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*Exploring Feminist Strategies in the  
Islamic World*

**Faisal Al Yafai**

2009

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# Exploring Feminist Strategies in the Islamic World

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Faisal Al Yafai

The genesis of the idea for the fellowship came from my time as a journalist in the Middle East. I had spent several years in the region and one of the aspects of the societies that most fascinated me was how different the lived reality of Muslim women was from the perceived reality in the West.

Indeed, even the definition of these women as Muslim was problematic, because they would not have identified themselves first and foremost as Muslim. Once we identify them as Muslim, we are placing their religion as their primary identifier, which may not be how they see it, and it may not reflect the reality of their lived experience. So that was a very interesting observation to me, and a very interesting distinction between the perception in the West and the reality in the Middle East and indeed in the broader Islamic world.

That led to a second observation, based on the experience of British Muslim communities, but with, I came to understand, parallels in other Western Islamic communities. And it was this: that women in the West from Muslim communities tended, in their negotiations with their families and communities over gender roles, to draw on only two broad sources of information. One was their own particular ethnic traditions, whether that was Arab or South Asian or African or European, and the other was the religious texts themselves, which tended to be interpreted as unchanging.

But what I'd seen as a journalist in the Middle East was that actually there was an incredible variety of ways in the way gender roles were defined and negotiated. And if that was the case in the Middle East, which shares a common social and cultural heritage, it must also be the case across the wider Islamic world. Across this vast expanse of humanity, there must be myriad forms of interpretation, of negotiation, a variety of ways that feminists are interpreting their cultural and religious traditions. And if in these Muslim communities they are reinterpreting their heritage so radically, there must surely be lessons and strategies for British communities, too.

That was the beginning of the journey, a journey that took me from Lebanon's capital Beirut, the most eclectic and cosmopolitan city in the Middle East, through India's vast cities of New Delhi and Mumbai, and on to Jakarta, the largest city in the world's largest Islamic nation, and further to Aceh, the furthest western point of the Indonesian archipelago, that once sought to break away and create a separate Islamic state.

I met and interviewed artists, academics and activists; journalists, students and public figures. Nearly two dozen women, totalling hours of discussions and, when transcribed, tens of thousands of words. It would be the work of a book to put all of those interviews into context and draw out the themes and topics. And indeed, that is what I am currently working on, a book about feminism in the Arab and Islamic worlds, which will incorporate many of the discussions, experiences and ideas that this fellowship raised. What I've sought to do in this report, instead, is to give a flavour of the discussions and the strategies encountered on my fellowship.

# Lebanon

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Lebanon is an enormously interesting country, and a country that has been widely studied by people from outside the Arab world, owing to its position between several political and social spheres - between Europe, the Arab world and Africa, affected by the legacies of both English and French colonisation, and with influences from across the world due to historical Lebanese emigration. Lebanon has also suffered the trauma of having the wars of the rest of the region played out across its territory, resulting in a finely balanced mix of religious and political affiliations.

That provides the background to any discussion about feminist strategies in Lebanon because it is important to understand the social contexts the Lebanese find themselves in, negotiating different religions, before you can start to discuss the strategies that they have developed.

A good example of this came from Lina Khoury, a playwright who wrote a Lebanese version of "The Vagina Monologues", called "Hakeh Niswan" ("Women's Talk" in Arabic). She pointed out that Lebanese society has a complex interplay of religion and culture. "This is our inheritance," she said, "Both religion and culture together. It is there in the way we think, the way we behave, the way everyone around us thinks and behaves, so it is deeply rooted. It is the barrier against which you say, 'No, I cannot do this because God says no.'"

Khoury talked about how much this negotiation between religion and culture affected her. She gave the example of buying a house as an unmarried woman. She said: "I originally bought a house and, my god, everybody was looking at me like, You are buying a house? If I was going to buy furniture, it was like, What do you need a double bed for? This is the society - and you have millions of examples," she said. She said she was less affected by it than she used to be. "Previously I was really affected by it. Now, I've stopped caring. Probably it is about your own acceptance of it."

To some degree, these social negotiations are about whether you accept them or not; although naturally there is a social cost attached to not accepting them. And Khoury, as did other interviewers, pointed out that women's views on social restrictions depended on their backgrounds, because "people come at the restrictions of a society from different angles".

Someone, she pointed out, from a well-off family, might be more willing to accept the social strictures placed upon them, because, in return, they have a lot of financial freedom, they are able to do things, to study, to develop professionally. And so they might accept certain social restrictions. Others, without such commensurate benefits, might struggle harder against the strictures: "If," Khoury said, "you were a single parent, for example, and you do not have the social standing to get the right job, you might feel that these social restrictions are unacceptable. You might feel like you might have to push the boundaries a bit more."

That is a nuanced way of looking at social restrictions in the Arab world. It is inaccurate to imagine that every person is chafing against social restrictions. Rather that social norms are beneficial to people in some areas, but not beneficial in others. One person might accept social restrictions in terms of who she can socialise with, in return for circulating among the social elite and having significant material benefits. Another might accept violating a cultural norm in return for pursuing her professional life. There are benefits and costs, and to understand what Lebanese choose to argue for, one must understand it in context.

Interestingly, there are differences between the generations. In an interview with a couple of members of the feminist collective Nasawiya, both in their mid-twenties, these differences, and their particular approach, was highlighted. When I interviewed the broadcaster Giselle Khoury, she said feminism was a very old word to her. But a new generation of Arab feminists are reclaiming that word. More importantly, they are creating strategies that are particular to Lebanon, so even if the word is sometimes criticized as a foreign import, the strategies are not.

The feminist strategies they create are entirely to do with Lebanese questions, and the answers they provide are specifically Lebanese. With this generation, these are often legal questions. For example, whether there can be civil marriage. Or whether, if you are married, whether in law your husband is your guardian. And they are focusing on legal avenues, particularly around the status of civil laws.

For this generation of activists, feminist activism is about recognising that they have different aspirations and that they need to find answers to those aspirations from within the society itself. For them, the legal structure is very important. Indeed, some of the cultural and social questions that dominated the discussion of other feminist activists - about how people navigate their lives in society, the expectations of friends and families, the expectations about sexual expression – are much less important for them than the legal issues.

The point about this feminist strategy is that they are using the existing social structures, the existing strategies, to push the boundaries, rather than trying to tear up everything and start again (which would, as Lina Khoury discussed, put you very much outside the society). Instead, they

work within the society, within the structures of the particular community, and through that, they push the boundaries.

One of the reasons for this focus on laws and on legal questions, according to Nasawiya, is that they don't believe that a woman can be liberated just by the way she looks or acts. They believe liberation has to have a legal foundation. In this they are critiquing the ideas sometimes expressed by visitors to Lebanon (and indeed residents) that because the social lives of women are extremely unrestricted - indeed in some respects the social mores of Lebanon appear more open than some Western countries - that this in itself is a form of liberation. Nasawiya disagrees. "You cannot look like you are liberated, act like you are liberated if you are in fact second-class in the eyes of the law", said one of the activists. And so her view was that you have to start from that. You have to start from legal equality, and then social and cultural changes will come. But if there is not a foundation of legality then the outward appearances do not matter.

"You cannot be divided in this sense. You cannot enjoy certain rights, but you are okay with not having other rights. You cannot on the one hand have the right to travel, but then if you get divorced, you do not have custody of your child. True equality is having both. Either you are equal in the eyes of the law, or you are not liberated."

Two perspectives, then, on feminist strategies in Lebanon: on the one hand, accommodating some strictures, while agitating for others; on the other, refusing to accept cosmetic changes if the bedrock remains unequal.

# Indonesia

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Indonesia was the longest period of time I spent in one place during my fellowship and it was the clear highlight of the fellowship. A fascinating country, and one I would not have had the opportunity to visit and do research in were it not for the fellowship.

Indonesia is a country, as with Lebanon, and as with India to an extent, that is in transition. The country has emerged from a long period of authoritarian rule and is now establishing itself as a democracy, the largest in the region.

Because of the size of the country, there are naturally many social and political strands within it. In particular, I focused on two elements. One, the broader picture of Indonesia from Jakarta, the capital city, and the other in the breakaway province of Aceh. I have divided my research into those two areas.

## Jakarta

I spent three weeks in Jakarta conducting interviews. One observation, which was borne out in the research, is the way that the different religions interact, and the impact that various strands of Islam from around the world are having in Indonesia. Some of this came out in part of the conversation I had with Inayah Rochmaniya, a professor at the National Islamic University in Yogyakarta.

One of the things we were talking about was the influences on Indonesian Islam, and we discussed how some of those influences came from the Arab world, in particular from Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabi ideology that has a significant influence on what happens in Indonesia.

But also the strands of Islam that come from South Asia, from Pakistan and from India, and the influences that region brings to Indonesia. And then, of course, Indonesia itself is affected by other places in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia, next door.

But one thing that you notice there, and it is interesting that you notice it there at the very edge of the Islamic world, is that actually despite the appearances of geography, because Indonesia appears to be very far away, in fact, there is an enormous amount of dialogue occurring. There is a cross-pollination of ideas, of people, of institutions. And not merely religious ones: the role of secular ideas from the Arab world, the economic success of Singapore, the political movements of Asia, all of these have an impact. The overlap is astonishing.

All this is background to understand two things. The first is that Islamic ideas and movements, as they are understood in the West, are understood in a particular context. But those same movements can have very different meanings elsewhere, in a different context.

So in the UK, for example, we tend to understand Islamic movements such as Islamism and Salafism in the context of their expression in the Middle East and South Asia, because both regions have a historical relationship with the UK and UK Muslim communities.

But in Indonesia, those same movements can mean something very different. So, for example, Salafism, which in the Middle East is a rather austere philosophy of religion, has been taken and interpreted in Indonesia to be a very practical philosophy. Naturally, there are nuances and details, but it was a real revelation for me to see how the ideas of Salafism, that have come out of the Arab world, have been taken to Indonesia and, in the course of two or three decades, interpreted and overlaid with different emphases, to the point where the Salafist movement in Indonesia is very different to that movement in, say, Egypt. The local aspects – the impact of national politics, the specific socio-economic circumstances of the religious communities, even the charisma and interests of local leaders – all of these can shape the original ideas in rather different directions. That was a real revelation to me, to see that impact first hand.

The second point is about feminist strategies and how women navigate the political and community currents that surround them. Here, again, there is a complexity to these strategies. They are dependent to some degree on politics, and not merely perhaps on political ideas, but actually on political groups. So the strategies that women might use in Indonesia might depend on the political groups that they are part of.

More than one interviewee in Jakarta drew clear delineations between various political forms of Islam and feminism. They would distinguish among Muslim feminists, Islamic feminists, Islamist feminists, plus a host of divisions among secular or liberal feminists, liberal Muslims and so on.



What I found is that there was a real awareness of the differences between these labels, of the detail of what each label meant. In Jakarta, activists had a real understanding of the different strands, and how they related to each other, and an understanding that Indonesia had to navigate carefully between these different strands. I would actually say there seemed to be a greater awareness of these different strands in Indonesia, versus Lebanon on this fellowship, but also my broader experiences in the Middle East.

## Aceh

Aceh is a province at the western point of Indonesia. Historically, it was the first part of the archipelago to convert to Islam, after the faith was brought by Arab and Asian traders, perhaps around the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Since 1976, the region has had an active separatist insurgency, which later turned violent.

But after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which devastated the region - the extraordinary destruction of which was still apparent when I visited - the movement formed a peace deal with the central Indonesian government, which brought the region a large measure of autonomy.

The result of that autonomy was a codification of religious laws that were in place before. Essentially bringing a measure of sharia law - religious laws - to the province. Such laws prohibited drinking alcohol, gambling and being alone with an unrelated person of the opposite sex. There were also laws specifying the way women should dress.

Such laws were a manifestation of what I've called the 'hisbah' state (hisbah being the Arabic word for a religious doctrine that encourages a certain way of living), essentially using laws to promote a particular way of living, of seeking to make people "better" (in a particular religious understanding of the word) through laws.

The difficulty with these laws lies in the interpretation of the religious injunctions on which they are based. It is difficult to compromise with religion, so when one interpretation of religion is codified into law, it makes that interpretation the only one. Interpretation and flexibility, which are hallmarks of a good legal structure, become difficult.

In Aceh, interviewees commented on two aspects of what is an enormously complex question: firstly, how sharia law was seeking to remedy problems that existed before the peace agreement. Indeed, it was interesting to see first hand how some people accepted and perhaps even welcomed some of the religious laws because they solved real problems. And secondly, how the lack of interpretation of the religious texts was creating a culture that allowed corruption and imposed a particular, narrow interpretation which often helped the ruling elite.

# India

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As with Indonesia, India is a country undergoing enormous social and political changes. One of the issues that received a lot of media attention during my fellowship was sexual violence in the country, following a horrific incident where a young woman was gang-raped on a bus in New Delhi, and later died of her injuries.

The incident sparked a country-wide debate about sexual violence and became a rallying point for women to talk about sexual harassment, discrimination and violence in Indian society. Sexual violence in India intersects with various questions about the role of women in Indian society. It has to do with women's involvement in the public space, with religion, with family and community honour, with an imbalance of power between the genders.

One of the points that came out of my time in India was that the lessons of Indonesia are replicable in somewhere like India. The lessons of Indonesia were that often families or communities will desire to stop women doing certain things - entering the public space, or having the relationships with men that they desire, or accessing education – and will seek to justify such restrictions through religion. (A similar point was made by interviewees in Lebanon.)

In India, particularly with the background of this rape in New Delhi, it was interesting that some of the interviewees pointed out that, afterwards, the risk of sexual violence was used as an excuse. So, parents took their daughters out of school after the rape, saying it was too dangerous.

So, in fact, that sexual violence that women were exposed to in the public space, had a knock-on effect on their life chances, because when they were pulled out of school, or their access to the public space was restricted, suddenly what happens is that their general freedom is limited. Their potential to educate themselves is limited, thus in turn limiting their potential to earn money, to raise families and so on. That in turn has a knock-on effect, of course, on their life chances, because if women cannot earn money they have to rely on their husbands, which in turn makes them more dependent.

At the beginning of that chain, however, is the initial justification that removing women from the public space was justified, either with regard to protection from sexual violence, or with regard to religion (which itself is often framed as “protection” from various perceived ills).

So women are hit twice, and that led to a discussion about how the honour of a community is seen as being vested in the body of a woman, and how dangerous that is. Because when the honour of a community is vested in a woman, it means that woman ceases to be an individual and becomes an idea, a concept, that needs to be protected. It needs to be cosseted. And a natural way of protecting something is to limit its freedom, circumscribe its ability to move in the world, to be better able to protect it.

I asked one interviewee, Sabah Khan of the feminist collective Awaaz-e-Niswan, why she thought that it was so common for the honour of the community to be vested in women, and she laughed and said, “Well, that is how patriarchy operates”.

There is a wider point about honour. This use of women’s honour as the place where the honour of the community, the collective honour, resides is part of a rise in fundamentalism. It is, in fact, a global phenomenon, not limited to India and indeed not limited to the Muslim community. In India, this issue is seen quite keenly, because of the delicate relationships between the large Muslim community and the majority Hindu community. Both communities have become more fundamentalist and have asserted their identity through religion. The Hindu community has also become more nationalistic.

This rise of identity politics has come about for many reasons: a consequence of the war on terror, a difficult relationship between India and Pakistan, the competition between communities in India for limited resources, the need of political parties like the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to motivate their bases. All have contributed to the rise of entire communities identifying through religion, and the need to protect the community to protect the religion, and vice-versa.

From there it’s a short, well-trodden step to the idea of community virtue, and to the idea of women’s virtue as the thing that is invested with the community’s honour. So it is important that the community defends that. That has brought about a range of effects, not the least of which has been a greater religiosity and a rise in gender and community segregation across India.

One of the things that I took away from the interviews in India was that the question of sexual violence was not a question that was limited to a particular community. It occurred across Muslim, Hindu and Christian communities, crossing both ethnic and religious lines. That is probably a good way of understanding the issue - that is, both a macro issue and a micro issue.

The macro issue is that these elements of sexual violence cross all the usual lines of society. They are not limited to certain social backgrounds or religious or ethnic communities. The problem of sexual violence is faced by women across India.

So it is a macro problem. But the violence, although felt similarly across the country, comes about in a particular social and political context. A lack of the rule of law, general instability and insecurity, these are all conducive conditions. This is the case in India where communities can feel incredibly insecure because the rule of law is very weak.

But the solutions that activists came up with tended to be extremely micro. Starting at the grassroots and forging links of understanding between particular communities in small geographical areas. One interviewee described organizing football matches for young men and women from different religious backgrounds. That alleviated some of the mistrust between the religious communities, and it also meant the men got used to sharing public space with women. That was a very micro solution to what is a macro problem.

## Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are always difficult. There are so many people to thank.

I'm especially grateful to Julia Weston and Jamie Balfour at the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. Both were unfailingly supportive, patient and encouraging. My original plan had to be amended several times, after I was turned down for entry to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (my life as a journalist coming back to haunt me), and then had to amend my travels around the Arab Spring revolutions. Throughout, both Julia and her colleagues were helpful and encouraging.

I'm grateful to every single person who agreed to be interviewed, and to the many more who helped with ideas, with contacts, with company and with conversation. I'm also grateful to Sam Alexandroni, a Churchill Fellow himself, who spoke so passionately and excitedly about his fellowship just before he boarded a flight to Pakistan that he convinced me to apply.

The largest group who need to be thanked are people whose names I don't even know. Even after years of working in countries in transition and at war, I'm still astonished by the swiftness and regularity of human kindness. From the urban jungle of Beirut to the literal jungles surrounded Aceh in Indonesia, unfailingly I met people who would volunteer to show me around, or invite me into their homes, or merely help me with directions or small kindnesses in countries far from home. Without them, I couldn't have completed the fellowship.

## How has the fellowship helped you?

It has helped me immensely by informing the work that I do currently, informing my journalism and essays. And it has helped me grow in understanding: to recognise the lived reality of women across this vast region; to spend time in these societies and see what is happening at the grassroots; to have articulated to me that lived experience, which will allow me to take that knowledge and disseminate it more widely.

## The value of the fellowship

I'd like to say a word about what I think is the real value of the fellowship. For me, the journey has been an immensely enriching experience. And I think the value of the fellowship lies entirely in the experience, not merely in the information. Through the fellowship, you grow as a person, and you grow in understanding. Because the fellowship allows you to do something quite unique, which is to have the opportunity to look at a topic without any particular end result. That open-ended exploration allows you to make connections that you would not have made before. It affords you the opportunity to have new experiences and to take your intellectual understanding of a topic, of your practical knowledge of the topic, in directions you would not have been able to previously. There is no substitute for being on the ground and exploring a specific topic: the real richness of the fellowship came in the conversations with interesting people in interesting locations.

## Conclusion

The fellowship took me to three of the most interesting parts of the modern Islamic world: the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. I would say there were three themes that came out of my research: reinterpretation, interconnectedness and the importance of context.

In those three regions, there are different strands of Islam developing where the religion is being re-interpreted, as a state religion, a community religion, as something that people live by, and as something that political movements use to gain influence. In that way, the religion becomes fluid and the ideas develop in intellectually fascinating ways. Far from being static, the religion and the texts are being reinterpreted in surprising ways.

Recognising that interconnectedness was one of the things that was so valuable about the fellowship; you can see the connections at a grassroots level. To be able to go and talk to people on the Mediterranean and then travel to the very edge of the vast Indian ocean and ask the same questions, to question these connections and influences, is enormously valuable. It is interesting how the events in one part of the Islamic world – the political success of a particular party, for example – can affect what happens in another, very different part.

At the same time, all politics is local. While there is this interconnectedness, and while groups, communities and individuals can draw ideas and experiences from across the vast Islamic world, in the end the particular local context determines the strategies. What works in one place may not work in another. The strategies of feminism that each community, country and individual uses will depend on their context. The politics of the community, its particular interests, experiences and challenges, will determine not only the selection of which problems to tackle but the specific ways in which they are tackled. If, across the vast Islamic world, the challenges can sometimes look the same, the real lesson of the fellowship was that the answers have to be grown from the local soil.

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