

Introduction

IN THE FALL OF 1985, the duet “Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves” hit the charts on both sides of the Atlantic with its celebration of, as legendary singers Aretha Franklin and Annie Lennox put it, “the conscious liberation of the female state.” The accompanying video was remarkable in its inclusion of women of varied racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds. Through a montage of sexist images interspersed with women’s accomplishments, the video reminded viewers that the struggle for women’s liberation had started some time ago—and that it was far from over even as the twentieth century was drawing to a close.¹ The refrain of this feminist anthem encapsulated its boldness:

Sisters are doing it for themselves
Standing on their own two feet
And ringing on their own bells
Sisters are doing it for themselves

The single and video were released at a time marked by many accomplishments in women’s rights around the world. The UN Decade for Women, which drew to a close that year, was instrumental in persuading governments to pay serious attention to women’s issues in their policy making. However, as the clashes at the UN conferences for women revealed, women from countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America and women of color in Europe and North America disagreed vehemently with the agendas and priorities of White Western women, including the latter’s embrace of the notion of global sisterhood. Among the points of contention were the colonial and racist legacies and ongoing exploitative relations between and within countries and,

indeed, between women. *Sisters in the Mirror* recounts the protracted history of these tensions as well as of instances of empathy, collaboration, and even solidarity—with attention to women’s rights advocates in the West and the Muslim world.

Feminists around the world tell two conflicting stories about the global history and politics of feminism. One is that it originated among White women in the West, who exported it to the rest of the world, where it took on local forms. Versions of this story dominate in the West and are also repeated by opponents of feminism elsewhere who use this narrative to tarnish all feminist efforts as Western imperialist impositions. Parallel stories circulate about racial equality, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and so on. The other story, often told by feminists in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, is that each society has its own history of indigenous and authentic feminism; this story is strategically deployed against critics who see feminism as a Western import.

We can choose, however, to narrate a third, more historically accurate story—if we understand feminism to encompass both ideas about gender equality and social movements to enact change based on these ideas and if we keep in mind the history of unequal power relations binding different parts of the world. This third story recognizes that people around the world have long reflected on the unequal roles and opportunities of women and men in their societies. However, their ability to speak out about these injustices, put their ideas in writing, and mobilize in movements for change has necessarily been shaped by social, economic, and political factors, including histories and legacies of imperialism that have powerfully, and often painfully, connected countries in the West with those in other parts of the world.

Today many people in the West, including scholars, feminists, and politicians, regard Muslim women as polar opposites of Western women, the former supposedly deprived of all the rights and liberties that the latter are said to enjoy. Muslim women, in that sense, represent the final frontier of twenty-first-century Western feminist humanitarian activism. The third story, however, reminds us—and *Sisters in the Mirror* shows—that, first, Muslim women, like other women, have been engaged in their own struggles for generations. Second, they have done so as individuals with a variety of personal, familial, professional, national, and international concerns that are often connected to but also extend beyond their religious identity and religious practices. And they have done so as members of societies that have been (and remain) deeply enmeshed in global relationships and that, for the most part, have been at the weaker end of disparities of wealth and power, of processes of

colonization as well as policies of war, structural adjustment, economic sanctions, and Western feminist outreach. Third, Muslim women and men have long constructed their own ideas about women's and men's lives in the West, with implications for how they articulate their feminist dreams for their own societies. Finally, in contrast to recent work, including my own, on Muslim women's piety, religious practice, and faith-based or Islamic activism that challenges older Western liberal feminist understandings of feminist agency, I focus here on Muslim women's secular forms of public activism and engagement with women's rights. For that reason I also do not engage with the vast scholarship on feminist approaches to religious texts and theology. As the long history of women's writings and mobilization in and across the diverse Islamic world makes clear, Muslim women are not—and never have been—defined only by their piety or their “Muslimness”; they are also defined by their circumstances, by their histories and experiences, and by the increasingly visible, if not always recognized, roles they have played in their own emancipation.

I should point out here that I use the “West” in this introduction and occasionally in the main text as a shorthand for what is today Europe and the United States. As convenient and as problematic is the term “Muslim world,” which emerged in Europe in the late nineteenth century as a distinct subset of what had been known as “the East” or “the Orient” and encompasses a dizzying array of regions, cultures, languages, political structures, and, indeed, “Muslims.”

In *Sisters in the Mirror*, I argue that feminist movements in the West and in Muslim societies have developed in tandem rather than in isolation, even helping to construct one another. Specifically, Western ideas about Muslim women have long shaped the history of Western feminism, and these same ideas, combined with Western political power and Muslims' ideas about Western men and women, have also influenced feminist ideas and activism in Muslim societies. This book traces the entangled histories of depictions of Muslim and Western women since the sixteenth century and of movements for women's rights in the West and the Muslim world since the late eighteenth century. I end the book in the early twenty-first century, which has seen increased Western political, social, economic, and military presence in the lands where Muslims have historically lived, but also a growing Muslim presence in Europe and North America that blurs the very distinction between “Muslim” and “Western” contexts.

This historical span highlights changes over time in the political and economic relationships between Muslim and Western societies as well as in

ideas about gender equality within these societies. These larger developments prompted changes in how men and women in Muslim and Western societies have viewed men and women in the other, with implications for feminist activism in these different contexts. At the same time the ideas and political engagement of many men and women in these different societies have contributed to social, economic, and political changes. Consider the examples of nineteenth-century British women's support for the British imperial cause and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century US feminists' support for the invasion of Afghanistan.

By reflecting on these different sites together in one frame, I challenge assumptions about inevitable civilizational antagonism between the West and the Muslim world, a notion that has become increasingly popular in recent decades, and of a lag in the emergence of feminism in the latter. While it shouldn't be controversial to insist that male bias and privilege are present in Western as well as in Muslim-majority societies, it is more difficult to show how and why efforts to improve women's lives in even these geographically distant parts of the world have long been interconnected and interdependent.

The extended history in *Sisters in the Mirror* makes clear that these larger shifts in the balance of power between the West and the Muslim world are reflected in the ways each side has articulated its ideas about women's rights as well as how it has depicted the women of the other side. For example, during the Cold War in the second half of the twentieth century, both superpowers viewed Muslim and non-Muslim women in what came to be called "Third World" countries as equally laden with the potential to be brought forward through development and modernization. In recent decades, however, Muslim women everywhere have come to occupy a category of their own, perceived as distinct from other non-Muslim impoverished women around the world by dint of their Muslimness and as oppressed not by economic conditions, authoritarian governments, war and occupation, or even general male privilege but by a uniquely oppressive, violent, irreparably backward Islam that also threatens vaguely defined Western values.

These depictions, it turns out, have served different purposes in different political contexts. Take the figure of the oppressed, enslaved Muslim woman so familiar to us in the post-9/11 era. This figure can be found as early as the late seventeenth century in the writings of Mary Astell and a century later in Mary Wollstonecraft's work. However, while the US government, with support from some US feminists, used the figure of the oppressed Muslim woman to justify the invasion and occupation of Muslim lands such as

Afghanistan, Wollstonecraft used the Muslim woman in the harem, whom she depicted as deprived of her soul and her liberties, as a foil with which to criticize Western male philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and to argue for Englishwomen's rights. Consider now the different global political contexts in which these different Western feminists invoked Muslim women. Wollstonecraft was writing when Britain, having lost its North American colonies, was just beginning its rise to imperial dominance in the East. By contrast, the United States had declared itself the lone global superpower when, in the final years of the twentieth century, the Feminist Majority Foundation began reaching out to Muslim women in Afghanistan as though the United States had already attained feminist nirvana and the time had arrived to channel feminist energies to problems elsewhere. Some US feminists also went on to support the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, despite the extraordinary economic and human costs of war in the countries invaded and occupied, as well as in impoverished communities and communities of color across the United States.

Woven throughout this book alongside stories of conflict are stories of encounters that led writers to pause and reconsider norms in their own society—much as one might discover imperfections when studying oneself in a mirror—including cherished ideas about women's roles and rights. Among the English and US women who, in their words and deeds, dissented from the dominant attitude of their time and society toward Muslims and Muslim women were the eighteenth-century English playwright Delarivier Manley; her contemporary, the English aristocrat Mary Montagu; the American YWCA official Ruth Woodsmall, who toured several Muslim-majority countries in the 1920s and 1950s; the American Margaret Marcus, who rejected the middle-class New York life she was born into, converted to Islam, and became Maryam Jameelah; and the American civil rights and feminist activist Angela Davis, who recognized the parallels between the racist attacks against Muslim immigrants she witnessed in 1960s Paris and the assaults on civil rights activists in the US South—and the need to forge a shared struggle against both. That these women's valiant and thoughtful efforts to challenge the dominant Western narratives of their times about Muslims generally went unheeded is testament to the enduring power of those stories.

While the Western characters in this story are from Britain and the United States, the Muslim women and men who populate this story are primarily from South Asia, home today to a greater number of Muslims than the entire Arab world. Recounting this history of Muslims and the West from