

Text of Migrant Woman Conference Speech

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Huda Jawad ©

I was born in Baghdad and left Iraq at the age of two. I grew up in the United Arab Emirates and Syria before coming to settle as a teenager in London in the late eighties. My parents were political activists during the time of Saddam Hussein and fled Iraq after the death sentence was imposed on them in absentia. We travelled throughout the Middle East and seemed that we were constantly on the move.

My mother has been a shining example of strength and endurance since her childhood. Her great grandfather was a famous religious jurist or Ayatollah, Ayatollah Naini and as a result she was raised in a deeply religious atmosphere. However, Ayatollah Naini was a vehement advocate of constitutionalism and the superiority of reasoning who described freedom of expression as God given. Perhaps that explains in part why she was the first girl in her family to go to university and go on to have a career as a head teacher. Before her, women in her family and social circle were not allowed an education save for home-based Qur'anic and Islamic learning.

Likewise my father grew up in southern Iraq into a family with a heritage for political and religious activism since the 1900s. Both my mother and father fought against the now de-funked Baa'thist regime of Saddam Hussain. As a result of this my parents had to continually flee from where they had settled and make a new start in foreign lands, at least 4 times in their lives. Imagine doing that with two and then 3 young children who also happen to be girls!

Whilst most of the time it was a life rich of adventure for us girls, largely due to our parents' ability to shield from the emotional turmoil, there were some very dark moments in an otherwise happy childhood.

It wasn't until I arrived in the UK that I began to notice the impact of being a migrant, a refugee, of being different has had on my life. When I first arrived I identified myself as Iraqi, then Arab, then Muslim, British Muslim and now a woman of the world! But something strange happened in the early nineties ...society seemed to demand that I choose an identity. Newspapers, TV, political figures and social commentators frequently asked what are you? Are you British? Are you Muslim? Where do your loyalties belong? As if I can only ever be one thing at a time rather than many labels and identities at once. And since September 2001 things changed for me and 2 million other people in the UK. They changed for ever..we from now on were and will only be identified as Muslim first and foremost. And that identity is constructed for political reasons rather than anything else.

Muslims have been in the UK since the Middle Ages but significant migration didn't begin until the mid 1940s and fifties when the British state invited and recruited many Muslims and others from its colonies to come and live and work in its industrial factories after the end of World War 2. Most of the Muslim that live in the UK are from South Indian origin (Pakistan, Bangladesh and India). They make up 70% of the Muslim population and the first generation came from largely rural backgrounds who were semi-skilled workers. The rest of British Muslim community is made up of a variety of cultures, ethnic and linguistic groups such as Arabs, Turks, Persians, Afghans, Kurds, Somali, Black and White converts as well as indigenous

Muslim Europeans like the Bosnians and Kosovars. Those that migrated to the UK came for a variety of reasons including war, violence, dictatorship and seeking economic and educational opportunities . So you can see that there is huge diversity in terms of the experiences and representation of Islam and Muslim in the UK. Now an extra layer of identity and experiences is added by gender.

Muslim and ethnic minority women in particular are rooted to their communities and families. Often the ethical and moral compass or measure of a family and the community is placed solely on women and girls. Hence there are certain expectations and traditions that women must adhere to in order to gain the trust, respect and protection of the family and community at large. 'Straying' away from such norms and expectations (by leaving a violent partner for example) often costs a woman her life. A fact that is sadly true regardless of her religion or ethnic background. That is not to say that Muslim and (BME) women do not lead fulfilling, inspirational and very high powered lives as can be seen by the inspirational and diverse number of women in this room, but it is important to highlight that making choices outside of those offered by the community is not something that is valued but rather frowned up on within minority communities, regardless of their religion. In addition, many women have the added responsibility of looking after and caring for older members of the family which makes dealing with family discord and finding practical solutions to it even harder.

It is in this context and under the guise of regulating family life and family relationships, that Muslim women come up against prejudice,

discrimination and often injustice both from within their communities but also from mainstream society which has often stereotyped their identity and experience as that of inherently oppressed or inferior. This is known as the double bind effect.

The perception of a global war against Islam, a belief that certain devastating interventions in Muslim majority countries are born out of an ideology that sees Islam as inherently threatening, inferior and barbaric, a harking back of the brutal role religion played in Europe in the Middle Ages and a cynical view of manipulating the resources of a resource-rich region? Apart from the latter all the former attitudes are often clumped together to define Islamophobia. The rise of Islamophobia and xenophobic attitudes in Europe and the West in the last 10-15 years has been very well documented and the use of women, Muslim women to justify attacks and prejudices attitudes has been a central part of the Islamophobic discourse as exemplified by the moral panics about hijab, niqab, forced marriage, domestic violence etc. Labels like terrorist, immigrant, failed asylum seekers, benefit cheats, criminals, gangs and groomers are all used and associated with Muslims and in fact any migrant 'other' to reinforce negative messages about Islam and its people. This of course has a unique impact on women which as I mentioned earlier is known as the double bind effect.

Women in general, migrant women, but Muslim women in this case, are used as political footballs, nay cannon balls by all in this debate, whether secularists, Islamists, ideologues or even activists to prove a point or score points and it feels very disempowering from where I am standing and not at all helpful.

Hence the question of “where do people like me fit in?” arises. I am a believer in Islam, its message of universal humanity and its values of justice, equality and fairness. I believe in doing good, treating people good and caring or supporting those who are vulnerable. Such values are not unique to Islam in fact they are universal. You don’t need religion to believe and advocate for such values. I however, choose to understand and express these values in the context of the faith of Islam. I do not recognize the Islam of Taliban , Al-Qaeda or ISIS. I also cannot see God or goodness in advocating hatred of difference and sectarianism. And first and foremost I do not believe in an Islam that justifies unthinking and blind acceptance of tradition, ritual or behaviour in its name. But alas that, with very few exceptions, is being perpetuated by the media and certain sectors of society.

When considering all of the above related factors, how can women like me, from within a minority that is perceived to be under constant attack can be supported to put our heads above the parapet and speak about injustices in the name of our religion without being seen as ‘agents’ of the Western conspiracy against my community or more importantly dismissed within our communities as irrelevant or too westernised? How do I improve the state of women in all society, particularly Muslim women, when I am restricted by my ‘own’ community and stereotyped by mainstream society? What if I am from ‘the West’? There comes a point when for those of us that arrived in the UK as migrants invest so much in society that we make the transition from migrant to British woman..where we value our hybrid and multiple identity. I worked hard to be comfortable with and nourished my

'Arabness', 'Britishness' and 'Muslimness'. I draw power from the different aspects of my experience. I have a lot to offer and have offered to British society. My migrant journey is a powerful tool that I drawn on constantly and it should be celebrated rather than ridiculed or discriminated against.