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Silenced: Muslim women commentators in the Australian media

Muslim women, and particularly Middle Eastern and North African women, have been among the most enduring subjects of discussion in the western media for the past two centuries.¹

THE FASCINATION WITH MUSLIM women in the West is as persistent as it is negative. Western observers have explicitly associated Islam with the oppression of women, since the eighteenth century.² As Lord Cromer, the British Consul-General to Egypt (1883-1907) announced, 'I am here to liberate Muslim women, I am here to liberate them from Islam,'³ a view that demonstrates the desire to rescue the Muslim woman, even if against her will. The Orientalist view that Muslim women are oppressed by their men and their religion was actively cultivated by the Western press, with 60,000 books published over 150 years (between 1800 and 1950 on the primary topic of the Arab Orient, and 'the primary mission of these writings was to depict the colonized Arabs/Muslims as inferior/backwards who were urgently in need of [the] progress offered to them by the colonial superiors.'⁴ Muslim women were a distinct focus of fascination and pity in these writings also.⁵

The negative view of the treatment of Muslim women has persisted over the centuries, though its form has altered. Even today, the treatment of Muslim women bothers Westerners considerably. A 2005 Gallup Poll of U.S. households found that 'gender inequality' was among the top responses American women gave to the open-ended question, 'What do you admire least about the Muslim or Islamic world?'⁶

While Muslim women have been a hot topic of conversation in the western media for hundreds of years, they are currently participating in the discourse at an increasing rate. Where they previously were seen as little more than objects to be discussed, Muslim women in the West are now contributing to the discussion about them in a variety of media.

I began to wonder about the experiences of these women, as I personally had many media engagements as a Muslim woman commentator and had received an interesting range of responses. I was also keen to document these cases, as the little research that has been done on Muslim women in the media seems to focus almost entirely on their appearance,⁷ and the stereotypical portrayal of everyday Muslim women by the Western media,⁸ as opposed to engaging with Muslim women who are media players themselves, actively contributing to, and helping to shape, the public discourse. Given the perception that still seems to exist of their absence from the public sphere and their oppression, I was eager for their experiences to be recorded. Nouraiie-Simone discusses this phenomenon:



Visiting doctor from Indonesia at Preston Mosque during Eid al-Fitr, 1994.
Photo by Viva Gibb, H98.161/71.

Throughout the Muslim world, women are making their voices heard: documenting the realities of their own lives, exploring their changing identities, and insisting upon greater participation in the public sphere . . . In the West, however, these dynamic realities have often been rendered invisible, or obscured by stereotyped representations of Muslim women. Even among Western feminists, Muslim women are too often seen as passive victims, rather than as agents who are actively engaged in efforts to reshape their individual selves, their cultures, and their societies. Islam is generally viewed, through Western eyes, as static, traditional, antimodern, and misogynistic.⁹

While the women I spoke to reported some positives to their experience as commentators, there was a personal cost to some of the Australian Muslim women who do speak out regularly in the media, due to abuse they have received from within the Muslim and wider Australian community. Indeed, as I found out through interviewing them (discussed below), some had received personal abuse – including death threats – because of their appearances in the media.

The personal abuse these women faced, however, turned out to be more of a symptom than a cause of the underlying issue at play. After talking with the women commentators, I realised there was a theme of silencing emerging. It appeared that in various ways, their audiences and the media in which they operated, either wittingly or unwittingly, were using different techniques to try to silence them. While the women commentators did also receive positive responses from their audience and the media and felt validated in their work, the underlying thread of being silenced was ever-present. The main ways the women commentators were being silenced were being ignored, being criticised for their appearance as a way to diminish their arguments, only being welcome to address certain topics, and being condescended to because of the stereotypical view of Muslim women that exists. These experiences form the basis of my discussion as I investigate the experiences of five Australian Muslim women who regularly feature in the Australian media, woven with my own regular experiences in the media. I will primarily address the way Muslim women spokespeople and commentators are received by the Muslim and wider Australian communities, and also the women's motivations for appearing in the media specifically as Muslim women.

I am coming from a place of personal investment in this issue, as I have appeared in Australian media many times since becoming Muslim as a teenager, specifically because I am a Muslim woman, and my reception has been one that has given me pause on more than one occasion. I intend to include my own experiences alongside the women I investigate in this story as appropriate, fully placing myself within the work, as an Australian Muslim woman who is often in the media. This is significant as Harding explains:

The best feminist analysis . . . insists that the enquirer her/himself be placed into the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of the research. That is, class, race, culture, and gender must be placed within the frame of the picture that she/he attempts to paint.¹⁰

I feel that for any degree of objectivity, paradoxically, the researcher must clearly articulate their biases, since doing so allows readers to scrutinise analysis and findings critically with reference to the author's biases. Not highlighting subjectivities that will inevitably come into play in research may hide potential 'distortion from the unexamined beliefs and behaviours of social scientists themselves'.¹¹

The Participants

The five women I spoke to all appeared in a variety of media including television, radio, print and online, and featured as respondents to, and also creators of, content (such as through writing opinion pieces or as columnists). Between them, they have written dozens of op-eds, [opinion pieces] appeared in countless radio and print interviews, and done more than 40 television interviews and appearances. All are intelligent, university-educated, articulate and successful women. Some cover their hair, some do not. At the time of interviewing, they were in their 20s, 30s and 40s, from a variety of backgrounds, and most are bilingual.

The women I interviewed are those who most frequently appear in the Australian media in their capacity as Muslim women, either as spokespeople or simply presenting unique voices on the experiences of Muslim women. I would classify them as commentators. Although Muslims make up less than two per cent of the Australian population,¹² this is a highly scrutinised minority. As one participant said, 'even though we're a small part of the population we have a disproportionately large share of the focus' (Aida).¹³ Thus, these same few women are all called upon repeatedly for interviews and statements to the media. To protect their privacy and anonymity, pseudonyms are used.

What Motivates Them?

All of the women I spoke to said their involvement in the media was at least in part due to a desire to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women, either by presenting as articulate Muslim women speaking competently, or to counter some of the less-than-ideal male Muslim spokespeople featured in the media. All the interviewees were acutely aware of the negative ways in which Muslim women are perceived by mainstream society, and saw being in the media as a powerful way to counteract misperceptions of Muslim women. As Nora told me:

I did it initially because I was growing weary of Muslim males representing Muslim women on issues such as why Muslim women wear the *hijab* and why women have the right to wear the *burqa* [full body covering]. I also felt a strong need to dispel the negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam which I felt were being reinforced by certain male spokespeople.

Iman said she did it as a way to try to be proactively engaged in the media, as opposed to simply grumbling or just reactively responding to the issues that were presented to her:

My main motivation is to try and counter the stereotypical reporting of Muslim women, and provide an alternative voice. I also want to engage with the media beast

as opposed to just complaining. I'm trying to have some input, not just reactionary, but show that we're also producing new ideas.

All the women I interviewed participated as a form of agency, fully aware of the negative stereotypes that exist of Muslim women, and eager to use the megaphone of modern-day media to challenge such misconceptions. As feminist scholars Houston and Kramarae describe this sort of activity by women in their work on women's silence and resistance, '[such women] are refusing to be silent in ways that remind us that language and women are powerful'.¹⁴

Positive Responses

1. From non-Muslims

Given that most of the women I interviewed said that, at least in part, they participated in media engagement as a way to break down the stereotypes that exist about them, I was interested to know how non-Muslims would respond to them. Was the response what they were aiming for?

Interestingly, the women I spoke to said that there were many responses they received from non-Muslims that were either 'very positive' or 'overwhelmingly positive'. They reported often receiving letters, email, or personal contact (such as being approached on the street) from individuals saying how much they appreciated what the women had done, and also how they had often negated some of the stereotypical images the non-Muslims held of Muslim women. Iman said: 'The response has been overwhelmingly positive, particularly when I'm perceived to be breaking down a common misconception or stereotype, or providing an alternative viewpoint.'

Daria stated:

The response has been overwhelmingly positive. The feedback has been that I've made a difference, that I've changed their viewpoints, about Muslims, about young people, and especially about Muslim women. So it's been really positive. I've had journos tell me my voice needs to be heard and even more so they've encouraged me along the way. I've had people email me admitting they had really bigoted anti-Muslim views before they heard me, that they'd get their info from newspapers or TV but after an interview of mine their views had changed.

I could relate to what these women said and had similar experiences myself; it was these sorts of responses that encouraged me to feel there was a point to my participation.

However, the response from the wider Australian community was by no means an exclusively warm embrace. Nora told me:

Sadly there have been quite a few non-Muslims who have responded quite negatively. I have my fair share of hate-mail which I have had to report to the police. Recently I received hate mail that was sent to my home address which was quite unsettling.

I have had similar experiences to Nora, receiving hate mail at my home and work; had alarming encounters with strangers on the street who recognised me from television

and wanted to make me aware of their disgust; and a decent volume of unsavoury emails. Even my parents received nasty anonymous messages left on their answering machine about me.

The women I interviewed received a *range* of responses from the wider Australian community, as Zia succinctly described:

A combination of genuine appreciation at hearing from an ‘actual’ Muslim who sounds ‘Australian’, through to the overt critics who believe my comments are nothing short of a genuine conspiracy to impose shar‘ia by stealth. And everything in between.

ii. Response from other Muslims

Whether these women like it or not, they will be perceived, at least by some (and likely by many) as spokespeople for the Muslim community, and with such a role comes an unattainable expectation, neatly captured in this statement by Daria: ‘you bear the responsibility of representing what two billion Muslims think’. This is an obviously impossible task, given the massive diversity of opinions within the global Muslim community. Coupled with this is the hope from other Muslims that the women will contribute in a way that non-Muslims find palatable. I know this is a common expectation because I have faced it myself on numerous occasions when I have been featured in the media.

It is understandable on some level; the Australian Muslim community is, by and large, frustrated by the way it is portrayed in mainstream media and desperately wants someone there presenting Muslims in a way that makes them proud.

The women I spoke to reported that the Muslim community was indeed often happy with their efforts, as Nora told me:

The response from Muslims has been quite positive. Every now and then I am contacted by a Muslim who states they do not agree with my stance which is understandable as the Muslim community is not a homogenous group. They are usually quite civilised and often simply ask for an explanation or clarification.

Iman shared: ‘It’s been very positive, because there’s a recognition of the need to get a Muslim voice in the mainstream media, so on one level just being able to counter the usual rubbish is seen as good’. And Zia stated:

Overall, I’d say the younger demographic respond positively to seeing a ‘*hijabi*’ spokesperson represent them, who sounds like ‘them’ and who can articulate against the hype. By comparison, the elders in the Muslim community have been more apprehensive about praise, believing that the media and the Jews are part of a collective conspiracy to ‘catch me out’ at any chance they can, so better say nothing than risk a scandal.

Zia’s comment reveals the delicate point of Muslims not being happy with the women’s media engagements. As some of the interviewees pointed out, Muslims’ reactions could be just as nasty, if not more so, than the wider Australian community, as will be discussed below.

Negative Responses and Silencing

i. Using Appearance

Daria explained:

Muslims liked what I had to say until I started talking about controversial issues in our community, and it's been rather negative since then, even when I try to make clear repeatedly that I'm not coming from an Islamic perspective, but from a human rights perspective. I think Muslims have been really threatened by this, and I've received hate mail and death threats from other Muslims. I've had people contact my parents and tell them to shut their daughter up, and when family members see comments about me on Facebook, it upsets them. So it's not just me – it affects my family. It's really personal and it intrudes on my private sphere. There's a lot of focus on my appearance – how I wear my *hijab*, that my breasts are too 'prominent', that I'm wearing too much make-up, etc. A Muslim leader once said to me that I'm an easy target because I'm a young single Muslim woman, so that's to suggest if I were married I wouldn't get that response.

Daria's experience, while extreme, is not unique. I have received correspondence (normally via anonymous email) from outraged Muslims after my media appearances, infuriated about everything from my appearance (many of my fellow Muslims seemed outrage that I wore makeup on television, seemingly oblivious to the fact that men also had to wear make up when on TV), to my manner, to the very fact I was there in the first place. One impassioned Muslim man demanded to know if my husband knew I was on television, certain that if he did, he would put a stop to it immediately. Some such responses can be laughed off and dealt with by the click of the 'delete' button, but others, such as with Daria's death threats, are far more serious and have far greater impact.

As referred to above, the appearance of Muslim women in the media was often used as a weapon against them, something that Muslim men did not have to face. The dress of the women, the way they wore their *hijab* (and especially if they didn't wear one at all), their makeup, their weight and their clothing in general were all seen as fair game. As Aida said:

Muslim females who are friends of mine have really copped it. No one says to the men, 'your pants are too tight, your beards are too short'. They will attack their ideas but no one says to them they shouldn't be in a public role, like they do with Muslim women.

The technique of trivialising or silencing women commentators by primarily criticising their appearance is nothing new, although with Muslim women it takes on additional religious dimensions (criticisms over veiling, tightness of clothing and the wearing of makeup). This sexist ad hominem attack that is used to obfuscate the message women commentators are addressing was described by Miller, who called it:

The tendency in our culture to demean women based on their sexuality or for their looks rather than to engage with what they have to say . . . too often, when women raise their voices, they are criticised not for what they say but how they look.¹⁵

Doing so also implicitly serves to remind women that their most important asset is their appearance, as it is used as the ultimate trump card to shout down and shut down

women commentators. As Miller asks, 'is that the currency of a woman or girl – her looks? Is a female's Achilles heel still her appearance? If you strike there, do you take away her only power?'¹⁶

ii. Being Ignored

To rapturous applause, Jane Caro on *Gruen Planet* made the following statement:

One of the problems that Islam has, serious problems, is that way it's seen in its attitudes towards women. So going down the road where all you have is male spokespeople, male sports teams, male emphasis. That ad has a male voice over. The only woman in it is an elderly frail thing that has a blanket put over her. The first thing they should be doing is getting female spokespeople, feisty Muslim women getting up there and talking about their experience of their faith. That would do more than all the male spokespeople in the world, quite frankly.¹⁷

From the above quote, one could be forgiven for thinking that there are no Muslim women present in the Australian media, and that if only women would speak out as Caro suggests, things would change and Muslims would be received differently and more positively.

I was first made aware of this speech on *Gruen Planet*, an ABC panel show discussing media strategies and public relations, when one of the regular commentators I interviewed for this research emailed me about it, herself having been tipped off by another prominent Muslim woman in the media I interviewed. They were outraged at the implication that there are no Muslim women appearing in Australian media, especially, as they pointed out, there are really only one or two consistently prominent Muslim men. I was intrigued by Caro's perception that there are no 'feisty Muslim women getting up there and talking about their experience of their faith', given that I know that is not the case; the significant amount of media work the women I interviewed had done, as well as my own experiences (I have honestly lost count of all the media appearances I have done, and at least 95% of those were solely because I am a Muslim woman and was invited to discuss some aspect of the Australian Muslim experience) was proof of this. And yet it appears that public perception has us pegged as silent non-players. That Muslim women had been relatively present in the Australian media and yet the audience insisted we weren't there is a phenomenon reflected by Hoodfar, who had similar experiences in her personal encounters with people: 'Frustratingly, in the majority of cases, while my conversants listened to me, they did not hear, and at the end of the conversation they would reiterate their earlier views as if our discussion were irrelevant'.¹⁸ That the wider Australian community feels it is not seeing or hearing Muslim women is because they are blind to them, not because they do not exist. This technique of bemoaning the lack of Muslim women speaking out in the media, and then ignoring them when they do serves the double purpose of silencing women in a very absolute way (it is literally as if they are not there), while still giving the impression that the audience is eager and open to hearing from them if they should ever wish to speak.

iii. *Being Kept in a Box*

As I spoke with these women I started to detect a sense of ambivalence in some of them about being in the media as Muslim women. While they were cognisant of the positives that came with the opportunity and eager to change the discourse, they also recognised that there were hidden negatives.

Apart from all the enthusiastic emails and personal comments these women received (as well as the less than pleasant ones), the responses from their audiences as well as professionals working in the media often seemed to smack of condescension and an Orientalism that understandably annoyed the women, as well as coming with a clear agenda. For example, more than one of the women I interviewed spoke about being asked to adopt religious dress that wasn't their normal attire (most notably covering their faces), as the media they were dealing with thought it would create greater impact for their audience. This ensured that the perception of Muslim women as weak was maintained. It was also made clear to the commentators that they were only welcome to challenge stereotypes and buck against the norm when they were saying things that the wider community wanted to hear (i.e., if they spoke about sexism occurring within the Muslim community), and didn't challenge perceptions about Muslims too greatly. But they were discouraged from venturing outside certain boundaries. Iman said:

It can be patronising, as I'm seen as a cultural and religious whistleblower and I'm seen as exposing the dark secrets of my community. So it's uneasy as you want to speak honestly and candidly but non-Muslims will only credit your opinion because they see you as a whistleblower. So if you talk about issues that aren't specific to Islam or Muslims, your authority is questioned. I've read about this happening with film-makers, where white film-makers are allowed to make stories about any culture and race and be respected, but if, say, a black person does that, they're only respected when they make a film about black culture or community. So if they want to do something about white people or power, it's viewed with suspicion. We're only respected and given space when it's about a very specific topic, but if we want to be part of the wider conversation it's not always welcome.

Such an attitude is a method of silencing Muslim women, as identified by Houston and Kramarae in their research of the different ways women are silenced:

The power to silence another is not simply the power to *prevent* her talk; it is also the power to *shape and control* her talk, to restrict the things that she may talk about and the ways she is permitted to express them, to permit her to speak but to suppress her authentic voice.¹⁹

Daria saw the compliments she receives for her work in the media often as little more than condescension, as they come from people who expect so little from Muslim women. I have had similar experiences many times, being told *ad nauseum* that I 'challenge the stereotype of Muslim women' in a way that suggests I should be grateful for them not viewing me in the negative manner that is all their own creation in the first place. This is doubly problematic when it comes from professionals working in the media, because, as Daria points out, they are the gatekeepers to the public platform these women recognise they need; to be overtly critical of journalists and media professionals

could jeopardise much-needed opportunities:

You can also be fetishised – they marvel and find it remarkable that I can string a sentence together. Now if a Muslim woman goes on air or stands up for her rights, she's treated in a patronising way. You know, give her a pat on the head for doing that. So you can get the genuinely positive response, and you can also get the patronising, fetishising one. And it's hard to respond to that because you can't say 'I don't want to be patronised or seen in the way' when they're giving you a platform that we need.

In this sense, some of the women felt they were in a bind – having to accept and work within a system that viewed them patronisingly in order to participate in that which could ultimately lead to changing such a view.

This view of Muslim women didn't just spring from paternalism, as Margot Badran explains:

Many in the West . . . have used the trope of the 'oppressed Muslim woman', a set piece in Orientalist discourse, displaying a feigned concern for her 'plight' in order to justify colonial and neo-colonial incursions into Muslim societies, or simply to make a show of arrogant superiority.²⁰

Thus, while ostensibly giving Muslim women an opportunity to speak, that Muslim women commentators were given narrow perimeters in which to operate, and often treated condescendingly, still helps to maintain an image of Muslim women that Western media wants to maintain.

From my own experience, I know that I have had a love-hate relationship with my media experiences as a Muslim woman. On the one hand, I have been grateful for the opportunity to present my opinions on issues where I know Muslim women's voices are not being given adequate, or even any, airtime. This has been especially crucial for me in areas directly relating to Muslim women, such as the issue of banning the *burqa*, but also simply because of the perception that Muslim men never let women speak; simply by participating in the media, I was attacking that idea. On the other hand, I have grown increasingly frustrated with answering an almost identical set of interview questions in nearly every appearance – whether print, radio or television – and felt that in my more than a decade of doing such interviews, the conversation about and with Muslim women has not progressed at all, and still seems to be obsessively focussed on the piece of cloth on my head.

Whilst the ways Muslim women dress is of political relevance for issues such as the *burqa*-ban, that it has been so consistently the main topic of conversation in my interviews feels infuriatingly superficial, and seems to reinforce the idea I have been trying to negate: that Muslim women are defined by and reduced to what they wear. So even when going into the media with the goal of providing a more three-dimensional view of Muslim women, I feel my very participation has been, inadvertently, helping to partially maintain a paradigm of Muslim women I reject and wish to refute.

The ambivalence about media engagements is ultimately tempered by a recognition

of the nature of the media game, and the greater good. As Iman addressed:

Sometimes it can be frustrating because you need to feed a media machine, and have it packaged in the way they want it. You have to engage by their rules. But if you don't engage with the media the way they want, you lose an opportunity which I think you'd be silly to walk away from.

Perhaps this best encapsulates the sentiment of all the women I spoke with; that even with the potential for negative (even extremely so) responses from both Muslims and non-Muslims, and the problematic nature of Muslim women engaging with the media due to persistent misperceptions and stereotypes, ultimately their continued engagement was something neither they, nor the community they cared about, could afford for them to abandon.

'Muslim women like all other women are social actors, employing, reforming, and changing existing social institutions, often creatively to their own ends.' Here Hoodfar²¹ is talking about the *hijab*. But she could just as easily have been discussing the media. For just as the *hijab* has been both a tool to control and silence Muslim women, it has also been appropriated and used by Muslim women for their own goals, aspirations and liberation; from the comments made by the women I interviewed, I feel that the media could be viewed similarly. While the media and its audiences have certainly used different techniques to silence Muslim women, the confident and savvy women with whom I spoke were quite capable of using the media for their own ends and to achieve their own pre-determined goals. They were cognisant of the many challenges associated with being a Muslim woman in the media, and yet still actively engaged with the media to further their cause.

In the end, both media and *hijab* are just tools. And to suggest that Muslim women are the victims of, or controlled by, either of these tools, is to completely negate any sense of agency and insight these women clearly have.