By prioritising male ways of being and knowing, existing social hierarchies marginalise women (Le Doeuff 1998). For centuries women have been engaging in activism to challenge their marginalisation and to demand equal recognition of women’s contributions to civilisation. Such activism by and for women is ‘politics’, yet ‘for most of its history, western political theory has ignored women’ (Bryson 2003: 1). Focusing on the experiences of Muslim women and informed by a feminist epistemological stance, this chapter will unravel women’s negotiations around religious and gendered identity markers, exploring how one influences the other to ‘politicise’ Muslim women. In doing so this chapter will take its readers on a journey through the evolution of feminist political thought, particularly where it intersects with women’s religious practices and beliefs.

Is feminism political?

Feminism may be understood as a struggle for women’s emancipation for rights and respect (Watkins et al. 1992). This is a struggle that takes place on many fronts – the personal, communal, moral and political. In its note on feminism, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* describes it as ‘a relatively recent term for the politics of equal rights for women’ (McLean and McMillan 2009: 197–198). Although the term ‘feminism’ may be relatively recent – in English-use since the 1890s (McLean and McMillan 2009) – struggles for women’s equality as undertaken by women or by women and men in partnership have existed since long before the word existed. Politics is inherent within these struggles. Rather than provide a conceptualisation of politics (which is a separate discussion, dealt with elsewhere in this book), it is sufficient to say that in this chapter, politics is used in a wide and inter-disciplinary sense aimed at capturing the diversities, contradictions and porous boundaries within its conceptualisation. Politics can be about the structures of government. It is also about the hierarchies within everyday life. For this chapter, politics involves the myriad ways whereby women organise to secure equality through critical engagement with structures of government, through challenge of attitudes within communities, and through transformative consciousness-raising of their own selves.
Feminist thought is often described as having emerged in three and now possibly four ‘waves’ (Llewellyn 2015; Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012). The first wave emerged in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century and consisted of western localised movements in reaction to patriarchal attitudes in the west, including the British suffrage movement (Holton 1995; Pugh 1980). The Suffragettes are an example of women’s activism that demonstrates a direct link between women’s demands for rights and structures of government. In Britain this movement was led by the British Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst (Purvis 1995). The WSPU engaged in direct action and civil disobedience aimed at securing women’s right to vote in elections. Yet in seeking the right to vote, the suffragettes fought against the patriarchal political structures that are deeply embedded in society and which deny the equality of women’s political rights (Holton 1995; Pugh 1980).

During the 1960s and 1970s, second wave feminism sought to move beyond the political spheres of women’s existence into women’s social and economic lives. This movement grew out of first wave feminism and is often perceived as an exclusively middle-class white movement that got its ideals from the political struggles of social-haves in western society (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Afshar and Maynard 2000). This led to the development in the 1990s of what is now known as third wave feminism: women who were not white and not middle-class began to articulate their needs and demands. These ‘new’ feminists interspersed arguments against racism along with arguments against sexism and classism. They argued that women of colour had to challenge the marginalisation they experienced in their own language and using symbols and norms that were their own. A possible contemporary fourth wave calls for solidarity across diverse women. As discussed by Cheruvallil-Contractor women have much in common:

This finding of commonality does not nullify difference in any way instead it coexists with difference and allows for a philosophical space and praxis of solidarity where people (and not just women) can work together for the cause of the marginalised, whoever this may be.

(2012: 143)

It is important to reflect on the labels and categories which we use, including our use of ‘waves’ of feminism. The feminist intellectual endeavour insists on unpicking the assumptions and biases that underpin how we ‘do’ knowledge. We have already alluded to the challenge of trying to define ‘politics’. Debates around the term feminism are similarly fraught with some women (of all ethnicities) embracing it as a ‘label’ for their struggles and other women eschewing it as a white western construct that is of no relevance to women from other ethnicities. A key criticism of the wave model is that it privileges histories of white western women’s struggles (starting with the Suffragettes) and overlooks women’s struggles for rights prior to the 1890s. In relegating the activities of women of colour to the third wave, such histories ignore the rich history of activism by these women including, for example, by anti-slavery feminists (Watkins et al. 1992) who prior to the 1890s spoke about diverse women’s rights. See for example this excerpt from a speech by black activist Sojourner Truth:

They have got their liberty – so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want its root and branch destroyed … I want women to have their rights.
the courts women have no right, no voice, nobody speaks for them. I wish women to have her voice there among the pettifoggers. 

*(Sojourner Truth, excerpt from her address to the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association, New York City, May 9th 1867; Truth 1867)*

Truth demanded equality and rights for women but did not call herself a feminist. Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam (1838–1901), ruler of the erstwhile princely state of Bhopal (now in India), did not call herself a feminist. Yet she used her political power to reform women’s education and to institute political and marital rights for women in India (Lambert-Hurley 2007). Although feminism may be a recent word, throughout history women have challenged their marginalisation in ways that reflected their local contexts.

**Feminism, politics and hierarchies of knowledge**

So is feminism political and what kind of politics does it represent? The Suffragettes were political in the most obvious sense, as are many women’s movements that use governmental, constitutional and legal frameworks to garner equality for women – a good example of this is evolution of discourses around women’s human rights (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2018).

On a less obviously political level, feminists seek to change deep-rooted hierarchies prevalent within society, which determine how society is known, experienced and governed. Feminist political theory includes women as central to political analysis and experience. It questions, ‘why it is that in virtually all known societies men appear to have more power and privilege than women, and how this can be changed’ (Bryson 2003: 1).

In their struggles for equality and rights, feminists realised that there was a need to question and disrupt existing sources of knowledge that were created by and for dominant social groups (namely white middle-class men) and which were biased towards favouring the interests of this group. As feminists attempted to reclaim systems of knowledge and governance for women, they realised that the tools they developed could be used to further the cause of any marginalised group (not just women) who, like women, remained under-represented or mis-represented in traditional discourses of knowledge. For some thinkers, feminist thought has evolved to advocate emancipation and rights for any ‘othered’ group within society, who may be marginalised on account of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion or age (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012). According to Flax,

> Feminist philosophy thus represents the return of the oppressed, of the exposure of particular social roots of all apparently abstract and universal knowledge (p. 249) … Feminism is a revolutionary theory and practice. It requires simultaneously an incorporation, negation and transformation of all human history, including existing philosophies.  

*(1983: 271)*

Feminist thought may best be understood through its deconstruction and interrogation of traditional conceptualisations and constructs of truth, objectivity and neutrality (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012; Cohen et al. 2000; Webb 2000). The intellectual influence of feminism now extends beyond a celebration of women’s social contributions. It includes for example the work of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt who has written among other things on revolution, human rights and political action (1951, 1965); Saba Mahmood who is critical of secular liberal politics and liberal feminisms which she considers inadequate to explore the lived experiences of religious women (2005); and Michelle Le Doeuff who interrogates the politics of knowledge production (1998). Through its challenge of the structures of knowledge, feminism is intrinsically political.
Disrupting gender and religion in women’s intersectional identities

The term ‘intersectionality’ is used to discuss the multiple realities and layered identities that are possible within everyday human existence (Crenshaw 1989; Brah and Phoenix 2004). It is also used to depict the interconnections between different hierarchies within society that collude to either marginalise or privilege particular actors and voices in society. This term emerged from within feminist scholarship, to depict the multiple modalities of identity of an individual and their impact on the individual. An individual’s identity is made up of a number of aspects – gender, ethnicity, religion, class, education, geographical location – that together determine how an individual is affected by marginalisation. In this chapter we focus on religion and gender.

Women understand and experience the intersection between religion and gender in diverse ways, which on occasion may even be mutually antagonistic. For example some women reject religion as a patriarchal construct designed to subjugate women, whereas others embrace religion as an emancipatory tool through which to enable women’s activism for equality and rights. Between these two camps, a number of diverse standpoints exist, each with a specific take on the significance or not of religion in facilitating either more or less equal lives and opportunities for women. Whatever the stance an activist or a thinker takes either embracing religion or eschewing it, religion is embedded in women’s debates around their politics, their activism, their identities and their preferred ways of being a woman.

The ontological position that religion is important in determining gender needs to be unpicked. To begin with we explore the argument that as a patriarchal tool religion affirms the dominance of men or at least male ways of knowing. Gender is a social construct that is shaped by these and other social hierarchies (Haug et al. 1999). So for example through the veiling of women, the prescription of domestic roles for them and their exclusion from positions of public leadership, it is argued that religion has systematically shaped understandings of gender, gender identities and gender politics. Through the privileges vested by religion in (usually upper-class) men, they had the rights to lead congregations, interpret religious texts and to be citizens. In ancient Greece, from where we still draw much of our ideas about politics, women were considered less rational than men and as citizenship was confined to (free) men, women were emphatically not citizens (Minogue 1995).

But women have and continue to shape religion through their conformance to, rejection of and negotiations with religion. To deny women’s knowledge production and (in the context of this chapter) their shaping of religion, is a symptom of the very same hierarchies that silence women. Often dismissed as unauthentic, inaccurate or informal, women’s belief (whether religious or not) remains a powerful intellectual and experiential space for women’s political and social activism. So for example in the context of the development of Islamic theology, women’s scholarship is generally ignored and scholarly women are often simplistically reified as pious and pure beings. Yet in the discipline of hadith studies the contributions of Aisha (a wife of Prophet Muhammad) are invaluable, particularly her narratives about the private life of Prophet Muhammad. Nadwi’s (2007) work about the Muhaddithat or female scholars of hadith provides evidence of the position of authority that female scholars historically enjoyed in Islamic societies, yet these women are largely forgotten. Recovering these women’s scholarship and a feminist retelling of their stories can be a powerful tool for women’s emancipation.

The diverse ways in which women ‘do’ religion is reflected in how their struggles for equality have emerged. For many feminists, most if not all formal religion consists of patriarchy-imposed religious symbolism which is invariably aimed at establishing and perpetuating male dominance (Christ 1997; Irigaray 1993; Daly 1970, 1985; De Beauvoir 1949). Yet across all three/four waves of feminism religion was important to women (Zwissler 2012) and there is
evidence of women utilising religion and religious language in their social, moral and political struggles for equality.

During the so-called first wave of feminism, although the Suffragettes in Britain faced many criticisms from various religious institutions, they themselves appropriated religious arguments in support of their claims; that is, ‘their militant actions were supported by, and given credibility by, their many references to traditional Christian experiences and beliefs’ (Nelson 2010: 227). They even adopted the French Catholic saint, Joan of Arc, as their model for political activism. During second wave feminism the relationship between religion and women’s political activism for equal rights was even more complex. In her analysis of the relationship between second wave feminism and the ongoing struggle for equality within American religious institutions, Foxworth describes how religious leaders, both male and female, opposed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Yet the women’s equality movement inspired religious women in different ways, encouraging them to seek religious expression outside of the church, which led to increased explorations of ‘woman’s spirituality’ and understandings of the female divine. In her conclusions, Foxworth contends that although second wave feminisms were primarily a battle for secular equality, it also became a powerful movement within religious institutions. Despite enduring and significant inequalities within religious institutions (in Foxworth’s analysis she refers to the church), there are also now leadership roles for women within these institutions (Foxworth 2018).

Third wave feminisms in their critiques of white, middle-class women’s feminism and culturally contextualised approach to women’s studies were more direct in their inclusion of religious discussion. Latino women were inspired by the Mujerista movement that contextualised Latino languages, theological understandings and feminist demands for rights into a movement that was relevant to their realities (Asisi-Diaz 1989; Anzaldúa 1987). Similarly Alice Walker’s (and others) writings clearly articulate how black women’s Womanist struggles incorporated spiritual threads that reminded women of their African cultural and spiritual roots (Walker 1983). Third wave feminist understandings accepted the heterogeneity within the sisterhood and recognised that feminist activism had to contextualise differences of caste, class, culture, religion and ethnicity among women. Islamic feminisms began to evolve as a way to address the inequalities experienced by Muslim women (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012).

A key tool for women was to reclaim religion by interpreting religious text and practice in ways that were amenable to women and their rights – in doing so they reclaimed the making of religious knowledge from male-dominated structures (Zwissler 2012; Ruether 2005; Ford 1990; Hassan 1997). Feminist spirituality has also transformed how women (and men) practice religion. In her research with a largely Christian cohort of female participants (although a few women from other religious backgrounds are included), Aune identified three characteristics of feminist approaches to religion and spirituality. They are de-churched in that women usually do not have an affiliation to a religious institution; are relational, which means that women draw inspiration for their faith practices and beliefs from their family and social networks (rather than from texts); and, finally, feminist spiritualities emphasise practice and ‘lived religion’ (Aune 2015).

So, having established a role for religion in women’s political activism, it is important to point out that this is by no means a straightforward relationship. As noted previously politics is a word that cannot easily be defined simply. Feminism is similarly notoriously difficult to pin down (see Zwissler 2012 for a wider contextualisation of this debate). And, finally, religion and belief both defy easy categorisation (see Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2014 for a discussion of the complexities in defining religion). So when it comes to the intersection between feminist political activism and religion, the observer must explore a galaxy of different perspectives, methods and ontological stances. At this intersection religious and non-religious, male and
female, feminist and anti-feminist, political and non-political all engage in activism for increased equality for women in diverse social institutions – including government, religious structures, communities and families. The aim of this movement is clear – equality for women. Yet the actors, methods, contexts and impacts of this movement are far-reaching, which presents a rather broad palette for the scholar to work from.

To bring our so far largely theoretical discussion to the practicalities of everyday life, the chapter’s next section provides an overview and analysis of feminist activisms that have taken place in Muslim contexts. How do Muslim women do feminism? How do feminists do Islam? And what does this tell us about the relationship between feminist political activism and religion?

Why focus on Muslim women for this chapter?

Muslim women are the focus in this chapter for three reasons. These reasons contribute towards the objective of this chapter, which is an exploration of feminist political practice, and are therefore outlined here.

My positionality as a Muslim woman: an authentic voice?

Positionality refers to the stance or positioning of the author in relation to the social and political context of the study – the community, the organisation or the participant group (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014). As noted previously, central to the feminist cause is its challenge of the hierarchies of knowledge and to reflect on inherent biases and blind-spots within existing knowledge. Concomitant with this is an urgent need to include and invest in lesser heard and mis-heard voices, and for authenticity (another difficult to define term!) in knowledge production. Reflections on positionality are a feminist response to these concerns. Rose (1997) and Sultana (2007) provide useful discussions about the theoretical frameworks around positionality and the challenges that the reflective researcher can face. Here I reflect on my positionality as a Muslim woman and feminist writer. Being a Muslim woman does not preclude me from writing about other groups who are not Muslim or not feminist, just as anybody really may write about Muslim women. However, a feminist stance encourages the author to be transparent about his or her place in society and to reflect carefully on how their role influences their work. As a Muslim woman who believes and practices her faith, I have privileged access to many Muslim women for whom religion is an important determinant in life. I have the cultural awareness and sensibility to understand their life choices. I am also part of the same socio-cultural-religious milieu as many of these women who perhaps like me (and indeed like religious sisters from other faiths) have been frustrated by enduring patriarchy within religious institutions. My frustrations led me to embrace feminism, making it my own (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012). This has also meant that I see the world in a particular way that is unique to me.

At this point it is important to state the diversity among Muslim woman. Muslim women come from different ethnicities and socio-cultural backgrounds and have different ways of believing ranging from the deeply religious to the non-religious Muslim. My feminism is a religious one. Yet for a number of Muslim women, frustrations with patriarchy have led to the rejection of religion, which brings me to the second reason for this focus on Muslim women within this chapter which the diversity among Muslim women’s activisms.
Diversity among Muslim women’s activisms

Writing about Islamic feminism in 2012, I described it as a contentious term that is:

eschewed by some Muslim women (Bullock 2003), who dismiss it as an oxymoron (Haddad 2009), a contradiction (Cooke 2001: xxvi) or ‘a dilemma between faith and feminism’ (Afshar 2008: 411) and which is embraced by others (Badran 2005). There are further disagreements about who invented the term – was it ‘invented by observers of the rise of a new feminist paradigm in the Middle East, who began to call it Islamic feminism’ (Badran 2005: 14–15) or is it the ‘identity of choice for some Muslim scholars and activists’ (Haddad 2009: 1) who choose to be known as Islamic feminists? This debate is further confounded by the contrasting opinions of thinkers who feel that Islam and feminism are incompatible because either Islam as a faith is too misogynistic to support any feminist discourse (Hirsi Ali 2006; Sultan 2009) or Feminist discourse is a corruption and incompatible with sacred Islamic thought (Jameelah 2009).

(Cheruvallil Contractor 2012: 95–96)

The lives and work of two Muslim female activists, Fatima Mernissi (1940–2015) and Zaynab Al-Ghazali (1917–2005) illustrate two ends of a spectrum of approaches that Muslim women may take in their activism (Cooke 2001). Moroccan Fatima Mernissi accepted western philosophies and strove to work for women’s rights in a context that was ‘western’, whereas Egyptian Zainab Ghazzali tried to garner rights for women within a framework that was Islamic. Both women have inspired women’s activisms in the Muslim and Arab worlds, yet their philosophical approaches to activism were poles apart. Between them they have set up a template for Muslim women’s activism, which either dismiss or embrace Islamic faith values. In thinking about women’s politics it is important to acknowledge the diverse ways in which religious women perceive and experience feminism. In their struggle for rights do they reject religion preferring instead to adopt secular models of activism, equality and rights? Or do they allow their religious beliefs, values and sentiments to define their political struggles. And in undertaking their struggles how do they negotiate between their religious and gender identities.

Then there are those who reject feminism. This rejection of feminism is not limited to Muslim or religious women, recent research suggests that less than one in five young women would call themselves a feminist (BBC 2019). This rejection of feminism does not imply a rejection of gender equality; women reject feminism yet support equal rights for women. They however disagree with the politics of the label ‘feminism’. Cheruvallil-Contractor notes that Muslim women in her research often spoke about their disagreements with feminist discourse which they characterised as ‘anti-religion, anti-hijab, anti-men and anti-family (!)’ (2012: 95). Other Muslim women spoke about feminism as being a western label for a western movement, instead these women wanted to articulate a movement for rights and equality that was situated in their specific geographical, religious and social contexts.

After her transnational journey to explore women’s movements in the ‘Muslim’ world, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (1998) was convinced that most Muslim women’s activisms (whether or not they call them feminism) are underpinned strongly by their religious beliefs. Muslim women’s feminisms, by reclaiming religion, challenge patriarchy in Muslim contexts that deny women’s rights, including rights that these women believe are divinely ordained for them (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012). They also challenge wider societies’ perceptions of Muslim women.
The visible Muslim woman

A final reason for focusing on the Muslim woman is the disproportionate scrutiny that she faces in contemporary public discourse. Tarlo writes about women who are ‘visibly Muslim’ because of their adherence to Islamic faith practices including, but not limited to, wearing the hijab or headscarf (2010). In popular and also in some academic discourse, Muslim women have been reified into a homogenous construct that does not recognise the ethnic, social and religious diversity among Muslim women. Furthermore, according to these constructs, the Muslim woman is innately different from other women. When combined with current media and political preoccupation with extremist or ‘radical’ Islam, society has all the stimuli needed to create an environment that in its scrutiny of Muslim women (and their choices) also dismisses them as different, deviant and suspicious (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012; Tarlo 2010). A Muslim woman’s intersectional identity, her gender, faith and social contexts (that fear her faith), leads to her marginalisation. For this discussion on women’s politics, the case of Muslim women offers the possibility of richer analysis that interrogates their marginalisation.

The ‘politicised’ Muslim woman

This section starts with vignettes about two Muslim women who are ‘political’ in different socio-political, professional and geographic contexts:

**Vignette 9.1: the artist**

Mennel is a young French-Syrian Muslim woman – a YouTube artist who was recruited to sing on a popular French TV talent show. For her first public appearance she performed a famous Christian spiritual song, composed by a Jewish artist. She started the song in English, using its original words and halfway through (rather dramatically) switched to Arabic and used words with Islamic significance. She moved the audience and emerged as a strong contender to progress through the show. However this story has a twist, tweets from Mennel were ‘found’ that were deemed anti-national. Mennel was removed from the show. She became a politicised Muslim woman who was to be viewed with suspicion (for details see Fadil 2018). Her political agency, as demonstrated in her choice to sing in a way that expressed her French-Syrian hybrid identity, her faith, her life-journey as a migrant, was simply forgotten.

**Vignette 9.2: the politician**

Baroness Sayeeda Hussain Warsi is a well-known British politician. The daughter of Pakistani immigrants, who became Britain’s first ‘Muslim cabinet minister’, famously wore a traditional shalwar kameez to her first cabinet meeting (Telegraph 2010). Although no longer a cabinet minister and despite political upheavals, her political and social influence as a Muslim woman in ‘power’ remains significant in British politics. She is well-known among other things for her consistent and influential campaigning against Islamophobia. She has been criticised for being ‘not British enough’ and not ‘Muslim enough’, yet through her work she is publicly visible as a strong and powerful Muslim woman – a role model for young Muslims, female and male and for all Britons. Her political agency is clearly apparent.
The politics of being Muslim and female

Politicise is a useful word to denote the multiple and often contradictory ways in which Muslim women are perceived – by themselves, by religious and/or Muslim men, by their feminist sisters and by society, which at least in the west is increasingly secular (Weller et al. 2014). According to the Oxford dictionary, the word politicise could mean either to ‘cause (an activity or event) to become political in character’ or to ‘make (someone) politically aware’.3

In the case of Muslim women, the former definition may be used to refer to the Muslim woman as an inert object of society’s gaze – the locus of societal perception, approval or disapproval, suspicion and/or empathy. Historically perceptions of Muslim women have varied. Male colonialists described her as exotic and sensuous even though eighteenth-century writer Mary Montagu reports that they would never have had access to Muslim women (1716–1717). Societal gaze has varyingly positioned Muslim women as exotic, in need of rescue, sensuous or on the other hand as powerful, not needing ‘saving’ and as scholars. Somewhere in between also lie notions of the pious Muslim woman, who depending on how and from where you view her may be perceived as subjugated to religious patriarchy or challenging the male gaze (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012; Bullock 2003). Society perceives her and politicises her, subsequently assuming a self-righteous need to protect her or rescue her or leave her alone. This narrative politicises Muslim women without recognising their roles as citizens and actors in a shared society. She is different. Her choices in choosing to practice her faith, to wear a hijab or possibly even a niqab make her and her dissent visible. She embodies a critique of western secular culture and must therefore be viewed with disapproval and suspicion. Alternatively, if her faith is not her choice, she must be rescued.

Going back to the dictionary definition of the word ‘politicised’, the latter definition may refer to Muslim women’s agency as they co-exist in this society that may ‘fear’ them. Baroness Warsi is an example of this agency that is socially transformative on a large scale. Such agency is also evident on an ‘everyday’ level, as part of what might be described as the mundane routines of Muslim women’s lives. As they go about their lives, Muslim women challenge stereotypes (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012). Over and over again, Muslim women who are teachers, doctors, social workers, students or just neighbours, flatmates or co-travellers describe how the act of being a Muslim woman in a public space vests in them agency. By doing ‘normal’ things, they are viewed as less suspicious and as part of society. Not all women enjoy this attention – the benevolent gaze of society – yet for some this can be agentive (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012).

What about Muslim women challenging patriarchy? Consider the emotive voice of Farhat – a young Muslim woman living in central England:

Yes women should fight for their rights … Firstly, you should have full knowledge of the various rights that Islam has given you. And then if a particular right isn’t being given to you, you must fight for and demand that right … if you remain quiet you will never be given anything. So rallies should march, unions should be formed and other forums should be organised which can help women garner their rights. A woman should be aware of what her rights are rather than her living a suppressed life without knowing the different aspects of life that she can experience and enjoy.

(Farhat, Loughborough, August 2008, cited in Cheruvallil-Contractor 2012: 104)

For Farhat and other women like her, who hold diverse religious beliefs, their beliefs become a central aspect of the struggles for rights and equality. In utilising religion as a tool of their struggles, these women acquire knowledge of it. They study it, interrogate it, interpret it and ultimately transform it. This is a political struggle that is shaped both by the gender and religion of the women who embody and drive it. In such contexts women subvert existing social hierarchies to become holders, creators and
drivers of knowledge. It is important to acknowledge the political agency of these women who challenge such religious patriarchies through their knowledge of religion.

Finally, through their lives, voices and struggles, Farhat and other women like her also depict the commonalities across all women’s lives. These women may be different on account of their religion, their ethnicity or the social background. Yet inherent across all women’s struggles is a need to challenge inequalities deeply ingrained in most societies. So, when Muslim women articulate their struggles they are also politically contributing to the global feminist cause, adding to a space of solidarity where commonalities can be uncovered and differences recognised. This is political agency too.

Conclusion

Women have always engaged in political struggles. Yet their politics remain under-recognised. This is due to a trenchant privileging of male voices and experiences in political discourse, which has also led to conceptualisations of politics in grand terms: nations, war, citizens, laws and rights. Women have had important roles in all of these. But women have also been involved in politics at a more ‘mundane’ level – rights in the family, authority in the home, authenticity in religion, dialogue in the community. The cumulative transformations in our societies, which are brought about by such ‘everyday’ politics, need to be acknowledged and included in our studies of politics.

Women’s politics are characterised by diversity, multiplicity and intersectionality. Women’s everyday lives are determined by who they are. Religion as experienced by women (rejection, conformity, interrogation) remains an aspect of their intersectional identities. The debate around women, religion and politics should not be reduced to a simple narrative of religious and non-religious women and good or bad religion. Instead we need (many) new narratives of women’s politics that problematise the complexities brought about by the different ways in which women believe and which recognise the impact of women’s social contexts and personal agency in determining how they believe.

Notes

1 ‘A mujerista is someone who makes a preferential option for Latina women, for their struggle for liberation. Mujeristas struggle to liberate themselves not as individuals but as members of a Latino community’ (https://users.drew.edu/aisasidi/Definition1.htm).
2 www.parliament.uk/biographies/lords/baroness-warsi/3839.

References

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