

Religion and Society Research Centre



Symposium:

Researching Gender in Religious Communities: Challenges and Solutions

Recent developments in the field of gender and religion indicate a growing interest in contemporary debates on (post-) secularism, body and sexuality, family laws and religious authority. While cross-examining the challenges faced by scholars engaged with these debates, this symposium is a platform for different perspectives to analyse those various experiences in both global and local settings.

Date and Time

Tuesday, 11 November 2014
09.00 am – 14.30 pm

Venue

Bankstown Campus
Building 23, Room G.30 (LT04)

RSVP

By Tuesday, 04 November 2014
(for catering requirements)
To j.fishman@uws.edu.au

Speakers

Jan Ali, University of Western Sydney
George Ioannides, University of Sydney
Nahid Afrose Kabir, University of South Australia
Arskal Salim, University of Western Sydney
Lyndel Spence, University of Sydney
Lisa Worthington, University of Western Sydney

Symposium Organisers

Dr. Farjana Mahbuba
E-mail: f.mahbuba@uws.edu.au

Ms. Lisa Worthington
E-mail: l.worthington@uws.edu.au

Religion and Society Research Centre
School of Social Science and
Psychology
University of Western Sydney

Program Outline

09:00 am	Morning Tea
09:30 am	Opening of the event by Professor Adam Possamai, Director, Religion and Society Research Centre

9.40 am – 11.25 am	Morning Session: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges in the Field of Gender and Religion
9.40 am – 10.15 am	Dr. Jan A. Ali: Orientalist Discourse on Gender Relations in Islam
10.15 am – 10.50 am	Mr. George Ioannides: Gendering Religious Bodies-Politics: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Islam and Queer Theory
10.50 am – 11.25 am	Dr. Nahid Afrose Kabir: Secularism and Gender: The Case of Muslim Girls and Women

11.30 am – 12:30 pm	Lunch
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12.30 pm – 2.05 pm	Afternoon Session: Case Studies at the Intersection of Gender and Religion
12.30 pm – 1.05 pm	Dr. Arskal Salim: 'Not, Until He Has Tasted Her Sweetness': Women Bodies Between Doctrine and Hygiene
1.05 pm – 1.40 pm	Ms. Lyndel Spence: Enchantment With the Disenchanted: Methodological Issues in Studying the Female Ordination Movement
1.40 pm – 2.15 pm	Ms. Lisa Worthington: Rethinking Equality: Progressive Muslim Movements and Female Leadership

2:15 pm – 2:30 pm	Close of Symposium
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Abstracts

Orientalist Discourse on Gender Relations in Islam

Dr. Jan A. Ali, University of Western Sydney

Equality is important in the development and maintenance of a healthy relationship between men and women both in the private and public spheres. However, practical considerations and socio-psychological factors make equality in any social relationship let alone in relationship between men and women hugely problematic. This situation is further exacerbated by the politicisation of the concept of equality through which women's role in particular is negotiated especially in the public sphere. This paper examines the gender role in Islam. The fight for gender equality in Islam and outside it has been raging for decades now and there is no sign yet for it abating any time soon. In this paper I want to make two assertions. One is that the study of gender role in Islam in the last several decades has been undertaken from an Orientalist or Westocentric perspective. Second is that the over-emphasis on and politicisation of equality in gender relations undermines the relationship between men and women and consequently overlooks the importance and utility of a more important concept of equity. I want to argue in this paper that a more concerted and serious focus needs to be directed onto the concept of equity and that it is equity that has the power to bring men and women more closer.

Gendering Religious Bodies-Politics: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Study of Islam and Queer Theory

Mr. George Ioannides, University of Sydney

This presentation explores issues of researching and analysing gender in religious communities and societies through certain points of intersection between the study of Islam, sexuality, and queer theory. It argues that in examining particular academic treatments of Arab-Muslim, 'Middle Eastern' non-normative sexualities, we see the existence of the schismatic view that essentialism and social constructionism are the only two options available for the ontological conception of sexuality. The former paradigm understands non-heterosexual identities and practices as an expression of a universal and temporal category that is progressing towards 'full' expression, with

the West as its model. The latter paradigm, moreover, understands non-heterosexual identities and practices as products of local cultures and histories, which sets them apart from Western expressions of non-heterosexuality, and reads those who participate in non-heterosexual identitarian politics outside the West as 'assimilating' to the Western world. By focusing on an investigation of the discursive matrices of religion, sexuality, and gender present in such historical and socio-anthropological studies, this paper critically evaluates these dichotomous accounts with regards to the historically lived realities of non-normative sexualities intersected with Arab-Muslim subjectivities. It concludes by exploring whether the utility of a queer theoretical lens allows us to better account for the multiplicity of such sexual positionalities, which either can or cannot be subsumed under Western sexual rubrics. It also more broadly enquires into the effectiveness of intersectional and queer-theoretical approaches for an adequate understanding of issues of religion, sex, and gender within recent geopolitical shifts between the West and the Arab-Islamic Middle East.

Secularism and Gender: The Case of Muslim Girls and Women

Dr. Nahid Afrose Kabir, University of South Australia

Secularism generally means that people of different faiths are equal before the law of the land and that religion and politics should be kept separate. Under this principle it is expected there would be no discrimination on religious grounds. Many countries, both Muslim and non-Muslim have policies in place to safeguard secularism however, when majoritarian religious and cultural sentiments have an upper hand, policies remain ignored and minorities remain vulnerable. In the western democratic countries, secularism and multiculturalism are closely aligned. That is why minorities such as Muslims are inclined to migrate to countries such as Australia, Britain and America. However, research on Muslims in the West has found that some Muslims are racially, ethnically and religiously marginalised by the wider society. Structural inequality has been revealed through political rhetoric, media representation, unequal labour market status, racial profiling, and anti-Muslim and Islamophobic acts. The existing majority/minority matter is complex. In addition, the issues within the minority community complicate

human rights concerns further. In this paper I examine the position of Muslim women in the dynamics of inequality in contemporary Western societies. I discuss the multi-layered complexities Muslim women frequently face in secular societies. In the wider society their visibility is often questioned and in their own community they are expected to follow their cultural traditions. As I discuss their multi-faceted issues, I examine the factors that are necessary for women empowerment. This paper is based on interviews of Muslim girls and women in Australia, Britain and America, aged 15 to 30 years.

'Not, Until He has Tasted Her Sweetness': Women Bodies Between Doctrine and Hygiene

Dr. Arskal Salim, University of Western Sydney

This paper will discuss religious law and gender by looking at norms and practices of saving marriages in the aftermath of triple *talak* (divorce) in Muslim communities. An ex-wife after the third divorce is no longer able to return to her husband unless she had married with a new man, had a sexual intercourse with him and later got divorced from this person. This paper seeks to uncover intricate practice of saving the original marriage after such triple divorce in Aceh, which is locally known as 'cina buta' practice where a third person willingly helps both ex-husband and ex-wife to remarry after triple divorce (the person is also called *muhallil*). Drawing on several case studies from Aceh's rural areas, this paper will discuss the way in which certain religious actors in Aceh refer to several Islamic texts to justify the practice of 'cina buta'. The paper will also investigate the extent to which religious laws have been (mis)interpreted in a way that do not ponder some implications to women's health physically and mentally. In particular, the paper will explore the views of Muslim leaders on the use of contraceptive methods, such as pill, condom and IUD, when both an intermediary husband and a woman who sought to return to her original marriage have sexual intercourse. Finally, the paper will consider the incoherent relationship between religious law and gender sensitivity, especially women bitter experiences and possible repercussions of the 'cina buta' practice for their reproductive health.

Enchantment with the Disenchanted: Methodological Issues in Studying the Female Ordination Movement

Ms. Lyndel Spence, University of Sydney

The female ordination movement within the Catholic Church is a dynamic and forceful example of the paradoxical binary of institutional oppression and individual liberation operating within the contemporary religious sphere. Proponents of this movement are seeking justice and gender equality in the face of the systematic patriarchal oppression of women within the Catholic Church. This radical and pioneering international movement is struggling for recognition as a legitimate religious formation as it campaigns for a more inclusive and accountable Catholic Church. The female ordination movement thereby provides a fertile conduit for examining how religion can both oppress individual freedoms and also be used to mobilise political, social and spiritual liberation from institutional disempowerment. Researching such patterns of gender-based oppression within a religious institution raises several methodological and conceptual concerns for any social science researcher. This paper will elaborate on the problematic aspects of this research, raising such issues as the need for methodological secularism in the study of religious activist groups, and ideas concerning gendered reflexivity. As a female researcher, I will discuss how my own perspective both in terms of my gender and my faith, had to be mediated to ensure the objectivity and impartiality of my findings. I will expand on this negotiation process, drawing upon examples and data from my fieldwork with the inclusive Catholic communities who make up the female ordination movement in North America.

Rethinking Equality: Progressive Muslim Movements and Female Leadership

Ms. Lisa Worthington, University of Western Sydney

The diverse forms of progressive Islam all strive to realise gender equality and social justice through a critical engagement with Islamic sources and a re-examination of predominant contemporary Islamic practices. An important feature of most progressive Islamic movements in North America is the focus on social equality and ultimately on achieving gender parity. Progressive Muslims deal with perceived inequalities in a variety of ways. For example,

through retaining a Muslim identity and seeking to change the discourse from within; by identifying new ways of contextualising religious texts; through challenging dominant religious practices with social action; and by reformulating Islamic authority structures. This paper seeks to outline and analyse the methods through which gender justice is pursued in target progressive Muslim communities and organisations with a specific focus on female religious leadership. The data for this research is drawn from two organisations: *Muslims for Progressive Values* and the *El-Tawhid Jumma Circle*. The findings from this research will be used to evaluate the activist techniques employed by progressive Muslims to reformulate religious authority structures and introduce women as authority figures.

Biographies

Dr. Jan A. Ali is a Sociologist of Islam. He holds a joint appointment as a Senior Lecturer in Islam and Modernity in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts and as the Community and Research Analyst in the Religion and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. His main sociological focus is on the study of existential Islam. In recent years Jan has been invited by a number of non-government organizations and government agencies in various Australian capital cities and overseas to deliver Public Lectures on Islamic Revivalism, *Shari'ah*, Terrorism, and various other important topics on Islam. Jan has published numerous peer reviewed articles in international journals and book chapters. He also published a book entitled *Islamic Revivalism Encounters the Modern World: A Study of the Tablighi Jama'at*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2012). Currently Jan is researching *Shari'ah in Australia: A Sociological Perspective* using data based on questionnaire survey, collaborating with Professor Kevin Dunn, Professor Peter Hopkins, and Professor Adam Possamai researching *Muslims on Campus: University Life for Muslim Students in Australia*, and working with Dr Michael Kennedy on a research project entitled *Resilience and the NSW Police Community Engaged Counter-Radicalisation Model*.
Email: Jan.Ali@uws.edu.au

Mr. George Ioannides is a Teaching Fellow and PhD Candidate in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. George has written, spoken, and taught on a variety of topics

that combine his research interests in the study of religion, gender, and sexuality, religion and material and visual culture, and new materialism and posthumanism. He has recently co-edited a special issue of the *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* on rethinking religion and the non/human, and has just published an essay in *Queering Religion, Religious Queers* (eds Y. Taylor and R. Snowden, Routledge, 2014) on the study of Islam and queer theory.

Email: george.ioannides@sydney.edu.au

Dr. Nahid Afrose Kabir is a senior research fellow at the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia. From 2009-2011, Nahid A. Kabir was a visiting fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, USA. She is the author of *Muslims in Australia: Immigration, Race Relations and Cultural History*, London: Routledge 2005; *Young British Muslims: Identity, Culture, Politics and the Media*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2010; and *Young American Muslims: Dynamics of Identity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2013. Dr Kabir's current research project is titled, "Muslims in India: Young Muslims' Identity in a Religiously Diverse Society".
Email: nahid.kabir@unisa.edu.au

Dr. Arskal Salim is currently Senior Research Lecturer at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. His PhD was obtained from Melbourne Law School, University of Melbourne, Australia in 2006. He was awarded a three-years postdoctoral research fellowship by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany. In late 2009 to mid 2012, he served as visiting professor at the Aga Khan University, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, London United Kingdom. Dr. Salim has published numerous works on law and Islam in Indonesia including: *Challenging the Secular State, The Islamization of Laws in Modern Indonesia*, (Hawaii University Press, 2008); *The Shift in the Zakat Practice in Indonesia: From Piety to an Islamic Socio-Political-Economic System*, (Thailand Silkwormbooks, 2008); *Shari'a and Politics in Modern Indonesia*, (Singapore ISEAS, 2003). His forthcoming book 'Contemporary Islamic Law in Indonesia: Sharia and Legal Pluralism' will be published by Edinburgh University Press (February 2015).
Email: a.salim@uws.edu.au

Ms. Lyndel Spence completed a Bachelor of International Global Studies at the University of Sydney, majoring in sociology from 2008-2010. She was instantly drawn to sociology as a discipline. She became particularly captivated by sociological theory, both classical and contemporary, and in 2009 she was honoured to receive the Raewyn Connell Prize in Social Theory. In 2011 she completed her Honours dissertation entitled "*A God of One's Own?: Modernising Durkheim and the Sociology of Religion*". She was subsequently the recipient of the 2011 TASA Honours Student Award. In 2012 she commenced her PhD candidature at the University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr. Laura Beth Bugg. Her core research interests are religion, community, resistance, globalisation, social justice, human rights, identity and gender and she maintains a keen interest in both classical and contemporary social theory. With the assistance of two research scholarship grants, earlier this year Lyndel embarked on qualitative fieldwork investigating the female ordination movement in North America. Lyndel has collaborated on the creation of a new sociology textbook with Pearson Education Australia, and currently has several journal articles in the process of being published. She has also spoken at several academic conferences to date, including the ISA International Congress of Sociology in Japan earlier this year. Lyndel also has a passion for teaching, and is currently lecturing in International Global Studies at the University of Sydney.

Email: lspe8013@uni.sydney.edu.au

Ms. Lisa Worthington is a PhD candidate at the Religion and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney where she also teaches in both the School of Social Sciences and Psychology and the School of Humanities and Communication Arts. In 2013 she was a visiting scholar at the City University of New York Graduate Center while she undertook her fieldwork. Her PhD research investigates the social implications of gender practices in progressive Muslim movements in North America. Her most recent publication is "Crossing Boundaries: Travel and Muslim Women" in *Journeys and Destinations: Studies in Travel, Identity, and Meaning* edited by Alex Norman.

Email: L.Worthington@uws.edu.au