not be here. Faith, my faith, answers so much of the unexplainable for me. When I travel the world, I am united with and embraced by many women who tell me that the only thing they have is their faith. I refer to traveling to the townships of South Africa, near the cities of Durban and Cape Town, the occupied territories of Palestine—Jericho, Ramallah, and Negev. I am also referring to sitting with immigrant families in apartments in the South Bronx with rodents the size of some newborns putting in regular appearances.

I am truly grateful for being able to experience the simplicity of the divine beauty that has strengthened and expanded my faith. I question if any space is ever secular for me, because I define a space by the way I perceive or process it, and since my faith is always present, then I would argue that wherever I am, any space I occupy becomes a sacred space. Discussing the matter of faith as an identity marker is another area of failure of intellectual
thinking for me. Is clothing or food a ritual? Is intonation an expression of faith or a belief? As a Muslim woman who covers, I believe that my hijab, my head covering, by no means indicates my faith. I share with you that some of my most committed allies, my strongest supporters, are Muslim women who do not cover, and the fact that they do not cover does not make my faith stronger or better than theirs or me any better than they are. So while I am not always conscious of my faith, there are moments upon reflection when it becomes clear that my activism is dependent upon my faith.

In 1997 I received a full fellowship with no teaching obligations, to pursue a doctorate in sociology. The two years I spent in the program were marked with internal conflict and personal challenges. The first challenge started with a major case of ineptness, brought on by my marriage coming apart (partially due to my receiving the fellowship) and my daughter going away to college. I share this because I eventually walked away from that program because of a well-intended question asked by someone I respected very much and whom I was considering as the most likely person to be the chair of my committee. In a private consultation, I was told that the members of the department’s faculty admired my intellectual and analytical abilities and were very certain that I would do groundbreaking work in the area of sociology. However, they were concerned that I would not be able to check my religion at the door. I made the decision that I didn’t need a Ph.D. that much. I left the academy and went on to form the Muslim Women’s Institute for Research and Development, which is a faith-based human service community organization in the South Bronx. In forming the organization, I found that matters relating to the use and misuse of belonging to a religion were always present.

Community plays a major role in the social and cultural structure and in the understanding of Islam. However, the definition of community is conceptual. The sense of community that exists in Asia or in other parts of the world where there are large Muslim populations is very different from the understanding of community in the South Bronx. This is true particularly where you have an interesting mix of traditional Muslim immigrant communities, people from the Muslim world, and a growing population of Muslims who are western in culture. When we talk about Muslims and limit our meaning and reference to Muslims from the Muslim world, we overlook a sizable population of the Muslim community that includes people like myself who have embraced Islam after having been raised practicing other faith traditions—people who are very western in their cultural understanding of the world. A space has to be afforded us. The space we claim for ourselves as western cultured Muslims has to be respected.

Another challenge is when, which often happens, secular feminists take on a patronizing approach to women of faith, particularly to Muslim women.
However, the patronizing that comes from secular feminists is not just limited to Muslim women. They really are often totally disrespectful to all women of faith across the world. The specificity of this disrespect that occurs with Muslim women is often found in western countries. On many occasions I have been approached by women identified as feminists and asked, “How can an intelligent woman like you be a Muslim and on top of that you cover?” I respond, Why not? My intelligence is what leads me to this choice. I find it offensive that the question would even be asked.

I am someone who has embraced a different faith tradition from the one in which I was socialized in my own life. I live with a central sense that my faith has continued through my transition from one faith to another. My conversations with the Divine from an early age have been a source of comfort, guilt, awe, motivation, inspiration and have continued uninterrupted through the years that have been entrusted to me. Yes, I view my life as a sacred trust, a trust for which I am not always a good steward. At times, due to ignorance, I do not know what to do or how to do what needs to be done. At times my rebelliousness leads to straying and sin, but even in those moments my conversation with God continues.

The last point that I will share with you is that my faith provides the mechanisms for peace and reconciliation within my being. Why do I continue on this path? Attempting to live a faithful life with all the contradictions leaves me with no choice. In my mind it would be so much easier to be either a saint or a sinner, but then I would not be human. Aiming to no longer separate my good works from the Islamic instruction to seek knowledge, arguing that there is valuable knowledge to be had in doing good works, I continue on this journey. As a woman of African descent who works as an archival librarian at the Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture, documenting the experiences and culture of people of African descent, I find that all of this occurs; all of my life unfolds on a tightly woven fabric of my understanding and practice of Islam, my faith.

To live without faith is unimaginable to me in as much as I would not be able to fulfill my life’s calling of doing this work if I did not have my faith. My faith is a necessary element of my work. My faith and my work are necessary and complementary components of the whole—me. I see my faith as that which connects me to my grandmothers. Faith is what I share with these incredible women who were/are devout in different faith traditions. Each one of them collectively gives me a sense of a real God that is our own—a God that instigates, supports, sustains, comforts us in our journeys on the paths of independence and defiance. Our faith connects us and provides us with the wisdom of our collective conscience. I proclaim it, and I hold it up, and I see no contradiction in the fact that these women, who were/are not Muslim in their
faith tradition, have given me so much that I am able to draw on that enables me to practice Islam as well as I do.

The identity, the label of feminism is not one that I use. I do not use it because of the risk that it puts me at in my faith community. When I think of the body of work that I do, and I think of what I would risk if I were to label myself a feminist, I know that it would be too high a price to pay and it would hinder or even destroy the work. I am not willing to take that risk. I also continue to have deep questions about what feminism is, particularly secular feminism as it relates to women of color, especially women of African descent. And so I will close by suggesting to women in the secular feminist community that when they engage women of faith, they accord them some level of respect, attempt to step away from the patronizing condescension that often stands in the way, and make a diligent effort to separate faith from religion.
I should start by saying that, more and more, my politics are feminist politics. As I travel and report more, I find that my basic political question (and I write a great deal about politics) comes down to this: Is it good for women? My conclusions, or my uncertainties, about what I’ll call the veil wars have very little to do with questions of religious faith; they have to do with the question of women. I have worked with women, Muslim women, in Africa and Turkey, in France, in Germany, in England. Less here. So my experiences are very much limited to those countries. And I think the experience for Muslims can be quite different here. Many of my young Muslim friends in France who are quite opposed to the policies of the United States still hope to come to the United States to be educated, finding it a more tolerant society than theoretically assimilationist France, which has a much more specific set of priorities in terms of women’s equality.

I am going to talk to you specifically about the veil in France because the veil law has been very, very much misinterpreted in this country. I went to France to do research on the new law, quite convinced that it was a foolish law and that it would lead to nothing but problems in France, and that in fact it was quite an unnecessary piece of legislation. I should state right off what the existing laws actually were. France’s laws on secular education were written in 1905 and were the attempt to resolve an incredible bitterness between Catholics and Calvinists born of hundreds and hundreds of years of religious wars. Those laws were very hard won, and, to simplify a lot, what they boiled down to was that a child entering a French public school entered the protective custody of a constitutionally secular state. Now the laws were never interpreted as having to do with university education, because the legal definition of a French “school,” and of a student at school, had specifically to do with the legal definition of a child—that is, a young person under the age of legal majority. After the age of legal majority, the French state has no control over the education or the choices made by a student.

Therefore, you will see many, many women with headscarves, with hijab, in French colleges, but you will not see them in lycées, middle schools, or elementary schools in France. You will also not see Jewish kippas, as the
French call yalmulkes, nor will you see Catholic or Protestant crosses (unless they are tucked down the child’s shirt, with only the chain visible). This is the social contract. Till now, the French and the Americans have had the two most rigorously secular republics in the western world. If you look—constitutionally—at most western European states, you will find that in one way or another, either loosely acknowledged or locked tightly in place, there is an established church (like the Anglican Church in England) or several options for adherents in terms of tax tithing, and that many rights (and responsibilities) accrue to citizens who proclaim themselves to be attached to a religion. So you have two countries that were really the most strictly divided as to questions of church and state. Church and state are constitutionally separated in our two countries.

I think I also went to France thinking as an American—terrified by the incursion of religion into American life, terrified by legal incursions of religion into American life. I was terrified by the collapse of the separation between church and state as directly affecting my life as a woman or certainly the life of my daughter or children she might have and the lives of women I know, especially young women. I knew that reproductive rights were threatened here and feminist dissent was being threatened here. So I went with two views: first, with the perhaps fairly traditional (small r) republican view that I would prefer the French social contract to be reaffirmed without recourse to new legislation, and, second—this is probably less a “view” than an outrage—with the horror of an American woman, a liberal American woman, at the collapse of a formal separation of church and state in her own country. That said, I came very quickly to realize that a law stating that a child under the age of sixteen or eighteen entering a public school enters the protective custody of the French state mirrors a concept deep within French consciousness. Citizenship in France is citizenship by birth, not citizenship by blood, and it’s citizenship by application. Citizenship by blood means by ethnicity. It means that if you are born, say, in Germany and are ethnically German (whatever that means today), only then are you a German citizen. Citizenship by birth means that you are born into a social contract—an automatic party to the rights and responsibilities of a citizen. So I am really not talking about the new veil law in France—which forbids the wearing of aggressive or “ostentatious” emblems of religious adherence in public schools—as a question of faith versus a rejection of faith; I’m talking about it as an expression of the social contract entered into at birth by all citizens of France.

This became fundamentally important to me as I changed my mind about the veil law and decided that, while it may not be delicately put or sensitive, it was perfectly legal in French constitutional terms. There are horrible problems facing immigrant women in France, especially Muslim
women. The country is by definition assimilationist, but in practice it is quite exclusionary. Muslim women tend to live in “new towns,” or banlieues—huge blocks of public housing well beyond the ring roads of the major cities—and cut off from any real access (beyond menial jobs) to life in those cities. There is huge discontent; the rise of Islamist recruitment in France is a direct result of that. The capacity of Muslim extremists to recruit young people there, as they have in every banlieue, has in fact been fairly proportionate to the isolation those young people feel in their schools—in their lives, in their prospects.

The truth is that France failed miserably in integrating and assimilating its Muslim citizens, although by anyone’s definition it was the model of an assimilationist state. Its immigrant population is now over ten percent of the population, which means that it has failed to address the concerns of somewhere between five and six million people. In one sense, the veil law was hypocritical, focusing on symbols of a problem and leaving the real problem unaddressed.

I want to talk a bit about what the recruitment in France was like at the beginning—some fifteen years ago—about how it affected the Muslims in one community that had been immensely tolerant of French neglect. It was a moderate community and traditionally an unveiled one. You did not see any Muslim dress in its schools, or for that matter in any French public schools then. French law is such that if you would like to wear religious dress, the state will fund parochial schools for you—up to eighty percent, with any part of the remaining twenty percent that’s needed automatically granted to families that can’t pay. So it was never a question of access to schools, or of forcing Muslims out of school; it was a question of options. Other religions in France took the option of starting state-subsidized parochial schools. The Catholic school system in France is quite good and is an alternative that many Catholics choose. One of the best schools in the country is a Protestant school in Paris. But there is one proviso: a parochial school, to be accredited (and, if it chooses, subsidized), must meet the standards of the French Ministry of Education. Education is centralized in France, and there is a specific set of curriculum requirements necessary to qualify for matriculation—and for students who want higher education, to qualify to take the bac. And to get there those standards have to be met. Most schools have done that. But there has not been a Muslim school in France that has agreed to do this, except one. That school is operating quite successfully and is entirely funded by the government. Lille has a remarkable woman mayor, a feminist, and in the Muslim school the girls and their teachers are either veiled or not, as they choose.

The Islamist recruitment hit France partly in response to French neglect, partly in response to a very considerable effort on the part of the Muslim brotherhood, with Saudi backing, to place its imams in France, take over local mosques, and recruit schoolchildren. But it only became apparent in
the 1980s, as a response to the anti-immigrant feeling represented by extremist groups on the fringes of the French Christian right, most notably Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National. A very considerable recruitment took place then. The first sign of it was not in the schools but in small local mosques. The mosques were gradually infiltrated, and the imams in many of those mosques, traditionally under the influence of the moderate rector of the Great Mosque of Paris, found themselves replaced by extremist clerics. This was a change ratified, to some extent, by the French government last year, when the country’s Islamic Council was taken over by fundamentalists, much to the distress of most of its old Muslim clerics.

The second sign of this was in the public school system. It was not as in Germany and England, a recruitment that tapped failure in the schools. It began in the form of demands that the curriculum be adapted to the requirements of Muslim students or that those students be exempted from the very things they needed to take to matriculate. The families of women students were asking for exemptions from biology classes, they were asking for exemptions from French literature classes, they were asking to be exempted from gym classes. Gym class in France is a joke. The country has the worst record in Europe in terms of providing sports or exercise or even basic physical education for schoolchildren. But after-school teams of one sort or another existed, under the school’s aegis, and now girls (or their fathers or brothers) were demanding to play on, say, the school basketball team in long skirts and shawls and jackets and sometimes even burkas. When the law was explained to parents, their response was often a threat to the principal or teacher. So the veil law was written, in part, in response to a very particular, local kind of terrorism, not mass terrorism but the example of teachers terrorized by men demanding the religious “rights” of daughters or sisters.

I’m not saying that these problems are not real. How does a schoolgirl practice a faith that says very eloquently that it must be represented, symbolically, in every aspect of her life? How does her family negotiate this with a secular state? But I think that these questions are not so much illegal as extra-legal, though ultimately they pose constitutional challenges that I’m not sure most French men and women would agree with. But they are not really about faith; they are not really about schools. They are about the French constitution, and the separation of church and state, and I think this fact has been incredibly misunderstood. The French are not saying to women: “You are not allowed to veil.” Women are veiling everywhere in France. The veil law was very specific to public schools. It happened at a time of increasing fear of violence; it happened under conditions where violence had been part and parcel of the life of the school. Schools were being blown up, and it had nothing to do with the children in those schools; it had nothing to do with the Muslim families
who sent their children to those schools. It had to do with extremist identity politics. The state’s response was very complicated, but it was very, very understandable as a tip of the iceberg statement. You will not find the same statement being made in England, where, as I said, the scarf has always been worn as traditional garb. In France, where several thousand schoolgirls had suddenly started showing up for classes in “Islamic” clothes, it was an affirmation, right or wrong, of French republican principles.

The situation in Europe is quite different from country to country, and we have to read it as sensitively as we read, or try to read, the society we live in. We cannot say Europe; we cannot say France or Germany. We have to say, What are the rules of this country? What is the notion of citizenship in this country? And how does that notion affect women or reflect the influence of women in this country?
Nurah Ammat’ullah has explained how people ask her about her veil and her work, but I’m often asked a question in the reverse direction. My activist friends, women and men that I work with, say to me, “You must not be a traditional Muslim woman,” and when I ask them why, they answer, “because you don’t wear the hijab.” The reason why I am bringing that up is because it is so easy to fall into that stereotypical understanding of what a Muslim woman represents. It comes, I believe, from a lack of understanding on the part of western feminists as well the larger society as to what constitutes a Muslim. There is a lack of awareness of the tremendous diversity within the Muslim community. If you just go around Queens, you will probably meet a dozen Muslim women, and none of them will look alike or dress alike, but they all identify themselves as Muslim women. I tend to talk about this a lot. The lack of understanding is not helpful when we are working on behalf of Muslim women or representing them. People need to guard against those stereotypes, and the only way they can do it is by educating themselves. This means going out to different women who represent different groups in the Muslim community and asking them what they are all about, how they identify themselves, how they represent themselves, and whether there is a distinction amongst them. It’s really only the way we dress or the way we practice our faith that can be similar or different, but the basic tenets of Islam are the same for all of us, no matter where we come from. Our prayers, our fasting, the five pillars of Islam, and the way we read the Qur’an are the same for all of us. How we present ourselves physically may be different because our cultures are different. We come from so many different parts of the world.

One other notion that is widely held is that a large part of the Muslim population is Arab. Nothing is further from the truth. Only about twenty to twenty-five percent of Muslims around the world are Arabs; the rest of them are not. I don’t think many people whom I meet know this, even those who say they are familiar with the diversity within the Muslim society. There is
tremendous diversity in language, culture, dress, and social norms. Another common misconception sometimes causes culture and religion to be lumped together as though they were the same thing. We need to separate culture from religion. It is a mistake to think of Arabic culture, for example, as synonymous with Islam, or Pakistani culture as synonymous with Islam. The reason why we dress differently and talk differently is that there is so much about us that is very characteristic of the different cultures that we come from. And yet our faith brings us together. Our faith essentially is the binding force that brings us together and keeps us together. But we also have to recognize the differences.

One other thing that I encounter in my work is the tendency of Western feminists to believe that their way is the only way. I’m an activist, a civil rights activist, and a lot of my work is around women’s issues, especially domestic violence. One of the assumptions made by Western feminists is that the standards that work for them, work for everybody else around the world. I would like to caution all of us against that assumption because this is what really hurts Muslim women. Western feminists need to understand their own misconceptions about the rest of the world, especially women and what those women want. What works for western feminism, western women, may not always work for other women, whether we are here in the United States or are living in our countries. I come from Pakistan and know that Western standards don’t even work in the Pakistani Muslim community here, let alone in Pakistan. There is always common ground, but one must try to understand what it is that we can adopt and embrace, and what it is that we have to keep out because it simply will not work. The only way to understand that is to engage in a dialogue with women who represent those communities.

A glaring example is that of female genital mutilation. I think it is widely believed that this is an Islamic practice. This is just not true. Genital mutilation has no place in Islam. My mother doesn’t even know that this practice exists, and if I ever tried to tell her about it, she would probably faint! It’s a practice that exists in some parts of Africa and is purely cultural. It takes place both in Christian and Muslim communities as well as in other religious groups. But by believing or perceiving it to be an Islamic practice, we are again stereotyping rather than helping the world understand the problem, what is at the core of it and how we can address it. If we narrow our perception, we end up not doing much about the issue.

One of the things that I wanted to point out is something that I’ve encountered since 9/11. All of us have been impacted by that horrible tragedy, the Muslim community more than anybody else—including the South Asians and Arabs. I was nearly attacked in my own supermarket, which is half a block from where I live, and I’m not somebody who covers her head. But when people look at me, they assume that I am a Muslim and feel that it may be okay