

SPEAKING SIGNS
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LYDGALLERIET

The quotes presented here are taken from the book 'Einführung in islamische Feminismen' (Eng: Introduction to Islamic feminisms)

Interviews conducted by Lana Sirri (LS). Lana is assistant professor in Gender and Religion at the Centre for Gender and Diversity at Maastricht University. Her research lie at the intersection of religion and gender and critically explores Islamic feminist thought.

QM* is a group of LGBTQ Muslims who live in Germany. They are activists and organize various political events and hold workshops.

FM has been giving spoken-word performances on stage in German-speaking circles since the end of 2011. She is an active member of »i, Slam«, a Muslim poetry Islamic league promoting the integration and empowerment of Muslim adolescents.

NS is a legal and Islamic scholar. She is a junior faculty member at Harvard Law School and Institute for Global Law and Policy and Post-Doctorate researcher at the Erik Castren Institute of International Law and Human Rights at the University of Helsinki.

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” (Audre Lorde)

In an ever growing anti-Muslim mainstream debate in Europe and worldwide, gender and the female Muslim body are central to these debates. Therefore, it is important to have a closer look at the different strategies Muslim women have developed and are still developing to take a stand against this tendency and to empower themselves and others. Muslim women are rejecting the binary of oppression/subversion: either you are oppressed by your religion, or you seek liberation outside your religion.

The quotes printed here are from interviewees of different backgrounds; they help to deconstruct the image of the oppressed and voiceless Muslim Woman incapable of acting on her own accord and show how, for some Muslim women, Islam and feminism are by no means mutually exclusive concepts. We learn that not only that there is no single way of being a ‘Muslim woman’, but also, that women from different locations and backgrounds (social, economical, sexual, political) have diverse ways of negotiating their multiple identities and positions of inclusion and exclusion toward the state, their communities, their families and their religion. They challenge the so called universality of western values, and offer different perspectives on how to understand self-determination, freedom and the ways to achieve them.

Muslim women are often spoken on behalf of, which is a way of taking their voice. Are you willing to listen to them speaking for themselves? Are you willing to listen to her personal narrative and inner thoughts which contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of being a person of Colour, Muslim, feminist, belonging to a minority group? Are you willing to listen to how she envisions the world becoming a better place for us all?

Lana Sirri, 2018

LS: “What does self-determination mean to you?”

NS: Self-determination is important to me in relation to both individual and collective choice. I was able to determine my own path as an individual: But not in collective terms. So as part of a lot of collective imperatives, I feel very un-free, very repressed, and lacking self-determination. I am not self-determined as a Muslim, I am not self-determined as a Palestinian in Germany, and I am not self-determined as a Woman of Colour. Often I feel weak because I cannot self-determine things; I can’t self-determine content or the methods available to fight for my self-determination but must deal with the given realities strategically.

LS: What are for you important factors which to lead self-determination?

NS: As regards individual self-determination, of course, there is one factor that you cannot determine yourself and that’s your parents and the family home. That is fundamental. After this, comes the question of education. In my case, the education issue is very closely linked to my origins as a Palestinian and at the same time to the “privilege” of German citizenship, which opened up access to scholarships and visas. In Palestine, education is highly valued because, since 1948, Palestinians have lost almost everything, land, an intact community, so education is the only thing left. Because of this, it was never in doubt that I would finish school and study. So my strategy was self-determination and feminism through education, including feminism by travelling. My thinking and acting as a Muslim woman of colour is necessarily transnational.

LS: Where do you see freedom in your life? How do you relate to feeling free?

NS: Freedom is a basic requirement for action, but at the same time freedom is a really big requirement. In many ways, I do not feel free at all. In fact, lack of freedom is a more important concept for me, I think about it more. Lack of freedom creates more creative energy, probably because the idea is more of a call to action.

LS: How is it manifested?

NS: I notice the lack of freedom when I have to think about what I can say, things which I usually can’t express as I would like to. Or that I have to consider a hundred times before I can say anything. And how I demand or criticize or express something. How I can forge alliances, what I should not say so as not to lose allies. Sometimes you have to test who is an ally and who is not. This is familiar to every socially committed person, whether in networks, clubs, parties or science. But as a member of a minority group it all feels a bit more precarious. I draw my livelihood from other peoples’ acceptance of my being different. And it is not always the case. Difference can be productive, but also problematic. In many forums I don’t know how many will support me. I often have good experiences. But the feeling that you never know if there is someone present who sees themselves as a hater of Islam-Arabs-Feminists etc., that possibility is always on my mind. After all, it’s about nothing less than my identity, at least the way I attribute it to myself, or it’s attributed to me. And there are those moments when people say, “Oh, I thought you were an emancipated woman.” And people are confused because they believe that the more educated one is the more likely one is to move away from Islam or the collective or nation, or from broader concepts. These things are not understood as emancipative collectives. So, lack of freedom concerns me more, I more often feel un-free than I feel free.

LS: What does self-determination mean to you?

FM: Literally that, that I may determine, I myself: I can decide to do what I want without being influenced in any way by considerations of gender, religion and race. Quite simply, that, for example, I can be a rapper although I’m a woman. I used to play football. I was able to do that as a Muslim woman. What I mean, of course, is not rapping about being a woman but just being a rapper. There were all those female MC’s who always had to strip and were only accepted as sort of sex symbol rappers. It should be possible just to be a rapper just like anyone else. To do it without constantly having to emphasize that you are something special because you are a woman.

LS: Where do you see freedom in your life? And, how do you relate to feeling free?

FM: That’s a difficult question because I think it’s not possible to generalise. Lack of freedom here is different from somewhere else. When I feel un-free here that is completely different from feeling un-free elsewhere, in Palestine for example or so. What is freedom? I think that’s another really hard question. I feel relatively free, I think. And that has somehow something to do with my writing, that I can write. And that I had the luck for it to be a really big thing in my life, that I can take it really seriously. Of course that is a selfish interpretation of freedom, because this is something very personal to me. Yes, and, at the same time, from the point of view of religious orientation, I have always been able to choose just how much of it I want to accept. At the same time, I do see the daily occurring structural violence and discrimination, more obvious to some than to others, as a restriction on freedom. When I made a comparison with Palestine I did not mean to suggest that we don’t have any serious restrictions on freedom here in Germany, just that they are less physical. There is no wall, no military, but you have minority discrimination which takes a toll on both the body and the psyche.

LS: What does self-determination mean to you? What do you need to reach it?

QM *: That’s a very good question. Money and a job. And acceptance. To accept oneself.

QM *: To secure your survival, of course, you need certain skills, knowledge, access, information and education. And the will to adapt to the system. And community. I recall the mosque-community in my city. My single mother, without a husband or partner, received support from the mosque-community. Through this community, there were always donations. My sister and I were able to travel, participate in recreational and youth activities, instead of driving to our parents’ homeland in the summer. There were always some activities with the local youth group.

LS: “Where do you see freedom in your life? What does “being free” mean for you?”

QM *: Freedom is something very important, in the sense that I am looking for a kind of inner freedom with myself. So not what I can do, but how I feel inwardly with myself. Also feeling free, feeling more secure with what I am and how I feel: What is the complexity of my identities so that I may exist?

How do we define People of Colour? What about People of Colour who have one or two parents, from a formerly colonized country, for example, from Africa? So there is the idea not only to say, “You experience racism,” but it also has to do with the story your family carries. This is very important to me, because I know that I “pass”. That’s why the kind of racism I’m experiencing here is not the same thing that a person that does not “fit”, experiences. But it still exists. It is very important for me to consider: what does it mean that part of my family comes from a formerly colonized country? And also: What did that do to me?

QM *: Freedom? I really have no idea. I think freedom is something very restricted. Since so many hierarchies of power structures exist, we are so determined from the outside.

Nowadays, in this economic situation, it does not matter how educated you are, how much you have invested in your education. It feels like being committed to living a precarious life. Especially in the context of migration, with the pressure to perform well, to lead a good, beautiful, capitalistic life, to support people in the global South - things like that. So in the sense of the things that should actually make you freer, especially in neo-liberalism, there is the idea that you can choose from so