

Workshop Report
BEYOND “FEMINISM VERSUS MULTICULTURALISM”:
Revisiting the relationship between power, beliefs, identity and values

The School of Law, King’s College London
LSE Gender Institute
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1) INTRODUCTION

The primary goal of the workshop was explore ways of moving through and beyond the “feminism versus multiculturalism” debate. As explained in the workshop outline:

At its crudest, the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism is depicted as a battle between two sides. On the one side, sit ethnicized religious minorities, and advocates of cultural relativism. Against them are arranged the forces of liberal feminism, intent on defending women’s rights and freedoms from oppressive minority practices. This portrayal of the gender/ethnicity interface has become increasingly influential within public policy debate, despite the many scholars, activists and others who have resisted or challenged its terms.

The depiction of gender politics and ethnic politics as being in conflict has bolstered conservative agendas, divided progressive commentators and deflected attention away from the voices of minority ethnic feminists. The salience of this polarity within academic and policy arenas calls for greater interrogation and critical discussion. As such, the workshop sought to identify key problems which have arisen from the portrayal of “feminism versus multiculturalism” and to explore potential strategies for avoiding stalemates between the two. The workshop sought to facilitate discussion on “the interrelationships of belief, power and social identity, and the implications of those relationships for a critical political agenda.” In order to foster conversations across a range of perspectives, the workshop brought together academics who occupy a diverse spectrum of positions with respect to their commitments to, and critiques of, multiculturalism.

The following report is not a summary of the papers presented at the workshop (since the abstracts and in many cases full papers are available online); rather, the report highlights key themes and debates that arose from the day. I have tried to provide a descriptive synthesis, rather than analytical account of the issues raised at the workshop. Wherever possible, I use direct quotes to represent each perspective as accurately as possible, and have noted in parenthesis when I paraphrase specific comments by individual speakers. Nevertheless, the report is filtered through my own situated lens, which certainly influences which issues I deemed noteworthy. More specifically, I have highlighted areas of tension and unresolved dilemmas (particularly among normative claims, methodological frameworks, and use of concepts) as a way of identifying issues that require further exploration. In doing so, I hope this report offers some direction for future discussion and debate.

2) IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS

Workshop participants began by identifying key problems that have arisen from the depiction of conflict between gender and ethnic politics. The background to this debate stems in part from controversy surrounding the essay by Susan Moller Okin entitled “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” (1997). Okin’s essay invoked widespread critique, including a counter essay by Chandran Kukathas entitled “Is Feminism Bad for Multiculturalism?” Framed in such polarized terms, the debate pitted feminist claims for individual equality against multicultural group claims for autonomy, whereby one set of “rights” were deemed to undermine the other. As opposing camps became increasingly entrenched, with both sides at times resorting to rigid and reductive claims, the framing of the debate quickly foreclosed upon space for nuanced analysis.

Some problems that have arisen from the depiction of debate in such narrow terms:

- *False choices*: The terms of the debate forced women to choose between liberal secular orders and religious (patriarchal) cultural communities, between “equality” and “culture”, or between “rights” and “religion” (Bhandar; Sunder). This problem is exemplified in many law and policy contexts where women are offered “a right to religious freedom (on leaders’ terms) or to equality (within the public sphere), but no right to both” (Sunder). This paradigm not only assumes that women have the capacity and desire to make such “choices”, but in doing so, places the burden of responsibility upon individual women rather than with the state or other factors (Malik). For many women, such “choice” is impossible; women can and do choose both (Sunder).
- *Conservative agendas*: Conservative commentators have picked up on these debates, and have used divisions to further their own agendas. Politicians and state actors, for example, have used claims of gender equality as a ruse for demonizing minority cultural practices and transforming racism into more socially palatable forms of criticism (Phillips).
- *Oversimplifications*: The focus on “culture” as the primary cause of harm to minority women obscures other key causal factors. Privileging “culture” as the key explanation for domestic violence within minority cultures, for example, conceals the ways in which state policy and structural violence collude with familial abuse (Burman). Pointing to “minority culture” also deflects attention and responsibility away from the imperialist and patriarchal qualities of “majority” cultures. “Culture” gets the bad rap when other factors such as law, immigration policy, state politics and economics are often the underlying problem (Sunder, Burman, Lewis). Within the binary of feminism versus multiculturalism, there is little space for nuanced understandings of the multiple and multilayered factors which shape socio-cultural practices (Bhandar).
- *Cultural determinism*: Terms like “culture” and “religion” have become monolithic and determinist categories, which not only reflect and reinforce stereotypes, but fail to attend to differences within groups and deny space for agency (Lewis).
- *Analytic paralysis*: The debate has invoked a kind of analytical paralysis among many progressive commentators who do not want to fall into political traps on either side of the debate. As Anne Phillips remarked, “Cultural difference had become overlaid with too many distorting assumptions and stereotypes, to the point where any criticism of a cultural practice evoked the image of the ‘do-gooder’ outsider, secure in the superiority of her own culture, telling the insiders what they ought to do. Faced with this unattractive

proposition, it looked for a period as if feminists would abandon the language of universals and give up on normative critique” (Phillips). Likewise, “in opposing a colonialist and orientalist gaze, one is often left defending a position that is perilously close to what looks like cultural relativism, even though it is not, or judging certain practices according to Anglo-European norms (if one can speak of such a thing) and aligning oneself with a majoritarian view” (Bhandar). Given these difficult analytical positions, many commentators have backed away from critical debate on these issues.

- *Imperialisms and relativisms*: A key challenge arising from the debate is to engage in critique while avoiding two slippery slopes: one the one hand, “the abyss of paternalist-colonialist rescue of ‘brown women from brown men’” and on the other, the “relativist apology for, and selective attention to, the oppression of particular groups of women in culture-blaming ways that reproduce prevailing racisms” (Burman).

3) UNPACKING / RETHINKING THE TERMS OF THE DEBATE

Unpacking the terms of the debate provided an important starting point for moving “beyond exclusionary feminisms and naïve multiculturalisms” (Burman). By assessing both the characterization and deployment of key concepts within the debates, workshop participants exposed assumptions that underlie arguments on both sides, and highlighted spaces for reframing the debate in more productive terms.

Identity

- Much discussion emphasized the need to avoid static, essentialist definitions of identity, particularly when referring to minority women, religious communities and cultural groups. Identity was therefore defined in more active and fluid terms, namely as a complex configuration of social practices. Workshop panellists emphasized the need to adopt more nuanced perspectives of identity, recognizing the ways that identity is continually shaped by a wide range of factors, including history, political context, social structures, state policies, economics and consumer culture (Bhandar, Lewis, Malik).
- It was also suggested that attention to “social practices” may be more politically useful than attention to “identities.” As Brenna Bhandar argued “cultural, religious and social practices cannot be reduced to ‘identities’ that find adequate protection within human rights or anti-discrimination law.”

Culture

- Panellists also emphasized the need to avoid essentialist and determinist ideas about culture, in order to avoid the above noted pitfalls of identity, but also to avoid foreclosing on spaces for agency. As Anne Phillips noted, “Culture is now widely employed in a discourse that denies human agency, defining individuals through their culture as the explanation of virtually everything they say or do.”
- Commentators must critically interrogate who defines culture and how culture is deployed. For example, “the way that boundaries are drawn around a culture or what gets offered as its supposedly core practices and beliefs tends to reflect an ‘outsider’ need to

categorise and place people, and/or an internal struggle for power” (Phillips). Such definitions by outsiders can contribute to inequalities of power and visibility *within* minority communities. For example, when politicians recognize certain individuals as leaders within minority groups, or identify what they see as the key tenets of faith or key cultural practises within a particular minority community, such definitions can further marginalize alternative voices within minority groups. At the same time, “culture” can be deployed by minority groups as a important resource against majority dominance (Phillips).

- Questions need to be posed of what, if anything, of dominant practises counts as “culture.” For example, is British immigration policy “cultural” and if so, in what sense? (Cooper). Attention must be paid to the political implications of naming some practises as cultural and other practises as otherwise.
- One way to avoid essentialist ideas about “culture” is to interrogate the complex matrix of factors that shape cultural practices. Reina Lewis, for example, unpacked reified ideas about culture and religion by analysing the multiple meanings of “the veil.” By examining different forms veiling not only as cultural/religious practices, but also as spatialized practices that are marked by fashion politics, consumer culture, and store uniform codes, Lewis “resist[ed] attempts by both religious revivalists and hostile majoritarian commentators to close down definitions of the veil” (Lewis).
- There is also a need to emphasize and examine difference *within* cultural groups (Phillips, Burman, Lewis). For “differences do not map onto simple binaries like liberal or non-liberal, Western or non-Western, any more than they map onto simple distinctions between female and male” (Phillips).

Multiculturalism

- The concept and deployment of multiculturalism was critiqued on several grounds: 1) as a managerial technique used by government to further social cohesion at the expense of minority communities; 2) for assuming a fixed pre-given subject, defined primarily by cultural, linguistic, or ethnic difference; 3) for commodifying differences as properties rather than processes or practises; 4) for reinforcing the notion of a unitary sovereign people, within whose bounds others are tolerated (Bhandar). Multiculturalist policies were also critiqued for reinforcing image of the state as a “neutral arbitrator” among various conflicting groups, thus obscuring the state’s role in structuring and perpetuating racism.
- Questions were raised about whether the language of multiculturalism needs to be abandoned altogether, given the extent to which the concept has been used to disempower minority communities.
- Brenna Bhandar argued for pluralism rather than multiculturalism: “Rather than advocating a multiculturalism that assumes less reified, less internally homogenous cultural communities, or one that seeks to locate an ‘authentic’ set of practices that are palatable to the mainstream, I want to argue for the recognition of a plurality of ways of being...the notion of plurality acknowledges how we are constituted always as individuals in community with others; constituted through a fundamental relationality that cannot be contained or bounded.”

- Anne Phillips argued for a recuperation/redefinition of multiculturalism rather than abandonment: “We need...a multiculturalism without ‘culture’: a multiculturalism that dispenses with the reified notions of culture that feed those stereotypes to which so many feminists have objected, yet retains enough robustness to address inequalities between cultural groups; a multiculturalism in which the language of cultural difference no longer gives hostages to fortune or sustenance to racists, but also no longer paralyses normative judgment.” Given the current xenophobic and racist political climate, argued Phillips, it is important to retain the language of multiculturalism for pragmatic and strategic reasons. Wary of refusals to engage with culture, Phillips argued that rather than abandoning multiculturalism, we need to “take culture out of its box.”
- Oonah Reitman argued that we need to reconfigure the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism. Rejecting frameworks which either force a choice between feminism and multiculturalism or seek “balance” between the two, Reitman argued that the two should be understood as synonymous. Drawing from Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, Reitman suggest that inhabiting the “borderlands” between feminism and multiculturalism allows two sets of principles of justice to be brought together as one.

Feminism

- Panellists emphasized the need for feminism to continually “change focus” and direct attention to conceptual spaces that are neglected within current frameworks of analysis. Rather than continuing to debate on already established terms, feminists need to attend to the issues that are obscured in current discussions.
- Maleiha Malik argued that feminism needs to confront more directly difficult questions around harm to women in minority communities. “Questions about how minority women should respond to harmful practices within their own groups, and how other women can support them in this struggle, should be of critical concern to feminism. A key challenge for feminism is to strike a balance between showing solidarity for minority women whilst at the same time maintaining a critical perspective.”
- In addressing questions of harm, feminist analysis must attend to the lived experiences of minority women (Bhandar, Malik). Feminist analysis must direct more attention to understanding minority women from their own perspectives, paying particular attention to texts that have authority in the lives of minority women, and to minority women’s own writing and literature (Malik).
- Feminists must be more open to the possibility of self-transformation when seeking to understand the cultural practices of others. Maleiha Malik encouraged feminist theorists to approach other cultural practices with a greater sense of self-reflexivity. When thinking about the cultural practices of others, the feminist theorist must adopt “more accurate understanding of her own ‘home’ perspective; i.e. she will need to review and re-examine her own commitments as a feminist...The theorist will need to remain open to the possibility of transformation: the study of minority women may lead to a change and shift in the fundamental criteria which are the starting point of her analysis” (Malik).

4) THEORETICAL TOOLS & STRATEGIES

Workshop speakers emphasized that there are many tools and resources within feminism to meet the theoretical challenges of the debate—both in theory and practise. Such tasks, however, require us to modify the familiar techniques of analysis and adopt new approaches. Some of the approaches discussed included:

- Understanding the subject “from her own perspective”

A key challenge for progressive scholars is to develop more effective and ethical ways of thinking about socio-cultural practices that are different from our own, and to do so in ways which neither lapse into cultural relativism on the one hand, nor impose outsider standards on the other. One strategy is to adopt theoretical approaches that seek to understand the “other” subject “from her own perspective” and strive place the subject’s conduct in its social and historical context (Malik). Such strategies require us to pay attention to “purpose, intent, motivations and inner-states” of individual actors, since individual conduct can only be made intelligible when understood as part of an ongoing tradition—“not as a static one off event, but as part of a dynamic process.” Malieha Malik argued that feminists must therefore move away from “neutral objectivity” in analysis. Rather imposing one’s own norms and values, however, Malik encouraged feminists theorists to engage in a *relational* process of understanding, whereby the practises of another are understand in relation to one’s own. As Malik notes, “the act of comparison of practices and experiences of minority women with our home understanding carries within it the seeds of its own success. Whereas previously, the other practise may have been viewed as merely different, undertaking comparison in a self-conscious and formal context can be illuminating: placing the different practise against an analogous “home” practice which has a point, value and significance within the life of the observer, may allow a shift—albeit modest—in understanding.” Malik suggested that methods of “human sciences” are better equipped for this task than “empiricist” methods, or methods which rely an external point of view using “neutral” and essentialist criteria (Malik).

- Envisioning a third way: new visions of freedom

Madhavi Sunder suggested that we need to look to grassroots activism to see how minority women are “bridging the gap” between multiculturalism and feminism. Drawing from the work of transnational human rights networks, Sunder argued that women activists “on the ground” are demonstrating that rights and religion do not have to be in conflict. “Envisioning a third way, women human rights activists in Muslim communities are pursuing equality and freedom within the context of religion, not just without it” (Sunder). This “third way” however, requires a rethinking of liberal notions of “secularism” and “freedom” which reinforce divisions between public and private. As Brenna Bhandar noted, “Secularism posits the sovereign, autonomous self in opposition to a self that is constrained by religious belief” ... ‘Freedom’ is realised through the division between a public realm free of religious faith and a private sphere where individual belief is contained and free from the authority of the state.” Highlighting how Muslim women “translate, construct, and reconstruct” key religious texts in ways that resonate with human rights claims, Sunder demonstrated how women are contesting these binaries in empowering ways. Monica Mookherjee cautioned, however, that attempts “to reconcile minority women with mainstream human rights discourse by emphasizing minority women’s capacity to re-interpret sacred texts” often fail to “recognize that deep patterns of discrimination can impede a capacity for (re)interpretation.” Questions of choice, capacity and agency therefore become crucial in the discussion.

- Putting analytic principles into practise

One of the key challenges at the policy level is putting theory into practise. The complexity of these challenges was exemplified in Erica Burman's project on women asylum seekers between the UK and Pakistan escaping domestic violence. Because Burman's project requires working within current state immigration policies, it bears the practical challenge of providing support to asylum seekers and critiquing practices of violence without pandering to victimizing, essentialist and culture-blaming strategies. To address these issues, Burman identified four analytic principles that guide her project:

- 1) The project team emphasized that they were not conducting a cross-cultural study as a strategic means of avoiding tendencies to situate the UK as the norm to which all else is compared.
- 2) The project focussed on intra-country comparisons; emphasising variations of practice within each country functioned to ward off essentialist, culture-blaming explanations.
- 3) The project reasserted points of commonality (i.e., in experiences of violence) to draw attention to structural causes (while remaining attentive to local contextual conditions and differences).
- 4) The project worked to 'colour in' the dominant culture; it aimed to reveal things generally not defined as "cultural" when they relate to dominant practices. For example, while mainstream perspectives explain domestic violence in Pakistan as primarily "cultural" problem, Burman's project draws attention to the fact that the West (and its "culture") carries significant historical and political responsibility for current events in Pakistan.

- Mediating (strong) universalism with (soft) relativism

The debate between feminism and multiculturalism has surfaced in debates about "the right to mediation" – the entitlement of minority groups to engage in their own interpretations or applications of legal codes, norms and values (such as private family dispute arbitration based on Sharia law, or interpretation of legal codes based on culturally-specific values). Within the "feminism versus multiculturalism" framework, the "right to mediation" represents culturally relativist group rights, which are deemed to conflict with feminist claims of universal equality for individual women. Drawing from these debates, Monica Mookherjee argues that universalism and relativism are not necessarily in conflict, but can work together. "Understanding this balance between relativism and universalism in human rights is useful when we view feminism and multiculturalism together, as connected or allied projects in the struggle against deprivation and injustice." Mookherjee defends the right to mediation on the grounds that "mediation does not imply *strong relativism*...but rather *subtle relativism*, that recognizes the plurality of goods in human life and the variety of ways in which those goods can be interpreted and secured." Recognizing that empowering groups to engage in mediation does not necessarily empower women within their groups, Mookherjee nonetheless defends the universal value of women's agency or autonomy underlying (and promoted by) mediation as having long-term and cumulative value. As "minority communities feel less alienated from the wider society, and therefore less likely to behave in reactionary or restrictive ways towards their vulnerable members...the doctrine of human rights is seen not as a 'Western imposition', but as a mode of protecting complex human beings with a range of different goals and desires" (Mookherjee). Promoting cultural relativism in the prioritization and mode of securing human rights is consistent with claims "is consistent with the claim that their value is, in a certain deep sense, universal."

5) ONGOING TENSIONS, RESURFACING DILEMMAS, FUTURE DISCUSSIONS

Feminism & Multiculturalism

- How do we represent the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism? Are the terms parallel, synonymous, intersecting or otherwise?
- Should we abandon the language of “multiculturalism” or can it be recuperated and infused with more progressive meanings? If alternative meanings or terms are adopted, what should they be and how should they be deployed?
- Is a language of social practices more productive than the language of “culture”?

Universalism & Relativism

- Can we talk about groups / constituencies, and if so, how?
- How do we assess the significance and relevance of similarities and differences within and among different groups?
- What are the standards for critical comparison of social/cultural/religious conduct? When should comparisons be made within and between groups? In what circumstances do comparisons between a (majority) self and (minority) other further entrench a majority view, and when do such comparisons provide opportunities to more accurately understand the other and critically transform understandings of the self?
- In what circumstances is it productive to draw on the language of “soft” universals and “contingent” relativisms?
- When and how does “difference” matter? What are the circumstances in which we need to be especially vigilant about differences caused by race, culture and religion?
- Is there a basic floor of individual rights that women cannot negotiate away?

Public & Private

- In what ways do we need to rethink the allocation of rights as belonging in the public sphere and religion as belonging in the private sphere? How might ideas of “freedom” and “secularism” be challenged by interrogating the public/private divide?
- How do questions of multiculturalism require feminists to rethink their analysis on divisions between public and private?

Structures & Agency

- When assessing causes, consequences and responsibility for harmful practices, how do we weigh identity individual choices against collective determinisms, cultural contexts, and socio-political structures?
- When is “choice” a meaningful indication of agency, and when does it obscure and reinforce structural norms?
- How should feminism respond to those women within a particular group who consent to practices that are likely to harm them? How can we question valid consent of minority women in these circumstances without falling prey to condescending attributions of false consciousness?

Norms, Values & Judgement

- Should we judge? If so, how should we judge?
- What limits or conditions, if any, should be placed on external critique by commentators regarding the practices and beliefs of others?

APPENDIX 1: Outline of Research Agenda

This inter-disciplinary workshop brings together academics from various disciplines (including law, politics, women's studies, cultural studies and sociology), as well as non-academics, to debate the pitting of feminism against multiculturalism. The aim of the workshop is to explore, in particular, ways of moving through and beyond this impasse. At its crudest, the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism is depicted as a battle between two sides. On the one side, sit ethnicized religious minorities, and advocates of cultural relativism. Against them are arranged the forces of liberal feminism, intent on defending women's rights and freedoms from oppressive minority practices. This portrayal of the gender/ethnicity interface has become increasingly influential within public policy debate, despite the many scholars, activists and others who have resisted or challenged its terms.

While conservative forces may find it productive to pit feminism against multiculturalism, our aim in holding this workshop is to explore the problems this depiction has generated. The notion that gender politics and ethnic politics point in competing directions has divided progressive commentators, deflected attention away from the voices of minority ethnic feminists. It has also allowed liberal states to portray themselves as beyond reproach. More theoretically, it has obstructed attempts to address the interrelationships of belief, power, identity and practise, and the implications of these interrelationships for a critical political agenda. These limitations and obstacles are becoming increasingly significant given the hardening of positions around a number of key issues: liberal free speech; the rapid development of anti-discrimination laws (causing sexuality minorities, for example, to be pitted against religious ones); growing xenophobia and the rigidifying of nation-state boundaries. This hardening of positions is increasingly being articulated in government policy, the media and in the progressive political agenda as "the need for a critique of multiculturalism."

Some Issues for Discussion:

- Within the feminism and multiculturalism debate how do conceptions of 'community', 'beliefs', 'culture', 'tradition', 'group' and 'power' become understood, and with what discursive effects?
- What frameworks and perspectives are available to rethink these conflicts differently, and to understand the interface of belief, identity, and social location more constructively?
- What limits or conditions, if any, should be placed on external critique by commentators academic and otherwise regarding the practices and beliefs of others?
- What are the implications of a majoritarian location for feminism for understanding core concepts such as 'feminist', 'female autonomy' and 'female consciousness'?
- Are there any limits to the ability of women to consent to practices that may cause them harm? If so, what principles should guide our analysis of the limits of consent to harmful practices?
- What gets erased or lost in the construction of minorities as anti-feminist?
- How should state bodies respond to charges of institutionalised sexism and inequality within minority communities?
- To what extent do state practices, for instance, over immigration, citizenship, welfare provision, medical intervention and advertising, contribute to gendered inequalities within majority and minority communities?
- Should democratic political processes focus on sexism within wider cultural and social life rather than among minorities?
- What part do the courts play in the gendered, cultural construction of minorities?
- What kinds of political conversations can and should take place regarding belief, given conditions of social inequality? Do anti-racist and Black feminisms, alongside other intersectional, theoretical frameworks that grow out of multiple oppressions, provide more productive ways of thinking through these tensions?

APPENDIX 2: Beyond Feminism v Multicultural Workshop Programme

9:30-10:30 Registration and Refreshments

10:30-11:45 Panel One Chair: Didi Herman (UKC)

- *Anne Phillips* (LSE): “Multiculturalism without Culture”
- *Madhavi Sunder* (University of California): “The New Enlightenment: How Muslim Women are Brining Religion and Culture Out of the Dark Ages”

11:45-12:00 Tea Break

12:00-13:15 Panel Two Chair: Aisha Gil (Roehampton)

- *Reina Lewis* (London College of Fashion): “Consuming Multiculture: Veils, Uniforms and Agency”
- *Erica Burman* (Manchester Metropolitan University): “Trans/National Topologies: Power Gradients of Multiculturalisms”

13:15-14:15 Lunch

14:15-15:45 Panel Three Chair: Andrea Baumeister (Stirling)

- *Oonagh Reitman* (LSE): “Feminism, Multiculturalism and their Borderlands”
- *Monica Mookherjee* (Keele): “Decolonizing the Other’s Rights: Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Right to Mediation”

14:15-15:45 Tea Break

15:45-17:30 Panel Four and Concluding Remarks Chair: Davina Cooper (UKC)

- *Brenna Bhandar* (Reading): “Beyond Pluralism: contesting multiculturalism through the recognition of plurality”
- *Maleiha Malik* (KCL): “The Branch on Which We Sit”: Feminism, Multiculturalism and Minority Women”

Papers/Abstracts available online:

http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/law/lawnews/main_news/wmview.php?ArtID=47#prog

*This report was prepared by Sarah Lamble (University of Kent, Canterbury).
Any errors or omissions are those of the reporter.
E-mail: SL231@kent.ac.uk