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I would like to thank the Fawcett Society for this opportunity to participate in their work. This invitation came at a time when I was just completing a joint project with women from other countries about theorising feminism as an intellectual and political tradition. In the course of my work for that project I wrote about the women such as Millicent Fawcett who represent the British suffragette tradition. Therefore, I am especially pleased to be able to be here today to honour the intellectual and practical debt that I owe, as a British woman, to Millicent Fawcett, the suffragette movement and British feminism. This recent work has taught me some very important lessons which I want to use to address the issue of Muslim women. More specifically, I want to take this opportunity to say something about the principles of policy that can guide decision-makers in this increasingly politicised debate.

The Context of ‘Free Choice’

First, feminism as an intellectual and political tradition needs to be understood in its historical, social and political context. Yet, at the same time, there are some perennial truths in feminist thinking that women need to hold on to. The central pivot of feminism is the commitment to women’s freedom. Whatever other differences there are between women, this animating idea is the branch on which we sit. To undermine the concept of women’s freedom to choose, to compromise on the concept of women’s agency, is to cut off from beneath us this branch on which we as women sit. That is why my starting point today is to defend the right of Muslim women to choose how they dress and to adopt ‘veils’ as part of the exercise of this choice.

However, as well as individual choice, there is another key idea that underlies feminist thought. This is the idea of female consciousness and the recognition that women can sometimes find themselves in contexts where their choices are either limited or that they

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may sometimes make choices that cause them harm. Therefore, as well as defending the right to choose I also want to be able to examine and question the basis of the choice of Muslim women. That is not to say that I want to interfere with these choices: merely that I think that those of us who defend free choice also have a responsibility to examine the range of choices available and the context in which choice is exercised. This is always tricky territory for feminists, especially when they are faced with differences between women that are based on culture, religion or class. The challenge is to navigate between holding on to women's freedom to choose and ensuring that we provide the appropriate conditions for this choice without collapsing into the patronising attribution of false consciousness to women, especially women who are 'different' to us. The debate around female veiling has often crossed this line. Too often I have heard intelligent feminist thinkers allowing their argument to collapse into the patronising attitude of 'poor illiterate traditional Muslim women, if only they could come out of the darkness into the enlightenment as we have, then they would not choose either this misogynist religion or these backward religious practices; lets ignore their real choices and desires in the here and now; lets put them in the privileged position of being free of Islam and then speculate about the choice they would make...'. I think it's probably crystal clear from the way in which I have caricatured this viewpoint that I have very little time for this type of patronising and crude analysis of the actual choices, conduct and desires of Muslim women. There is a lot to say about this approach but I just want to make two points. First, this analysis ignores the reality of what is happening across Britain and Europe. The assumption that women would throw off Islam when presented with greater choice living in free and liberal societies has not happened. Throughout Europe, Muslim women are emerging into the public sphere and they are asking for full recognition as free and equal European citizens whilst at the same time being deeply committed Muslims. Second, I also think this approach, which holds up an essential and unchanging model of Western feminism as the 'exemplar' and the 'truth' towards which all women should aspire, does a great disservice to all women. It assumes that Western feminism has 'got it right'. It leaves no critical space to challenge patriarchy and harm to women as general universal problems for all women. Something like this happened in France during the headscarf cases. French feminists found themselves trapped when they insisted that Muslim women

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should adopt a model of politics which many French women argued had failed to deliver the equality and justice that they sought.

The 'Integration' Debate

In the present discussion on the integration of Muslims into Britain and the EU the issue of Muslim women is taking on a disproportionate significance. The 'great veil debate' and the recent focus on women in the speech of the PM on multiculturalism are an example of this pre-occupation with Muslim women and their rights. Moreover, the issue of Islam versus the West, and the integration of Muslims in Europe, has also focused on Muslim women because there is a perception that as mothers they are the bearers of value and tradition for the next tradition of Muslims. Muslim women's dominant role in raising the next generation of European Muslim citizens is another way in which they are given a critical role in integration. There is therefore an increasing tendency to see Muslim women as the main vehicles of integration but also the first victims of the failure of integration.

There is also an increasing tendency, in Britain and the EU, to argue that there is an inherent incompatibility between Islam and the values of freedom and democracy. Of course, this is nothing new in Britain. In the 1890s it was argued that Jews because of their adherence to a religious text (the Torah) and religious law (the Talmud) were not capable of living in peace in the liberal democratic institutions which the British had developed over a long period of time (as Colin Holmes shows in his classic study of anti-Semitism between 1890 and 1930). What is significant about this Islam versus the West debate is that the issue of Muslim women has become an important marker: both for Muslim men and also for non-Muslims and most significantly for the State. The equation of Islam and women's oppression is deeply problematic. It is self-evident that like all monotheistic religions it will be difficult to reconcile Islam with modern concepts of gender equality. Nevertheless, as I have shown in my own work, the Islamic religious tradition contains within itself vast intellectual resources which confirm the values of female autonomy, individuality and equality. However, the debate on Muslim women

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rarely leaves any space for any critical discussion – whether an external or internal critique – of these issues. Instead, there is a zero sum game being played out: between Muslim men who want to resist pluralism and change; and critics of Islam who want to use the issue of gender as a basis for criticising Islam. The resulting stereotypes that are generated proliferate in our public sphere (political discourse and the media) conflate key categories such as Islam, Muslims, ethnic minorities and immigrants.

All of these factors, as well as the international and domestic concerns about political violence by Muslims, make it difficult to formulate principles which can be a practical guide to policy makers in this area. However, I would like to set out some principles that can act as a guide to policy in the context of Muslim women.

Devising Policy to Mainstream Muslim Women

I have argued that the starting point for any analysis of Muslim women is free choice. Moreover, we need to recognise the independent agency of Muslim women: both distinct from the control of Muslim men; but also distinct from the control and manipulation of non-Muslim women. However, we need to think about the context within which Muslim women exercise free choice. There are a number of specific issues which come to mind immediately in the context of devising policy to support Muslim women. Some of these were mentioned by the PM in his speech last week: they include the issue of forced marriage; and access to mosques. Other problem spots are ‘honour killings’ and ‘domestic violence’. More generally, there is a perception that Muslim men, and Muslim communities, are exceptionally patriarchal and need to ‘catch up’ with 21st century values. Rather than addressing each of these issues in turn, I want to just sketch out some general principles that could inform policy makers, who want to devise policies that are responsive to the needs of Muslim women. As I have already mentioned, there is a misleading assumption that, for example, certain problems such as patriarchy or violence are a problem only for minority communities. However, and I want to stress this point, there are, as I argue below, certain features of minority (Muslim) women’s lives that require a distinct and specific response, and what we need to do is to find an optimal

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balance between universal and discreet policies. Muslim women's rights need to be part of a general framework of gender equality.

1. Complex 'intersectional' equality

The most important challenge facing policy makers in this area is to ensure that concepts such as equality capture the complexity of the identity of Muslim women: who are often at the intersection of categories such as race, religion and gender. Moreover, Muslim women are at specific risk of injustice from a complex range of sources. In some cases the oppression they suffer will be from discrimination outside their own communities: e.g. general sexism; racism and especially increasing forms of anti-Muslim prejudice; and religious discrimination. In other cases, however, the oppression that they suffer will be embedded deep within their own Muslim communities. Muslim women must understand the subtle way in which both religious and gender inequality oppress. They will then be in a better position to develop the political consciousness to challenge injustices. At the same time, Muslim women need to develop a distinct and separate political consciousness from that of Muslim men. This will allow them to resist the internal causes of their oppression. So the most urgent act of empowerment for Muslim women is to reclaim the power of self-definition: not only from non-Muslims but also from Muslim men.

2. Muslim women's issues should be mainstreamed into feminism and the gender equality stream rather than being treated as part of the race equality agenda.

There has been an unfortunate tendency to assume that Muslim women fall into .1 the categories of either 'race' or 'religion'. Partly because of the crude model of feminism that has not allowed a more flexible approach towards categories such as 'women' or 'female consciousness' Muslim women have not been encouraged to see themselves as part of the women's movement more generally. I think this is a catastrophic mistake for a number of reasons. First, it places the power over the agenda

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for Muslim women in the hands of those who negotiate about 'race' and 'religion' in Britain: either politicians representing the majority; or often male community leaders representing the minority 'religious' community. I think one way round this impasse to empower Muslim women more directly is to see that they are at the intersections of both gender and religion, and to open up the category gender to accommodate the most pressing needs of Muslim women. For example, it has always baffled me that the issue of headscarves is seen as solely raising an issue of religious discrimination. After all, a ban on headscarves is also a paradigm example of discrimination against women. It's just that it is not discrimination against majority women – it is discrimination against a small and powerless minority within the category women. Ironically, the French feminists are right when they argue that the headscarf is uniquely about gender even if they are grievously wrong in concluding that the headscarf is always and inherently a form of gender inequality. Prohibitions on headscarves are always treated as a form of religious discrimination when they could just as easily be presented as a form of gender discrimination against women. After all, a ban on wearing headscarves in the public sphere, e.g. higher education, will be a form of indirect gender discrimination against Muslim women in their access to education. The failure to treat the ban on headscarves as an issue of gender discrimination is part of a wider malaise. The discrimination that Muslim women suffer through headscarf bans operates at the margins of race, religion and gender. It is a form of intersectional discrimination. The reason that the 'gender' aspects of the analysis disappear from view is because the category 'women' represents the viewpoint and interests of those women, and feminists, who have greater social power, and are able to impose their constructions of female empowerment upon all women including Muslim women who want to wear the headscarf. I think the way round this is to encourage the issue of Muslim women to be part of a wider agenda for gender equality. This will ensure that rather than vesting power in the hands of men, the Muslim women and girls who are in most need of protection or assistance are involved and consulted in developing and implementing measures of protection and also prevention. Therefore, Muslim women with direct experience of the issues in question should be empowered to drive the policy agenda.

3. The Allocation of Resources – Supporting Grass roots initiatives

This leads on to the next and critical point which is about resources. In my own work, and in a recent research study by the LSE and the Nuffield Foundation, it is clear that there is a lack of resources for civil society and NGOs in tackling these issues and supporting Muslim women at a grass roots level. Apart from the obvious point about better financing this raises another key issue. There is a tendency on the part of some national leadership and some governments to attribute the ‘blame’ for the failures of Muslim women on their religious culture. This approach treats problems of socio-economic marginalisation or violence as *solely and predominantly* a problem in the religious culture of Islam or the attitudes of Muslim men. I don’t want to argue that these features may not play a part in the problem and therefore action on re-examining religion or culture and the attitudes of Muslim women may not be required in order to formulate solutions. However, there is now substantial evidence to suggest that the attribution of blame to religious culture or to Muslim male attitudes is often and systematically overstated. The role of the State as the most significant power gradient in developing solutions is being underplayed. I would just like to cite two examples of outstanding research and policy work which confirms this. First, Professor Erica Burman’s on domestic violence in the Pakistani community in Manchester illustrates that there is an overemphasis on the causal role of ‘culture’ as a barrier to addressing harm to minoritised women. Second, EOC work on Muslim women in employment, which is a superb example of intelligent work on intersectional discrimination faced by ethnic minority women, confirms that discriminatory stereotypes by employers are a barrier to the opportunities and progression for these women.

4. Who should take the lead on these issues?

Organisations such as the MCB should mainstream issues of gender, and as the National Women’s Commission’s conclusions confirm, many Muslim women do want greater participation in Muslim organisations. Moreover, Muslim organisations have a key role

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to play in challenging stereotypes and attitudes of Muslim men in these communities. There is evidence that individuals in the Muslim community are committed to the values of equality and non-discrimination. (2005 survey for the Cabinet Office on stereotypes). Muslim organisations need to provide leadership that allows Muslims to live up to these values in their daily lives and conduct.

However, the work of Muslim organisations cannot be a substitute for the responsibility of the State to ensure that it protects Muslim women as full and equal citizens. Therefore, the lead role on these issues has to come from the State and its institutions. The DTI, gender equality unit, EOC and most importantly the new CEHR are examples. Where legislation is used as a lever for change it needs to go hand in hand with adequately resourced educational and social service provisions.

I also think it's important for the State and public institutions to take a lead role in this because it performs another critical function. Where Muslim women see that their interests are sincerely respected by public institutions they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to these British national institutions. As part of that process, it is also critically important for Muslim women to be represented in the media, in the public sphere and in public life. We should not underestimate how important it is for young Muslim women to see role models such as Kishwer and Salma in the public sphere. Organisations such as the Fawcett Society also have a crucial role to play in facilitating that process and facilitating the increasing access of Muslim women to public participation.

Conclusion

I would like to end on this point but also on a personal note. On a visit to the city of Fez I walked along the narrow lanes of old medina and I approach the mosque and university complex of Kairouin. The mosque and university were built and founded in 857 by a Muslim woman called Fatima Bint Mohammed El Feheri who was a refugee from Tunisia. The university which Fatima el Feheri founded predated Bologna, Paris and also

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of course Oxbridge. Those who studied at this university included Ibn Khaldun the founder of the earliest methods for the social sciences; Ibn Rush (Averroes) whose philosophical method and translations of Aristotle were used by later Enlightenment thinkers and Aquinas; they also included Muslim mathematicians whose work was studied by Pope Sylvester II who went on to found the mathematics faculties in Paris to promote mathematics in Europe. Therefore, it was a Muslim woman who founded a key centre of learning that contributed to the production of knowledge that we take to be key part of European civilisation. European British Muslim women are a living embodiment of the Islamic intellectual and religious tradition, as represented by Fatima el Feheri. They are also, simultaneously, part of a tradition of Western feminism that has achieved outstanding achievements for women through female emancipation, as represented by Millicent Fawcett. I believe that the task of those who are leaders and policy makers - feminists, Muslims, and non-Muslim who are concerned with the well being of Muslim women - is to ensure a greater convergence between these two traditions. Their task is to allow Muslim women to live at peace with the faith that they have chosen, Islam; whilst at the same time recognising them as full and equal citizens in the countries in which they live, Britain and Europe.