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**A fraught search for common political ground:
Muslim communities & alliance-building in post-9/11
Australia**

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This paper discusses the complex political engagements undertaken by Muslims in Australia in the years since 9/11. In particular, it discusses the political alliances and tensions that have arisen during encounters with progressive social movements, as well as with other 'out groups' such as Indigenous and Gay, Lesbian, Transvestite, Transsexual and Bisexual organisations and individuals. We argue that both Muslim and non-Muslim participants in such encounters must engage in a process of critical self-reflexivity, in order to avoid the hazard of reproducing the processes of marginalisation and appropriation that are so apparent in 'mainstream' society.

In the years since 9/11, Muslim communities in Australia have formed a central element of public discourse on issues of security as well as migration and settlement. During the years of the conservative federal government led by Prime Minister John Howard, Muslim communities and Islam were regularly positioned as posing a multifaceted threat to the national interest (Spalek and Imtoual 2007; Manning 2006; Poynting and Noble 2003). Muslims were constructed as a security threat through their association with international terrorism; as a threat to domestic law and order through their association with various forms of crime, especially crimes of sexual violence; as a threat to the integrity of 'Western' values through their propagation of alien ways of thinking on issues such as gender equality and the relationship between church and state, and as a demographic threat due to their capacity to outbreed 'mainstream Australians' (as foreshadowed by National Party MP Dana Vale during public debate over abortion) (Peating 2006). In response to this political climate, Australian Muslims have received a heightened degree of attention not only from

government, media, and policy-makers, but also from socially progressive individuals and movements who actively sought to resist and challenge the 'dog-whistle politics' (Wright 2000) that characterised the Howard years. Muslims have also developed a higher level of interaction with other 'out-groups', with sometimes mixed results. This paper seeks to tease out some of the fraught tensions generated by these transcultural encounters, with particular regard to gender issues.

The paper draws upon the authors' observations of, and participation in, engagements between Australian Muslims and social and political activists across a range of issues, including the rights of 'mainly Muslim' asylum seekers who were subject to mandatory detention upon arrival in Australia, the detention in Guantanamo Bay of Australian Muslims David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, the 'war on terror' and associated security discourses and legislation, media representation, and racist discrimination and harassment. In discussing 'alliances', we are referring to informal affiliations among individuals and loosely-structured movements, although many of those concerned are also members of formal organisations. These alliances are generally shifting and transient, often bringing participants together for a single event/action, but they involve continuing intersections of individuals, organisations, and ideas.

We also examine the hazards and opportunities of linking Muslim activism (particularly women's activism) with activism undertaken by other marginalised groups, such as Indigenous and Gay, Lesbian, Transvestite, Transexual and Bisexual (GLTTB) organisations and activists. We argue that in building relationships with 'mainstream' feminist and anti-racist organisations, Muslim women have necessarily prioritized the need to maintain their agency and safeguard against the risk of having their voices appropriated by their allies. However, the same analytical lens cannot be applied when thinking about the relationships and alliances that Muslim women build with communities that are similarly marginalised.

Such political and social encounters within Australia took place against an international landscape dominated by the 'war on terror' and by the widespread public warnings that diaspora Muslim communities represented a potential 'fifth column' that threatened to undermine the West from within (see for eg Stone 2006; Albrechtsen 2006). Australian discussions of the multi-faceted 'Muslim issue' were framed by this global context, and often prefaced by warnings that Australia risked replicating the mistakes of other Western societies if due care was not taken. Australian Muslim sensibilities, too, were shaped by this overspill from international events and discourses. We therefore locate our analysis within this broader international context.

Boundary-crossing and seeking common ground

The post 9/11 years have seen both a sharp increase in anti-Muslim hostility and a much higher level of interaction between Muslims and socially-progressive individuals and movements seeking to transcend that hostility. The 'Muslim threat' was constructed as both an internal and external danger to Australia. The 'external' threat of Muslim terrorist infiltration was cited as justification for vigilant 'border security' in the form of the mandatory detention of 'mainly Muslim asylum seekers' from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, when they sought refuge on Australian soil. Asylum-seekers, already vilified as 'queue-jumpers', were increasingly suspected of entering Australia to import violence rather than to flee it. Defence minister Peter Reith expressed this rationale by saying that a forceful response to asylum-seekers was necessary to protect the lives of Australian citizens. 'Otherwise it can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities' (3AK 2001). Muslims were also seen as posing an 'internal' threat, particularly in the wake of the 2005 bombings in London conducted by British-born Muslims. Muslim communities in Australia were viewed as nesting-grounds for potential 'home-grown terrorists'. Conservative commentators such as former Treasurer John Stone emphasised the need for careful surveillance of Muslim communities. 'We are now at war with international Islamist terrorism, and...therefore our Muslim community, collectively considered, now regrettably constitutes a potential threat...' (Stone 2006). Entwined with the 'potential threat' of Muslim terrorism was the threat of Muslim misogyny. The hijab is often cited as an example of Muslim misogyny towards their 'own' women, while the Sydney gang-rapes (a series of attacks by Muslim men against non-Muslim women) were used as evidence of the threat that Muslim men and Muslim gender norms pose to 'our' women (Ho 2007).

This antagonism prompted many non-Muslim Australians to seek out ways of showing solidarity with the vilified communities. As journalist Peter Manning relates:

Young Muslim Arab men were not only [represented as] violent but were sexual predators putting 'our' women at risk across Sydney. Middle Eastern asylum seekers were seen as tricky, ungrateful and undeserving...For the first time, I began to understand what it might feel like to live outside the castle walls of the cosy media edifices. I determined to get out there and do something about it. (Manning 2006)

Manning 'did something' by building links with Australian Muslims, writing a book about his travels in the Middle East, speaking out against political and media vilification of Muslims, and conducting a series of training workshops to impart media skills to Muslims in the public eye. Other activists organised and attended forums and rallies, produced and circulated relevant literature, and sought to educate themselves and others about Islam and Muslims. Such engagements

involved ideological as well as religious and ethnic boundary-crossing. Although many of the participants in such social and political activism were broadly aligned with the Left, others such as former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser were affiliated with conservative politics, while some left-wing activists declined association with Muslim-related campaigns or organisations.

In much of the anti-Islamic rhetoric to circulate politically in recent years, Muslims have not been the primary target. Rather, the target has been the 'enemies within' the West—the Left, feminists, multiculturalists, the 'politically correct'—who are accused from neo-conservative quarters of having failed to adequately value their own civilization and safeguard its borders. Some conservatives allege that left-wing alliances with various Muslim-related campaigns are consistent with a Leftist history of opportunistic support for totalitarian regimes. David Horowitz describes the Left's opposition to the post 9/11 war in Afghanistan as analogous to its embrace of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact (Horowitz 2004: 20). Dinesh D'Souza goes further, claiming that 'without the cultural left, 9/11 would not have happened' because the left had 'actively fostered the intense hatred of America' and was therefore the 'primary reason for Islamic anti-Americanism' (D'Souza 2007: 2). However, others regard left-wing participation in campaigns around various Muslim-related causes as a betrayal rather than a fulfillment of the Left's core values. Some prominent left-wing figures (Christopher Hitchens and Nick Cohen being well-known international examples) have broken ranks with their former political companions because of what they claim is their willingness to accommodate 'Islamofascism' (Cohen 2007; Hitchens 2007). This paper does not seek to join that chorus, but to highlight some of the complexities that have developed in the necessary relationship between Muslims and 'the Left' (especially those who view their work as anti-racist), with particular regard to gender issues and agency.

The challenges facing Muslim women in contemporary Australia, as well as internationally, are not limited to, or necessarily specifically related to, their religious identities. Indeed, for many women in Muslim-majority societies, the greatest challenges come not necessarily from religion per se, but from institutionalised patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988). Such patriarchy is evident in legal codes, social institutions, and community practices. However, a strong case can be made that patriarchy in these contexts is bolstered by, and justified in the name of, 'Islam' (Imtoul and Hussein 2009). The perpetuation and reproduction of patriarchy is often further reinforced in such contexts by the effects of global neo-liberal economics, globalisation, war, displacement and poverty, and each intersection creates its own unique challenges in the lives of (Muslim) women. In the Australian context, work by the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria (IWWCV) has identified a range of key obstacles facing Muslim women. Most of the barriers listed by IWWCV do not bear strong correlation to any religious identity, including Islam. However, these barriers most often relate to the difficulties and challenges posed by global displacements of people (migration, resettlement, refugee

status, trauma, poverty, family separation and breakdown), global economic shifts (poverty, job market restructuring especially the reduction and loss of unskilled and manufacturing jobs, welfare dependency and financial insecurities), marginalisation (of migrants from public institutions, of the needs of minority groups, from support services, racism, gendered/raced violence and victimization and media stereotyping), and changing family structures (domestic violence, separation, lack of family network support services, lack of women's health and wellbeing resources, lack of family crisis support services, changing gender roles, women's double/triple burdens) (Bedar and Matrah 2005).

These barriers are often loosely conceptualised as being either 'internal' (ie, located within Muslim communities) or 'external' (relating to Muslim women's interactions with 'mainstream society'). Those whom Christina Ho (2006) has termed the 'new feminists' - conservative public figures such as then-Prime Minister John Howard and journalist Paul Sheehan who developed a 'selective' concern for women's rights, at least when the victimizers were Muslim men—focused on the 'internal barriers' for Muslim women, as well as on the threat that Muslim men were alleged to pose to non-Muslim women. Echoing Mohanty's (1984) discussion of white feminists' appropriation of third world women's struggles, in this context, Muslim women's struggles around gendered and sexualized violence, and religious autonomy were appropriated not only by white feminists, but by a myriad of punters who saw themselves either as authentic saviours of oppressed Muslim women, or deployed this as a cynical ploy to destabilize Muslim communities and boost the neo-liberal/neo-conservative global project. This selective feminism operates not to 'liberate' women, but to stigmatise entire communities.

Transnational feminism is often implicitly assumed by some of its advocates as well as its critics to hold greater potential benefits for Muslim than for Western women (Hoff Sommers 2007; Benard 2002). In part, this reflects a recognition that at present, 'the West' has a much more powerful impact on 'the Islamic world' than vice versa, so that campaigns located in Muslim communities and societies used for the empowerment of women in the West are likely to have little impact—indeed, are likely to be regarded as ridiculous. However, it also strongly reflects the unspoken assumption that Muslim women are 'oppressed' while Western women are 'free'—that Muslim women should aspire to the liberation already enjoyed by their Western sisters. But of course, not all Muslim women suffer significant gender oppression, and not all Western women are free of it. Western women confronting issues such as inequality in the workforce or domestic violence may benefit from the experience and expertise of Muslim women. Nor should combating Orientalism be seen as beneficial only to Muslims. Orientalist representations of Muslim women are damaging to Western women too, since they carry the message that they are already 'free' and have no further need of feminism. This message was made very explicit after the war on Afghanistan, when a plethora of articles accused 'Western feminists' of defaming their own

culture and betraying their Muslim sisters by whinging over the negligible shortcomings of Western societies rather than joining the (neo-conservative led) battle against Islamic patriarchy, as embodied by the Taliban (Hymowitz 2003; Hoff Summers 2007; Chesler 2005)

While anti-Muslim hate mongers focus on Muslim communities' internal problems (including gender-related issues), anti-racist campaigners tend to focus on 'external' problems such as discrimination and harassment, even while they may acknowledge that internal problems exist. Conservative critics (as well as left-wing 'defectors' such as Hitchens) have characterised this sidelining of internal 'problems' as arising from a reflexive willingness by those on the left to ally themselves with anyone who is in conflict with their own enemies. However, rather than representing a cynical sell-out to Muslim bigotry, the reluctance to denounce misogyny within Muslim communities more often arises from a belief that such problems are best addressed by Muslim women themselves—women who have no desire to be swept up on the white horse of outside 'rescuers' (Abu-Lughod 2002; Hussein 2005). Many Australian Muslim women activists, leaders and intellectuals have been vocal in their denunciations of external, racialised 'rescue missions' (Hussein 2005; El Matrah 2005; Imtoul 2006; Hassan 2007). Such rescue missions add to the perception within Muslim communities that feminism is a 'Western' ideology and that Muslim women who engage in feminism are disloyal to their religious identity. They also feed into racialised discourses that heighten hostility against Muslim women as well as men.

However, anti-racist campaigns that focus on 'external' problems nonetheless have 'internal' ramifications, because 'external' and 'internal' spaces are not hermetically sealed off from each other. In seeking to support Muslims over 'external' issues, 'allies' are inevitably intervening in the internal sphere as well, intentionally or otherwise. Politicians, media and culture warriors have had much to say about how Muslim communities should run internal affairs. We are mindful that many allies of Muslim communities have not wanted to join that chorus. However they are implicated in the internal politics of Muslim communities through alliance building which necessarily provides legitimacy to particular spokespeople. 'External' visibility boosts 'internal' power, so that by providing a platform for particular community leaders to 'speak out' against racism, activists are also helping to build the profile of those leaders within their communities, where their role may be far from positive.

In attempting to navigate the complexities of alliance building, the experience of Muslim women activists [1] may provide some useful points of reflection. In response to the prominent role of gender issues in public discussions of 'the Muslim issue', some Australian Muslim women from across the politico-religious spectrum as well as from various ethnic backgrounds have gained an increased level of visibility as political and social activists across a range of issues. Women such

as Joumanah El Matrah, Sherifa Khan, Sherene Hassan, Azzizah Abdel-Halim, Silma Ihram, Yasmine Ahmed, Jamila Hussain, Susan Carland and Sara Sabbagh have been active in a range of different campaigns at any given time, advocating for the rights of women within Muslim communities, in addition to combating 'external' barriers such as anti-Muslim discrimination and harassment and often campaigning about crises in their country of origin as well. While there is a great deal of overlap between these various issues, campaigning on multiple fronts can often require some difficult negotiation. For example, 'speaking out' against misogyny within Muslim communities often leads to having one's voice appropriated by those who are hostile to Muslims in general (see Imtoul 2006; Zwartz 2008). Similarly, some of the participants in the feminist campaign against the Taliban deployed Orientalist imagery that heightened Western fears of Afghan men. These fears heightened hostility towards Afghan asylum seekers, who were subjected to 'mandatory detention' when they arrived on Australian shores (Hussein 2007). As Ho (2007) suggests:

The rhetoric of women's rights is obviously hypocritical when deployed by governments setting out to demonise other cultures. However, a potentially even more damaging legacy of this discourse is that it can undermine opportunities for women to contribute to political and community debates. The appropriation of the women's rights discourse by powerful and conservative elements can make it more difficult for Muslim women themselves to articulate their issues and perspectives when the defence of women's rights is bound so closely with anti-Muslim racism in public.

The experience of 'imperial feminism' has led some Muslim women to be wary of feminist-based alliances in general. However, Muslim women are not a homogenous category, either ethnically or ideologically. Some Muslim women find more political synergies with 'likeminded' non-Muslim women (and men) than with some other Muslim women. The challenge therefore is to find ways of building these relationships on the basis of justice and equality rather than protectionism or inequality.

Having ventured into alliances 'outside' Muslim communities, Muslim women who identify as feminist often find themselves in the unwelcome situation of having to confront some familiar faces, in the form of other Muslim 'representatives' who question their right to speak. The legitimacy of the 'Muslim feminist' speaking position is often decried within Muslim communities as a direct result of hegemonic associations of 'feminism' with 'imperialism'. Such connotations bolster the legitimacy of conservative claims that Muslim feminists are inauthentic Muslims and illegitimate spokeswomen. It is true that on many occasions Muslim feminists have been welcomed at a variety of socially conscious forums, as organizers (predominantly white feminist and/or left wing) are often conscious of the need to

include such voices in recognition of the diversity within Muslim communities in Australia. Yet Muslim feminists still regularly find themselves bypassed in favour of socially conservative Muslim men (and sometimes women) who have more significant public profiles. This marginalization has as much to do with hegemonic Australian suspicion of 'feminism' as it does to the dominance of conservatism amongst the 'leadership' cohort of Muslim communities.

The individuals and organizations claiming to represent '*the* Muslim community' (for example, the Australian National Council of Imams, Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, and the Lebanese Muslim Association) are often socially conservative and have little in common politically with those seeking to build alliances other than that determined by self-interest. Anti-racists tend to perceive such figures as powerless because they focus on their position in terms of structural inequality and institutions. Providing them the opportunity to express their concerns directly to a non-Muslim audience is seen as a way of redressing the biased representation of mainstream political discourse, while not necessarily endorsing all the opinions expressed.

However, while conservative community organizations and leaders may be marginalized within 'mainstream' Australian society, they wield considerable power within their own communities. Both external validation and external attacks serve to bolster their position as public figureheads. It often falls to Muslim women to seek alternatives to the dominant alliances formed with Muslim communities, but this is usually an uphill battle against perceptions of in-authenticity, being 'minor players' who are not able to 'speak on behalf of *the* community'. Organisations such as the Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, the Muslim Women National Network Australia and Al Zahra Muslim Women's Association are heavily involved in a range of alliances and regularly offer spokeswomen to comment publicly on a range of issues pertaining to their constituents. However, these efforts are not seen as representative of 'the' Muslim community, nor indeed of the particular Muslim community the organization serves, but as a corollary perspective. Patriarchy is an obstacle not only within Muslim communities but also in the relationships Muslim women try and forge with players from the broader community. Anecdotally, left wing and feminist Muslims have expressed the feeling that they are often bypassed by those who share their broad political outlook because of the belief that this viewpoint does not represent the 'typical' Muslim (Imtoul 2006). But this view derives from racist stereotyping in which Muslims are seen as inherently socially conservative. This stereotype influences the search for suitable points of entry into the mythical Muslim mainstream—rendering this in many ways a self-fulfilling prophecy. Why should such views be discounted on the grounds that they are not 'typical' of Muslims when they are not 'typical' of broader Australian society either? The diversity of political outlook among Muslims is mirrored by the diversity within Australia as a whole.

Solidarity at the margins?

Another form of activism whose potential has yet to be fully explored is for Muslim women to engage directly with women from other marginalised communities. Apart from the strategic value of pooling energy and resources, this could also help to reduce the sense of alienation by emphasising to Muslim women that they are not alone in facing certain challenges. It also allows women to represent these challenges as not being particular to Islam, and to focus on the underlying socio-economic, gendered or political factors.

As has been as fruitfully explored during the 'Gender, Violence, Protection' workshops,[2] Indigenous women face similar issues to many of those faced by Muslim women, but at an even more intense level. This can historically be linked to a history of 'racialised paternalism' (Ho 2007) evident throughout Australian history since white arrival. This has manifested itself most obviously 'with colonial authorities justifying their intervention in Indigenous communities by asserting their concern for the welfare of women and girls' (Ho 2007). The 'rescue mission' waged on behalf of Indigenous women has been much more far-reaching than that conducted against Muslim women in Australia, since the degree of government control over Indigenous communities is far greater, particularly in remote areas. The federal government's intervention into remote Indigenous communities has seen the introduction of a raft of punitive measures curtailing the personal autonomy of Indigenous people. These tools of control include welfare quarantining, the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, and the deployment of the army into the targeted communities—measures that were justified in the name of combating the abuse of women and children (Kendala 2008). While Muslim communities have been targeted by similar forms of discourse and by surveillance conducted in the name of national security, Muslims are too embedded in 'ordinary Australian suburbs' for such extreme and discriminatory intervention as that imposed by the 'intervention' into Indigenous communities to be adequately implemented and contained.

However, Muslim and Indigenous women have undergone similar experiences of racialised labelling, very often deployed by the same political and media culture warriors. They also confront similar dilemmas in having to confront 'internal' gender-related problems such as domestic violence while under the white heat of 'external' hostility, in which gender-related dysfunction is represented as evidence of their communities' need for externally-imposed discipline. This dilemma became starkly apparent in 2006 when the self-styled 'Mufti of Australia', Sheik Taj El-Din El-Hilali, was reported as having compared non-hijab wearing women to 'uncovered meat' who had left themselves exposed to sexual attack. In the glare of public discussion, Muslim women's anti-violence agendas were largely sidelined as Muslim communities experienced an upsurge in negative representation and vilification. As Ho (2007) writes:

...in the weeks following the scandal, as the Muslim community once again felt itself under attack, public statements became more protective of the Sheikh, who became seen by some groups as a victim of media sensationalism and political vilification. On October 30, the United Muslim Women Association issued a media release defending the Sheikh as a 'champion of women's rights' and expressing disappointment at 'our elected leaders using the current crises for political mileage at the expense of the Muslim community' ([UMWA, 2006](#)). A community statement issued soon after, and signed by 34 Muslim organisations, similarly condemned the 'hysteria and sensationalism' characterising the debate ([Kilani, 2006](#)). Gradually lost in much of the discussion was the issue of violence against women, as the more 'urgent' priority of defending the community prevailed. Muslim women seeking to critically discuss sexual violence and attitudes toward women found it virtually impossible to do so without fuelling further racism against their community. As one Muslim feminist expressed it, Muslim women became 'trapped' between the media and politicians on one side, and 'misogyny from elements in their own community' on the other. (Ho 2007)

Both Muslim and Indigenous women have witnessed the collective vilification of the men of their communities and families. Nicole Watson describes the effect upon Indigenous women of the 'dehumanization' of Indigenous men: 'As an Aboriginal woman, my heart ached for all of the black men who have added to the richness of my life - Dad, my brother Sam, my uncles, cousins and my precious nephews' (Watson 2008). As Watson points out, the Intervention to 'rescue' Indigenous women and children came only after years during which the government had failed to provide support to those attempting to combat family violence from within the affected communities.

Such synchronicities provide a promising basis for dialogue and activism between Muslim and Indigenous women. However, the relationship between Indigenous and Muslim Australians is highly complex, and alliances within this context must acknowledge differences as well as similarities.[3] Non-Indigenous Muslims must also exercise caution so that they do not reproduce the inequalities of the relationships generated by the dominant culture. This poses particular challenges given the ease with which many Muslims have reproduced the racism and negative stereotyping of Indigenous people as generated by hegemonic discourses (Flynn, forthcoming).

The most obvious point of difference between Indigenous and Muslim Australians is the issue of sovereignty. Many first-generation Muslim migrants arrived in Australia after having been subjected to forcible dispossession and displacement from their countries of origin. However, once in Australia they are primarily engaged in the process

of settlement, while Indigenous Australians are dealing with issues arising from continuing internal dispossession.

There are differences, too, in the rhetorical language deployed. For example, while Indigenous men are primarily seen in terms of the danger they supposedly pose to their 'own' women (and children), Muslim men are also seen as a sexual risk to non-Muslim women (ie women-who-are-not-their-own), particularly in the wake of the Sydney gang rapes and the Cronulla riots. Hegemonic understandings of Muslim men as misogynistic and violent towards Muslim women are framed within the confines of 'the family' which renders Muslim women as 'victims' of familial and domestic violence rather than victims of sexual and gendered violence from 'unrelated' Muslim men. Colonial emasculation of Indigenous men constructs them not as a primary threat to white women but as a threat to Indigenous women (and children) who are thus in need of rescuing by their colonial (white) protectors.

The synchronicities between the marginalization of Indigenous and Muslim Australians provide a basis for solidarity and anti-racist activism. However, such activism requires self-reflexivity on the part of Muslim participants if they are not themselves to engage in acts of further marginalization. In positioning themselves as 'fellow victims of racism', Muslims (along with other 'ethnic' communities) often fail to acknowledge that they, too, need to grapple with the issue of Indigenous dispossession. This view derives in part from a historical understanding that sees contemporary dispossession solely in terms of the legacy of past events that pre-dated the arrival in Australia of most Muslims and/or their families. Muslim communities are therefore not seen as implicated in the need for reparation.

Another hazard in Muslim/Indigenous encounters is the attempted Muslim appropriation of Indigenous identity. Recent years have seen an upsurge of interest in the history of Muslim/Indigenous cultural exchange, such as the trading exchange with Macassan fishermen in northern Australia, as well as interactions with Afghan cameleers during the nineteenth century. This has intersected with an intense focus on Indigenous converts to Islam (Stephenson 2008). While this interest can generate respect and understanding, it can also manifest as an appropriation of the Indigenous sense of belonging to country. Indigenous sportsman and Muslim Anthony Mundine has become an important figurehead in Muslim claims to 'Australian-ness'. Mundine and other Indigenous Muslims cannot be told to 'go back to where they came from', since this is the land of their ancestry as well as their birth. Yet while non-Indigenous Muslims may welcome their Indigenous co-believers as evidence that Islam is not an alien religion in Australia, this does not necessarily prevent them from engaging in the racism that continues to divide Muslim communities.

Shared participation in social and political networks has also brought Muslims into contact with gay, lesbian and transgender communities

in Australia. 'On paper' there appears room for alliances to be built between Muslim and GLTTB groups on a number of fronts; an interest in anti-discrimination and vilification legislation, similarities of experience of marginalization from hegemonic Australian 'citizenship', an interest in altering marriage and partnership legislation to provide recognition for 'non-conventional' family structures. However such encounters hold the potential for friction, given the attitude of socially conservative Muslims towards homosexuality—an attitude, like misogyny, that is often represented as a specifically "Muslim problem" despite its prevalence across Australian society.[4] This potential friction has been brought into the open on several occasions, such as in the wake of a forum entitled 'Islam and homosexuality: an Islamic, scientific, and logical approach', held at the University of Western Sydney. *Green Left Weekly* described the lectures presented by community leader Keysar Trad and psychologist Hanan Dover as 'grossly homophobic', and reported that gay activists were 'extremely alarmed that such a meeting was permitted in a place of public learning and social enquiry' (Harrison 2002). Trad responded by expressing his disappointment that a left-wing forum had failed to provide what he felt was 'uncritical reportage': 'As a supporter of *GLW*, I am very disappointed that Leon Harrison...is attacking us like a right-wing columnist' (Trad 2002).

Tensions again emerged in 2008 when the Australian National Imam's Council circulated a petition calling on the University of Western Sydney to 'reassess' the employment of Dr Samar Habib. Habib is a lecturer at the National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies where she taught subjects on Arabic and Islamic literature and on gender issues. Habib is also openly gay and her sexual identity provided motivation for a range of conservative Muslim voices to mount vitriolic attacks on her professional integrity and academic independence (Winter 2009). In this instance, Muslim homophobia and sexism again curtailed the possibility of encouraging public alliance between Muslim and GLTTB interests by creating a false dichotomy of identity. To be both Muslim and homosexual is widely seen as incommensurable, despite the growing visibility both in Australia and internationally of people who identify as both (Ibrahim 2009).

Despite this supposed incommensurability, the two groups have found themselves linked in conservative discourse as posing a similar threat to the institution of monogamous heterosexual marriage, through an imagined linkage between gay marriage and polygamy. Polygamy (specifically Islamic polygamy) is often cited as a possible consequence of the mooted recognition of gay marriage, in a view that regards any deviation from the heterosexual norm as a 'slippery slope' towards the total breakdown of family relationships. As conservative columnist Andrew Bolt writes 'Tell me why, if we say yes to gay marriages, we can still say no to polygamous ones' (Bolt 2006). This supposed linkage between gay marriage and polygamy is rendered problematic by the fact that there is very little overlap between supporters of gay marriage and those of institutionalized polygamy. Those Muslims who advocate institutionalized polygamy as

a contemporary social practice are generally deeply uncomfortable with homosexuality (although, like Bolt, they may ask 'why' gay marriage should be under public discussion while polygamy is not'). Others respond by pointing to the very different power dynamics involved. As Farzana Hussain from the Canadian Muslim Congress expressed it 'Same-sex marriages are still consensual relationships, while polygamy is about power and domination' (Cheadle 2009).

The assumption that homophobia is deeply entrenched within Muslim communities is brought into question by research conducted by one of the community leaders who has been most prominent in disseminating homophobic opinions. Hanan Dover writes that even among participants recruited at Islamic lectures, and so likely to be 'highly conservative' in their religious belief, responses to a questionnaire about sexuality were 'not as significantly anti-homosexual as was expected'. Dover views this finding as 'an indication of how younger Muslims, through socialisation in the schools, universities and the media, have been desensitized into thinking that homosexuality has a hint of normality attached to it' (Dover 2002). While Dover is often located as 'representative' of Muslim opinion, on the issue of homosexuality she does not seek to reflect existing Muslim norms, but rather to bring them into alignment with her own beliefs. However, it remains true that formal, organizational alliances between Muslim communities and GLTTB communities remain undeveloped in Australia.[5]

Far more developed are the links between Muslim communities and other communities of faith, mostly in the Abrahamic traditions. The interfaith dialogue network is another site where (particularly) Muslim women have engaged with 'other' marginalised women. Tanja Dreher describes interfaith dialogue as being arguably 'the most common community response strategy' after September 11, 2001, with projects attracting widespread public interest as well as government funding (Dreher 2006). These discussions have identified areas of common concern across religious boundaries. For example, Muslim and Jewish women face the challenge of dealing with both civil and religious bodies over family law (Family Law Council 2001), while women of all religions from the Indian subcontinent may confront similar situations concerning cultural practices such as dowry. Interfaith encounters are often complicated by the political background against which they occur. In particular, Jewish/Muslim encounters are overshadowed by events in Israel/Palestine to the exclusion of any substantial discussion on other issues. Yet despite these tensions, Muslims are often more comfortable with interfaith encounters than with other political and social forums, since the focus on theological issues emphasises a commonality based upon the shared heritage of faith communities. Discussion of political issues is often seen as divisive, and therefore to be avoided during interfaith encounters. As Dreher writes: The emphasis on common ground and achieving harmony can also mean that contentious histories and contemporary conflicts are not discussed (Dreher 2006).

Interfaith explorations of parallel religious traditions can be immensely enriching for participants and may help to break down mutual stereotyping. However, the heavy emphasis on interfaith encounters has left other possible alliances underdeveloped, and 'de-politicises' community relations and risks analysing the issues facing Muslim communities as primarily theological/religious in nature rather than socio-political. (Ho 2006)

Conclusion

As this paper illustrates, alliance building for Muslims (particularly for Muslim women) is problematic, challenging and far from straightforward. Alliances are contingent on the convergence of a number of factors which are not easily controlled: alignment of political outlook, activist strategy, timeliness, and the building of inter-personal relationships able to withstand pressures external to the alliance. These pressures come from within the communities of the alliance partners (to conform to internal hierarchies and hegemonic group discourses), as well as from broader communities.

Alliance-building necessarily involves boundary-crossing and transgression. We recognize that the kinds of alliances under discussion are vitally important in advancing urgent political agendas. We challenge non-Muslim political and social activists to look beyond the usual suspects when connecting with Muslim communities. We further challenge Muslims to engage in self-reflexivity and reciprocity when engaging with regard to other marginalized communities.

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Notes

[1] We hesitate to use the term 'feminist' here as many of these women would not self-identify as 'feminist', although their work contributes to a women's rights agenda.

[2] These were a series of workshops held at the University of Technology Sydney in collaboration with Macquarie University (convened by Tanja Dreher and Goldie Osuri) to discuss a range of issues affecting Muslim and Indigenous women and communities.

[3] We are mindful here that such discussions of 'dialogue' or 'alliance' set up artificial binaries of identity. We utilise this strategically for the purposes of teasing out the challenges not as a disavowal of those who identify with both Indigenous and Muslim (and other) communities simultaneously.

[4] In a report commissioned by the Australia Institute, Flood and Hamilton (2005) found that 35% of all Australians over 14 years of age believe that homosexuality is immoral.

[5] We are mindful that the presentation of Muslim communities and GLBTT communities in this paper may imply mutual exclusivity and that this presents difficulties for those who identify with both communities. But unlike the situation in Britain, the United States and some Arab countries, there are not formalised, public voices or organisations for Muslim GLBTT communities in Australia and individuals with these identities have not been involved in public debate and alliance building *from the standpoint* of their Muslim GLBTT identities (Abraham 2009).

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