

FEATURE STORY IDEAS FOR JOURNALISTS UTILIZING
HARVARD FACULTY AND STUDENT RESOURCES

ISLAM AND WOMEN— THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

BY SHENILA KHOJA-MOOLJI

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PARAMETERS FOR USE We have solicited the support of a series of individuals to provide area expertise for the story. We request that you contact them not as sources for further resources, but to answer questions regarding their specific research and areas of expertise.

EXPLANATION The purpose of the story would be to highlight the experiences and achievements of Muslim women in the Boston/New York area. Together, these women demonstrate a face of Islam that is not usually highlighted in the media—a faith that nurtures these women to live ethical lives and to participate actively in public and private spheres. The women chosen for this feature are leaders in professional and/or community service.

JUSTIFICATION The status of women in Muslim countries has at times been exploited throughout history by internal and/or external forces for political reasons. Often times the exploitation served to restrict the understanding of Muslim women to pre-conceived ideas of their roles in society. At other times, gender—and not underlying cultural, social and/or economic conditions—has been upheld as the cause of the poor condition of Muslim women in society. Highlighting the leadership of Muslim women shines a light on the diversity of women's actions and roles within Muslim communities and the specifics of Muslim women's participation in society.

NOTE A conference entitled "Muslim Women and Networks of Empowerment" is to be held at the Harvard Divinity School in September 2009.

HARVARD RESOURCES

ACADEMICS **PROFESSOR LEILA AHMED**, Victor S. Thomas Professor of Divinity,
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Leila Ahmed is the first professor of women's studies in religion at Harvard Divinity School (HDS) and was appointed to the Victor S. Thomas chair in 2003. Prior to her appointment, she was professor of Women's Studies and Near Eastern studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where she directed the Women's Studies program from 1992 to 1995. Leila Ahmed's latest book, *A Border Passage*, has been widely acclaimed. Her other publications include the books *Women and Gender in Islam: The Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* and *Edward William Lane: A Study of His Life and Work and of British Ideas of the Middle East in the Nineteenth Century*, as well as many articles. Leila Ahmed focuses her current research and writing on Islam in America and on issues of women and gender.

DEAN JANE SMITH, Senior Lecturer in Divinity and Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs, Harvard Divinity School
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Jane Smith teaches and writes on women in Islam, Muslim communities in America, and historical and theological relations between Christians and Muslims. A member of the Commission on Interfaith Relations of the National Council of Churches of Christ, she is a frequent participant in Christian-Muslim dialogue meetings. Among Jane Smith's recent and forthcoming publications are *Islam in America* (revised 2009); *Educating the Muslims of America* (2009, co-edited with Farid Sensai and Yvonne Haddad); *Muslims, Christians and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (2007); *Muslim Women in America* (2006, co-authored with Yvonne Haddad); and *Visible and Invisible: Muslim Communities in the West* (2002).

PROFESSOR NARGIS VIRANI, Assistant Professor, Arabic and Islamic Studies,
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Born in Mumbai, India, Nargis Virani is Assistant Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at The New School University in New York City. She received her MA and PhD from Harvard University. During the course of her Arabic Studies she studied at al-Azhar University, Cairo, where she studied the Qur'an with the Shaykh of al-Azhar. Nargis Virani's areas of specialization are Arabic Language and Literature, Persian Language and Literature, Islamic Intellectual Thought, and Sufism. She is currently working on two book projects tentatively entitled: *Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi's Multilingual Poems* and *The Qur'an in Muslim Mystical*

and Literary Memory. Nargis Virani is a member on the American Academy of Religion's Committee on Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the Profession (CREM).

Note: Nargis Virani can also be profiled for this story.

STUDENTS **NANCY A. KHALIL**, PhD candidate, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University
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Nancy Khalil is a first-year doctoral student in Social Anthropology at Harvard and is a Research Associate at the Harvard Transnational Studies Initiative, studying ethnic and religious identity in second generation Muslim and Hindu Americans. She also researches for the Muslims in Boston Survey, an initiative of Harvard's Islam in the West Project. Prior to starting at Harvard, Nancy Khalil worked for four years as a Muslim Chaplain at Wellesley College and as Advisor to the College's Multi-faith Living and Learning Community. She serves on the Muslim American Society (MAS) Boston and Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center Executive Board, on the Muslims in Boston Survey Advisory Board, and on the Culture, Identity, and the Economic Socialization of Children Advisory Panel at Tufts University.

Note: Nancy Khalil can also be profiled for this story.

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Celene Ayat is a Master of Divinity (MDiv) candidate and Presidential Scholar at the Harvard Divinity School (HDS). She graduated with highest distinction from Princeton University with a concentration in Near Eastern Studies, and also holds a baccalaureate from the United World Colleges. Ceylan Ayat's research areas include: American Muslim women's networks, Qur'anic hermeneutics, and Islamic intellectual history broadly conceived.

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Shenila Khoja-Moolji is a Master of Theological Studies (MTS) candidate at the Harvard Divinity School (HDS) and a lay minister for the Ismaili Muslim congregation in New York City. She graduated from Brown University in 2005 with concentrations in International Relations and Business Economics, and worked in investment banking before pursuing graduate work in Islamic Studies. Shenila Khoja-Moolji's academic research interests lie in women's studies and Shi'a Islam. She has served as a board member for the Aga Khan

Education Board, which seeks to increase the educational achievements of students in the North East region. Most recently, Shenila Khoja-Moolji worked with the Aga Khan Academies on a market study project in the Syrian Arab Republic.

AMINA CHAUDARY, PhD candidate, Department of Anthropology, Harvard University
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Amina Chaudary has been involved in the field of human rights and diplomacy for over eight years, particularly focusing on women's empowerment in the Muslim world. She has worked with Oxfam, Women Waging Peace and the Honorable Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Amina Chaudary's academic work includes studies in public policy and human rights. She is currently a graduate student at Harvard University's Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations department and an Islamic Studies fellow at Boston University, where she researches issues related to identity among second generation American Muslim women.

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Yousra Y. Fazili is a Kashmiri-American attorney, a Master of Theological Studies (MTS) candidate at Harvard Divinity School (HDS) and the recipient of a World Religions Grant. She is also a researcher with the Islamic Finance Project at the Harvard Law School (HLS). Yousra Fazili's primary research focus is on inter-gender dynamics and sexuality in Islamic law. She has published works in the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, the Encyclopedia of Islam in the United States, and Living Islam Out Loud, and is currently editing a monograph on Microfinance and Islamic Law for HLS.

At the Social Science Research Council sponsored workshop, "Presenting Islam and Muslim Communities in Context," held at Harvard University in November 2008, academics, Muslim community members and journalists affirmed the importance of combating religious illiteracy in the US, particularly around Islam and Muslim communities. These feature story items have been produced in an effort to make available more accurate and complex information about Islam and Muslim communities.



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