



Photos by Rana Hadid

# Women of the World

## The Muslim Woman Experience

The legacy of world events since the September 11 attack in America and more recently the Bali bombing and the war in Iraq, has taken a toll on the Muslim community worldwide. Many feel they are unfairly targeted and held responsible for events they have no connection with - spiritually or ideologically. MALIKEH MICHAELS looks at the effect of this on Muslim women, as they are often conspicuous if they wear traditional Islamic scarf.

One could easily argue that Muslim women collectively have suffered disproportionately in recent history. Wars have driven more Muslim women from their homes and to hardship than any other collective religious group. The continuing conflict of occupied Palestine which has been struggling against Israeli expansion since the early 1920s; the war in Lebanon from 1982 to 1988; the Gulf wars including the ten year Iran-Iraq War; the tragedy of former Yugoslavia in the mid 1990's; the Russian - Afghanistan conflict of the 1970's; the unrest of civil war that

afflicted that country for twenty years and which culminated in the recent American onslaught and its 'War against Terror'.

The images portraying women in these conflicts, generally of the aftermath of wars are of poor women crying over the dead, suffering in refugee camps, often with dependent and disaffected children. The images which portray Muslim women often have negative connotations. The ideas formed about Muslim women in the west generally come from the western-based media's generalisation of Muslims. Those ideas are formed

on assumptions made about Muslims who choose to practice a strict observance of the religion or the reactionary 'extremist' groups who have chosen for their own reasons to inflict violence on those who they see as a threat and claim to connect this with the religion. These views are not necessarily related to the real experience of the religion, but they do affect the way Muslim women are viewed in society and consequently how they are treated. Many stereotypes exist regarding Muslim women and many of them are wrong.

The women of the Islamic



Latiffa

faith are part of one of the most historically expansive and culturally diverse religions in the world. Islam is represented in around 270 countries. The number of Muslims in the world is approximately 1 billion, or 20 percent of the world's population.

Women of Islam all have the essence of their religion as a common thread. The common bond of understanding brings Muslim women together as sisters regardless of culture or language. Speaking to the broad range of Muslim women gives a better understanding of their experience of the world and how they feel they are treated in their communities.

## FATIMA

Fatima is a trained youth worker of Lebanese background. She works weekends in a fast food shop to help support her family of three girls and three boys. In her late thirties, Fatima has been married for over twenty years.

A big part of my life is cooking and hospitality. I spend almost my mortgage on food every month. This is the tradition in Islam; we have to serve our guests with five star service. We give the best food to our guests.

Fatima's experience in the wider community includes being President of her local primary school council, studying for a Diploma for Welfare in the Community and working as a youth counselor at a local youth center.

She believes it is important to build relationships across all cultures. We can only get knowledge by exchanging ideas. Some people viewed Muslims in a negative way but after meeting me they say they understand the big picture.

**How do you feel as a Muslim about the war with Iraq and the situation after September 11 terrorist attack in the United States?**

Very disappointed. I cannot see how this is a target for humanity. September 11 has affected me badly but what evidence do we have for this? People at TAFE were looking at me sideways. Just being Muslim makes us bad. We need to get out and communicate and exchange information and culture.

## LATIFFA

Latiffa Craig is an Australian convert to Islam. She is a mother and an accomplished painter in her early forties.

**When did you convert to Islam?**

In 1991, I was introduced to Islam through a person I subsequently married. This was the time of the first Iraq Gulf war. I converted in Australia two years before I lived in Indonesia. I lived in Indonesia with my ex-husband, for four years.

Latiffa worked in the Botanical Gardens next to the presidential palace Kebun Raya, Bogor, Indonesia. She taught



English to the botanical staff and was commissioned to do a series of cards of Indonesian orchards to sell to tourists. She returned to Australia in 1996.

### **What is Islam in your life?**

Islam has opened up the scope of my life. I have been a Muslim for thirteen years and I am still fascinated with studying about God, human nature and the relationship between us and God. The structure of Islam is beautifully simple; there is an enormous amount of knowledge and spirituality to be gained within that structure. As a painter, I have always been inspired by light and nature and felt there was a positive presence and force that was the source of life. With the birth of my child, I was convinced that God existed, but I never became part of an organised religion until I studied Islam and my criteria for reasonable evidence was satisfied.

### **How is life in Australia as a Muslim?**

I mix with my family; I invite

my parents and friends to mix with Muslim friends. I will talk with anybody from any background about anything. It's a bit difficult to mix closely with non-Muslims because of inappropriate conversation, such as gossip or the exchange of intimate details of their lives, which is unacceptable in our religion.

Some non-Muslims regard me as an oddity and question me tactlessly about my lifestyle, and they make negative assumptions about my religion. I am treated like a migrant or as if my IQ is lower. Non-Muslims' life philosophies may not be compatible with my Islamic beliefs. For example, neo-Darwinism and social Darwinism. I find this all pervading philosophy such as materialism and the 'party' lifestyle that pervades western culture as empty and not fulfilling. Non-Muslims tend to assume that because I wear Islamic clothing I am beaten and down-trodden.

### **How is your experience of Islam affected as an Anglo/Australian Muslim?**

I feel advantaged in not being caught up in the cultural binds of Islam. I often get asked questions about my religion by non-Muslims. In general if the conversation gets more involved and real information about Islam is imparted, they generally take fright and don't want to talk about it. I like to teach about the real Islam and give a better understanding of the true religion.

Latiffa gives mosques tours in the Gallipoli Mosque in Auburn and also gives lectures for the HSC religious studies course.

## **TAZIN**

Tazin is a media student in her early twenties who was born in Australia and was raised in Bangladesh. She is currently completing her honors. Tazin is very vocal on campus and a spokesperson on Islamic issues. She writes for university publications on women's issues and speaks on issues affecting Muslims at forums and information days in the general community.



Mirna

Tazin started to observe her religious obligations more and put on a scarf a couple of years ago. I asked her how this experience had affected her.

“When I first put on a scarf, of course, the first task at hand was to explain to everyone of my acquaintances why I wore a scarf. The misconceptions were plenty - even amongst my closest friends - but I suppose they felt comfortable asking me as they had known me previously when I didn’t wear one. After I put on a scarf, I did feel quite inhibited to simply go out for a walk like I used to. But, people weren’t unfriendly and they would generally be nice.”

### **Did you feel uncomfortable on the street after September 11?**

It’s a misconception in itself that after September 11, the Bali bombings, refugee issues and the ‘War on Terror’, that Muslim women had to constantly explain themselves as we had to explain ourselves *all* the time before as well. It’s only that the need to explain arose more after those incidents. After 9-11, there were people who would stop, smile, say hello and ask how I was. There were others who were hostile, but it was mostly glares and stares. And it’s gotten worse over the last year.

If you notice when you’re outside, people feel free to look at a Muslim woman up and down. I’ve seen people stare at my drink, at my food, observe my every move without pause. They don’t even get embarrassed if I glare right back at them or give them a dirty look. It’s as if people now feel it their right to stare and question your every move. If we’re out shopping, I’ll notice the salesperson speaking to my sister (she doesn’t wear a scarf) first or not paying me attention to me sometimes.

### **How does Islam affect your daily life - like how does it come out in your everyday living?**

Now I schedule things around my five daily prayers. If I’m looking for a job, I have to ensure that the employer will allow me to pray during lunchtime. I can’t eat everything. I have no problems in class at uni or with teachers at all.

### **How do you feel being a part of the Muslim community?**

It’s very nice to have a community to fall back against. I have a very close circle of friends who are always there for me. It’s nice to have people who share your experiences and your thoughts. The beauty of Islam is always evident in these situations.

My friends and I don’t agree on everything, we do not share every opinion, but at the end of the day, Islam unites us. Islam allows us to be individuals and yet function as members of an interdependent society.

### **And your personal experience of being a Muslim woman in a western society ?**

Unlike Western society, where you may not be legally punished for dressing a certain way, you are nonetheless punished by social opinion and social consensus. If you don’t have nice hair and a good body, there goes your worth as a woman. In Islam, you can be your individual self, you can have your own opinion and be respected for it. Our worth is not in our hair style or a stick of lipstick. I feel my worth comes from my intelligence, from my ability to express that intelligence.

Non-Muslims may be looking at us condescendingly because we are Muslims and because of the way we dress. But

when a non-Muslim speaks to me, the only thing they have access to is my intelligence and what I have to say. We know we are not being judged by our dress size, etcetera.

They can’t judge me on the basis of my beauty or the shade of my lipstick, because that just stops being a central issue.

Family life is paramount in Islam. Being a mother has the highest position in Islam and is the highest priority in a Muslim woman’s life. If a woman is not married and doesn’t have children, her responsibility will be to help her immediate and extended family. Women have responsibility for teaching children in Islam. This places a focus on women’s behavior and the expectations of women can be high because of this position of responsibility. It is however not only women who have responsibility to the family in Islam.

Everybody has a duty in the Muslim family; the husband to the wife; the wife to the husband; parents to their children and vice-versa; the extended family to each other. The community is like a part of the extended family so the notion of family commitment goes further to include neighbours and friends. Overall the experience of Muslim women is hard to define except for the common goal of the values of the religion and the commitment to the family. These are core elements of Islam; beyond this, women find their own identities and experience in life. ■

**MALIKEH MICHAELS** (a.k.a. Michelle Veneris) is an Australian woman who converted to Islam.