Can Religious Women Choose? Holding the Tension between Complicity and Agency

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[1]SHORT BIO
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ABSTRACT
Women are oppressed and made to suffer violence by a patriarchal system that values them less than men. Yet, at times they are complicit in this system. Those advocating for gender equality and non-violence tend to interpret this based on a simplistic patriarchal resistance/compliance model. This is especially the case with the religious woman, whose devotion to a religion that decrees her subjugation is challenging to especially feminists.

The article argues that, in order to recognise the agency of religious women, a splitting of the feminist project is needed: the analytical project, that strives to understand actions from the perspective of the doer, should be separated from the political project, which strives to bring change for the betterment of women. Yet, the analytical and the political are not a binary and exist in constant tension. Second, the analytical project is a dual one, where the positioning and worldview of the outsider is also interrogated. A case study from Zambia is used to illustrate the importance – for researchers and practitioners – of separating the feminist analytical project from the feminist political project when engaging with religious women and their role in gender inequality and violence.

This essay challenges feminist researchers and practitioners on two fronts: to constantly grapple with the tension between the (dual) analytical and political, and to take religion seriously when striving to understand compliance. Religious women's actions can possibly be a profound act of agency but can be misinterpreted if only analysed from the perspective of patriarchal resistance or compliance. This challenge reflects the constant tension that is the reality of feminist work with and on religion and gender inequality and violence.

KEYWORDS
religion; religious women; feminism; complicity; resistance; agency

Introduction

At a conference dinner, chatting with my table of staunch feminists, we were unpacking the high rates of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in South Africa. Referring to fieldwork I had conducted a few years before, I raised the issue of female perpetration of violence at household level, recalling certain situations where women had disclosed the violence they had perpetrated against their own daughters. It was met by an icy "that is impossible" response from one of the table's guests: "Women cannot perpetrate violence."

To this day I am not sure whether she meant that it is physically impossible for women to commit a violent act – surely not? Did she mean that women cannot be named as perpetrators of violence or that mothers cannot hurt their daughters? She never explained. Yet, since then, I have repeatedly found similar reactions when discussing women's complicity in patriarchy and VAWG. Women's agency – which includes their choice to support systems and structures that perpetuate gender inequality and violence – is constantly dismissed when faced with the reality of women opposing empowerment programming or equal rights. I feel this knee-jerk reaction within myself, too. The narrative of women as only victims is a strong one.

In this article I explore the issue of women's complicity in the patriarchal systems and beliefs that subjugate them. I argue that we limit our ability to respond to women's oppression by refusing to acknowledge their participation in gender inequality and violence-supporting attitudes and practices. Yet, automatically labelling all such attitudes and practices as either complicity or resistance, means that we often do not recognise women's agency. By focusing on *religious* women's complicity and agency, I show how separating the feminist analytical project from the feminist political project is needed in order to understand religious women's actions and agency, and second, to formulate transformative endeavours that are appropriate and respectful. Furthermore, the analytical project should have a dual nature, requiring constant critical engagement with the framing and worldviews of all parties involved. I draw on research conducted in Zambia as a case study to illustrate the value of intentionally including this separation in the design of research projects, but also in the design of intervention programming.

This article is written by a researcher working on religion and violence within the international development arena and aims to help bridge the ongoing gap between theory and praxis, both in its framing and through the case study included. The focus is on the religious woman, as she is a challenge to especially feminism, in as far as she is seen as willingly upholding a religion that ensures her continuous subjugation.[1] The article is not merely a contribution to the existing theoretical discussion of women's complicity, but aims to also inform how religious women's

[1] Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no.2 (2001): 202-36.

complicity is understood and responded to within practical interventions that aim to empower women and counter gender inequality and VAWG.

In discussing the Islamic veil, anthropologist Saba Mahmood wonders why "that to ask a different set of questions about this practice is to lay oneself open to the charge that one is indifferent to women's oppression."[2] In writing this essay, I am laying myself open to this charge. Thus, I wish to make it clear that it is not my intention to dismiss the comprehensiveness of women's oppressions. On the contrary, I believe that a better understanding of the comprehensiveness of women's agency will help those that seek to understand and transform women's lives for the better to enter into an encounter that is respectful and valuing of the worldviews and perspectives of both parties. I believe this is urgently needed in order to better respond to a world where many women are subjugated and remain victims of violence.[3]

Below, I first unpack women's complicity, identifying the pitfalls of blindly upholding a simplistic binary of male/perpetrator versus female/victim, after which I discuss the reasons that have commonly been offered for the existence of women's complicity. In the next section I focus the discussion specifically on religious women, looking at how their agency has often been ignored or misinterpreted, and call for a separation between the analytical and political dimensions of feminism as a way to allow for the recognition of agency. Thereafter, I use a case study from Zambia to illustrate how this separation can be embodied both in research and in intervention practice. I conclude with a brief discussion of what this means for our engagement with religious women.

Understanding Complicity

Feminism, while taking on various strands, emphasises that systematic gender inequalities exist within all societies. It takes on different forms depending on the economic structure and social organisation of the particular society and culture.[4] Gender inequality is a central cause of the

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2 Saba Mahmood, *The politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 195.

3 This essay was written while being a member of the Religion & Violence Seminar at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, USA. The author is thankful for the input and feedback on earlier drafts of this article from her colleagues at CTI as well as Princeton University's School of Religion.

4 Judith Lorber, *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

violence that many women experience. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women recognises this framing, stating that violence against women is "a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to the domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women."[5] Patriarchy, as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women,"[6] is both a result and a cause of gender inequality and takes on various forms, depending on locale, meaning that male domination looks differently within different societies at different times.[7] While radical feminists have used the term to describe almost any form of male domination, socialist feminists have focused on the relationship between patriarchy and class under capitalism. Arguably, the concept is most useful when it helps to unveil culturally and historically distinct arrangements between genders.[8] While the concept of patriarchy has been heavily criticised, it remains useful, for it keeps the focus on social contexts, rather than on individual men.[9]

While emphasising the power imbalance between men and women is crucial, especially when trying to understand VAWG, it unfortunately can lead to a simplistic binary where women are seen only as helpless victims and men only as all-powerful perpetrators.[10] Instead of a nuanced engagement with the dynamic interaction between male and female, the archetypal weak, helpless woman is called upon to ensure emotional and financial investment in an effort to empower women. By reifying gender binaries, men are only portrayed as perpetrators, and work with men and boys called for as part of a transformation of patriarchy "from within" approach. In this understanding, achieving gender equality and ending VAWG become a process that requires only men to change. However, a simplistic binary of male perpetrator versus female victim does not explain the full range of responses to VAWG and

5 UN General Assembly, "United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women," *United Nations*, Original publication 20 December 1993, http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm

6 Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 20.

7 Gwen Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence against Women: Resurrecting 'patriarchy' as a theoretical tool," *Violence against Women* 15, no.5 (2009): 553-73.

8 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," *Gender and Society* 2, no.3 (1988): 274-5.

9 Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy," 564.

10 Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy," 565.

patriarchal dominance *from women*, and lessens one's ability to respond to it. What about the counter-intuitive situations, such as women countering attempts to advance women's rights, or women blaming and shaming VAWG survivors? A number of studies have noted how women directly or indirectly support systems and practices that subjugate them or oppose efforts to end such systems and practices. For example, in a study of female genital mutilation and cutting in Mauritania, 70% of female respondents wanted the practice to continue;[11] the end line results of a VAWG intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo showed that 62% of the women still felt that physical intimate partner violence could be justified;[12] and in a recent baseline study conducted in local faith communities in Liberia, female congregants' patriarchal and violent-supportive attitudes were statistically significantly higher than male congregants'.[13]

Indian economist Amartya Sen has stated in his discussion of utilitarianism that "the most blatant forms of inequalities and exploitation survive in the world through making allies out of the deprived and the exploited."[14] This could have been written in a feminist manifesto on global gender inequality. It is not only men who ensure the continuous existence and domination of the patriarchal system. Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter have coined the term "for*men*ism" to explain the phenomenon whereby women support and perpetuate patriarchy: "For*men*ism, like masculinism, subscribes to a belief in the inherent superiority of men over women…but unlike masculinism, it is not an ideology developed and sustained by men, but constructed, endorsed, and sustained by women."[15]

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11 Nacerdine Ouldzeidoune, Joseph Keating, Jane Bertrandm, and Janet Rice, "A Descrip-tion of Female Genital Mutilation and Force-Feeding Practices in Mauritania: Implications for the Protection of Child Rights and Health," *PLoS ONE* 8, no.4 (2013): 1-9.

12 Selina Palm, Elisabet le Roux, Elena Bezzolato, Prabu Deepan, Julienne Corboz, Uwezo Lele, Veena O'Sullivan, and Rachel Jewkes, *Rethinking Relationships: Moving from Violence to Equality. What works to prevent violence against women and girls in the DRC* (Londen: Tearfund, 2019).

13 Elisabet le Roux and Julienne Corboz, *Baseline Report: Engaging Faith-Based Organizations to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls* (New York: Episcopal Relief & Development, 2019), 24.

14 Amartya K. Sen, *Resources, values and development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 308-9.

15 Sarojini Nadar and Cheryl Potgieter, "Living It Out. Liberated Through Submission? The Worthy Woman's Conference as a Case Study of Formenism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26 (2010): 141-51.

Women have been regarded as supporting or even encouraging their subjugation by the patriarchal system, and this compliance has been explained in different ways. First, compliant women are seen as without the freedom to oppose male dominance.[16] The dominance of the patriarchal system is so total and all-encompassing that women have no opportunity or power to resist it, are forced to conform, and unable to embrace efforts that will ensure them more freedom and rights. A woman with any form of power would have resisted.

Second, women who act in such a way can be regarded as suffering from false consciousness: while they think they are making their own choices for their own benefit, they are actually bowing to the patriarchal script. Using Steven Lukes' third dimension of power, this enactment of power is insidious: the power of A (men/patriarchy) over B (women) is such that A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests, but without any conflict arising.[17] Thus, women are not opposing their subjugation, as they are not even aware of it. The term "false consciousness" is usually not used any more, having fallen out of favour especially in the light of postcolonial feminism's efforts to emphasise the importance of local and contextual analysis and interpretation. Nevertheless, in various guises, women's continued compliance with oppression, or their resistance to "development" or "empowerment," is understood as being a result of them being unaware of their own best interests.

Third, in a process sometimes called "patriarchal bargaining,"[18] women are regarded as being aware of their subjugation and choosing to go along with it in return for the benefits that they can attain from doing so. The degree of their compliance depends on the nature of the patriarchal oppresssion they are subjected to. Explaining women's responses to what she calls classic patriarchy, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that some women support their submissiveness and resist efforts to change their circumstances, as they are protected and have power within the existing system:

> The cyclical nature of women's power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves.[19]

[16] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 2.
[17] Steven Lukes, *Power: A radical view* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
[18] Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," 274-90.
[19] Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," 279.

In other words, while they may be subjugated to men, many women do carve out pockets of power for themselves. They are then often unwilling to risk transformation of a system where they do have power of however limited a nature, in return for an uncertain future: "[W]omen often resist the process of transition because they see the old normative order slipping away from them without any empowering alternatives."[20]

Fourth, women's compliance can be understood as limited or even as faked. In this understanding, the subjugated is said to develop clever strategies through which they counter the dominant order; they create mechanisms that protect them, even if only a little.[21] James Scott, in his study of domination and resistance, goes so far as to argue that compliance is actually a form of resistance: "[T]he victims of domination are to be seen as tactical and strategic actors, who dissemble in order to survive."[22]

In many settings one or more of these explanations of women's complicity could be accurate. However, I suggest that to understand all of women's complicity in terms of these four explanations may deny the full potential and actuality of many women's agency. With these four explanations, all women's actions are interpreted only in terms of how it is formed by or responds to patriarchy. If they go along with it, then it is forced compliance, as they have no other/better choice; if they do not comply, it is because they are resisting patriarchal dominance. There is little room for interpreting their actions and choices outside resistance or non-resistance to patriarchy; and agency is only acknowledged if what is enacted resists patriarchy.

Engaging Religious Women: Splitting the Analytical from the Political

Religious women's complicity in patriarchal religions is often explained in one or more of three ways. First, it is said that, while religious women may still be restricted by religion, religion simultaneously frees them from the broader structural forces and limitations placed on them by patriarchal family structures and competitive labour markets.[23] As a

[20] Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with patriarchy," 282.
[21] Hunnicutt, "Varieties of Patriarchy," 556.
[22] Scott, in Lukes, *Power*, 124.
[23] Orit Avishai, "'Doing religion' in a secular world: Women in conservative religions and the question of agency," *Gender and Society* 22, no.4 (2008): 411.

"lesser of evils" they then agree to abide by religious edicts even though it restricts them, for it shields and protects them too. The second explanation argues that women actively strategise around and appropriate religion for extra-religious ends. In other words, being religious is strategically used so as to circumvent the other challenges they face.[24] Last, religious women's compliance with restrictive religious orders have been explained by demonstrating that they do not actually comply. They adapt, subvert, or resist official dogma through non-compliance, partial compliance, or personal interpretations.[25]

Religious women's actions are therefore explained in terms of how they comply or resist patriarchy, and how religion serves them (non-religiously) in doing so. However, there appears to be little attempt to understand what women's actions would mean if they are religious because of religion and not for any other purpose. How would you understand their actions if their religion and the way they understand it is used to frame the interpretation of their actions? How would you understand religious women's behaviour if a patriarchal resistance/compliance binary is not the default frame of analysis? Some of the strongest calls for a wider understanding of agency has come from scholars studying religious women, such as Saba Mahmood, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Orit Avishai.

Mahmood has been a key figure in criticising a narrow understanding of religious women's agency. She argues that you have to allow for modalities of agency that are not focused on achieving liberty from existing systems, for agency is not synonymous with resistance. Mahmood uses the Islamic practice of veiling and the pietist movement amongst Egyptian women to provide a thick description of how and why current, liberal thought, especially as captured in its understanding of agency, is too limited. This, she argues, is especially so in the case of most feminist analyses with its focus on identifying the moments and modalities of resistance to domination. Agency is then seen (only) as the ability to achieve your own interests despite the pressure of custom, tradition, religion, or any other obstacles.[26] This is a result of feminism's dual agenda: it is both a mode of analysis (diagnosing women's status) and a political agenda (prescribing what needs to be done to bring

[24] Avishai, "'Doing religion' in a secular world," 411.
[25] Avishai, "'Doing religion' in a secular world," 411.
[26] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 8.

change), and unfortunately these two are often collapsed. In other words, analysis is done with the feminist political agenda dominating and all acts interpreted in the light of this. What is needed, however, is to be contextually sensitive and relevant, analysing based on what is seen and experienced by those in the situation. This infers the need for a different approach to agency:

> [I]f the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific, then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity...In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms.[27]

Separating the analytical from the political allows both researchers and practitioners to engage with a community in a respectful way. The analytical process is the process of understanding the contexts, the problems, and its drivers. This process is typically associated with research. The political process is the process of intervening to bring change. Whereas both processes involve action and engagement, the analytical process aims to understand women's current context and realities from these women's perspectives, whereas the political process aims to bring change in line with a feminist agenda. Of course, the two processes should not be viewed as a binary. They exist in constant tension and can arguably never be completely separated. The Zambian case study discussed in the next section showcases this tension and how it can be managed.

Mahmood analyses the urban women's mosque movement in Cairo with a separation of the analytical and the political, leading her to understand their actions not primarily as submission to patriarchy, but as a profound act of choice-making. Viewed through the eyes of these religious women, the act of wearing a veil is a process of acquiring piety and can be understood as an act of agency. Looking at their actions only through the lenses of patriarchal compliance or resistance would miss why these women do what they are doing. In other words, *being* religious is rather a process of *doing* religion, through which each individual woman showcases agency. Compliance and agency are not polar opposites, but

[27] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 14-5 (original emphasis).

rather a false dichotomy that "reflects the intellectual biases of students of religion rather than the realities of religious subjects."[28]

This approach could be criticised for leading to culturally relativist thinking that prohibits any opposition to women's subjugation and VAWG. I would, however, argue that broadening one's understanding of women's agency is actually crucial for sustained transformation, by allowing for the possibility of a fuller understanding of what drives women's decision-making and positioning, and, as a result, the development of more appropriate and effective avenues of intervention.

Postcolonial and decolonising strands in various fields, including theology, sociology, and international development, have been particularly vocal in condemning the outsider's (usually Western) dominance of discourse and frames of interpretation. The same is true of feminism, where colonial feminism has shown how the social and political transformation of women's lives need to be formulated and embodied in local and contingent ways.[29] To allow for the possibility that action can be driven by something other than resistance or compliance to patriarchy is to invite frames of interpretation that look at a woman's actions not only in terms of compliance or resistance to patriarchy, but in terms of the frames that she herself allows. This is part of the process of recognising the insights and expertise of/from the local context. It should be noted that this is not simply a call for intersectionality. Intersectionality is a reminder of the need to account for the various intersecting forms of oppression that women are subjected to. What is argued here, however, is something else: to not only analyse women's actions in terms of their oppression and resistance to oppression, but to consciously strive to identify the actual frames of reference that drive many women's actions, and to use those in the initial process of analysis. Consider, for example, a mother who allows her nine-year-old daughter to marry a forty-year-old man, based on the religious belief that such an early marriage will ensure the salvation of the parents of the young girl. Intervention efforts that aim to end the practice by promoting girl child education and women's rights will fail to address the key driver of this mother's decision, namely her religious convictions. The religious framing of the action needs to be taken seriously – and attempts to transform the practice will have to engage religiously.

[28] Avishai, "'Doing religion' in a secular world," 429.
[29] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 36.

Of course, broadening an understanding of women's agency does not negate the fact that some women's support for the patriarchal system is due to patriarchal bargaining or similar modes of compliance/resistance to patriarchy. Recognising that women's agency can be more than patriarchal compliance or resistance does not mean that it cannot also be this. Broadening your understanding of agency avoids, however, an *a priori* assumption of the framing of compliance and resistance and allows for religion to be taken seriously within this process.

Furthermore, and importantly, broadening your understanding of women's agency does not negate efforts to also engage for change. Understanding that child marriage is happening because of the parents' hopes for salvation, does not mean that you cannot critique or even condemn this belief. On the contrary, it offers a more honest, transparent point of engagement from which to do so. By separating the analytical project (i.e. understanding the drivers of complicity) from the political project (i.e. ending complicity), *à la* Mahmood, you allow for research that is more respectful and reflective of local women and their lives, and enables intervention practices that can speak into it and bring change. With such an approach, "analysis [becomes] a mode of conversation, rather than mastery [that] can yield a vision of coexistence that does not require making others' lifeworlds extinct or provisional."[30] Splitting the process (analysis, then political engagement) allows a dialectical tension to exist between respecting the local (i.e. current religious beliefs that inform actual women's agency), whilst having a vision for a safer future. Both research and intervention practices can benefit greatly from a more careful distinction between these two tasks.

A Zambian Case Study

At the outset I stated that this article will engage with the need to bridge the ongoing gap between theory and praxis on the issue of religious women's complicity and agency. Therefore, a recent research project under my direction is offered here as a case study to practically illustrate the importance of separating the feminist analytical project from the feminist political project when engaging with religious women. As such, the case study does not focus on the findings of the research project, but rather on the process used in an attempt to concretely separate the

[30] Mahmood, *The politics of piety*, 198.

analytical from the political for both the researchers and the practitioners involved in the project.

I was approached by Episcopal Relief & Development,[31] Speak *One Voice*,[32] and the Zambian Anglican Church, to assist in doing research within the Zambian Anglican Mothers' Union. Feminist activists from within both the Zambian Anglican Church and Mothers' Union (MU) had identified practices and beliefs within the MU that they felt promoted violence against women and children. However, while they could identify some of these harmful practices and beliefs, they felt that they did not understand why it was happening, or why and how the MU supports or facilitates it, and therefore how to respond to it in an adequate and sensitive way. There was a need for research as an analytical exercise that could help them to clearly understand what is going on, so that they could then design intervention programming to respond to it. For this group of feminist insiders, inviting me to do research was an exercise of separating the analytical from the political. All of them had ideas based on their feminist agendas of what is going on and what should be done, but they believed their intervention practices might be inappropriate and fail if they did not respond to why and how the MU operates the way it does.

As a result, my team entered as researchers studying how and why members of the Anglican MU in Zambia contribute to and/or challenge violence against women and children. However, we were outsiders, with our own personal feminist agendas and worldviews influenced by the West. We realised that this would impact the way in which we conducted and interpreted the data we collected – our feminist political agenda would influence the analytical process of studying this religious women's organisation.

We therefore designed a highly participatory research project, where the MU's contribution to and challenging of violence against women (VAW) and children (VAC) would be identified and analysed by women from

[31] Episcopal Relief & Development is an international relief and development agency affiliated with the Episcopal Church.

[32] *One Voice* was started by senior African women leaders in the Anglican Church who recognised how violence against women and children was impacting not only individuals, but families and communities. The movement aims to actively engage both the Anglican Church hierarchy and women at grassroots level, in ending violence against women and children.

within the Zambian Anglican Church and MU. The key method used was Photovoice, a community-based participatory research method. Over a period of six months, trained research assistants (all members of the MU) took photos (on camera phones), covering themes such as power, gender roles, and social norms. We adapted Photovoice to link with new mobile technologies, which allowed rural women and women who only speak local languages to not only be included as participants, but as research assistants, sharing their photos, accompanied by oral voice notes, in-time with the research team. Moreover, the research assistants did not only function as data collectors by taking photos; in their voice notes they were also interpreting the photos, explaining why they took it and what it meant. This process was continued at end line, when all the research assistants were part of a two-and-a-half-day intensive process of analysing their photos themselves.

For me as researcher, the choice of research methodology as well as the adaptations made to the methodology were all part of an intentional process of separating the analytical from the political. MU members' own understanding of its practices and beliefs had to be captured. Therefore, they had to be included not only in the data collection, but very centrally in the analysis of the data. Adapting Photovoice so that illiterate and local language speakers could serve as research assistants, was another way of separating the analytical from the political, as it ensured that rural women could also be research assistants. This meant that a variety of MU-insider worldviews and interpretations were part of the data collection and analysis process.

One example is offered here of how this split allowed for the recognition of religious women's agency. The Photovoice research assistants took a number of pictures of the MU teaching its members how to cook different kinds of food. My team, seeing these pictures, understood it as showcasing how the MU enforces rigid and limiting gender roles. However, the voice notes accompanying the photos, as well as the end line analysis discussions, showed how many MU members actually experienced joining these sessions as acts of agency and empowerment. They were getting out of their houses, choosing to learn how to cook meals from other cultures and countries, stepping out of the restrictions of only preparing "cultural" food. These sessions were joyful activities, creating community and cohesion amongst members. Yet, it is important to realise that the research assistants also identified spaces and acts of complicity. For example, by taking pictures of the MU

uniform, they explained that certain parts of the uniform are understood as symbolically representing the importance of keeping the secrets of one's household. Women who are abused by their husbands thus believe that they should keep quiet about it, so as to protect the sanctity and stability of the marital relationship. Outsider researchers would never have known the symbolic meaning of the uniform in this particular Zambian context.

This example illustrates how the research (analytical) process benefited from engaging religious women not only as research subjects or data collectors, but as co-researchers, as well as how the intervention (political) process benefited from understanding what certain practices meant *before* deciding if and how to engage and transform it.

The process in Zambia showcases how both researchers and practitioners benefited from not unreservedly forcing their political agenda onto the communities they engaged with. The practitioners benefited by being able to design their intervention programming based on a thorough and in-depth understanding of the cultural and religious setting, the MU practices and beliefs, and MU members' experiences and interpretations of events. Yet, while the produced research report helped to show them what to respond to and what is driving it, it did not detract from their political agenda of wanting to end VAW and VAC by promoting gender equality and equity within the church and the broader community. On the contrary, it enabled them more to do so, by allowing them to develop tailored and responsive intervention programming. It also paved the way for a much more responsive and welcoming reception from the MU as an institution, as the MU recognised that their interpretations and perceptions were taken seriously during the analytical process.

As researcher, I also benefited from separating the analytical from the political, although it was at times challenging to do so. I had to be very intentional. It was more than only using participatory methodologies. I had to adapt methodologies to ensure that various voices could be included (and not only voices with the same political agenda as mine) and to ensure the local analysis of the data. Furthermore, it was challenging to not automatically interpret data with a feminist political lens. It constantly required what I call a dual analytical project, where I had to also critically engage with my own framing and worldviews. Arguably, the analytical project is inherently a dual project, requiring the development of understanding of both the other's worldview and framing,

as well as your own. Intentionality is required: you must do the difficult work of investigating your own positioning and biases. Yet, you cannot completely divorce yourself from your worldview. There was therefore a constant tension between the political and analytical projects. I tried to manage this tension through a constant reflexive process, where the research team was consistently reflecting on whether our interpretation of the data authentically reflected our discussions with the research assistants. This is in line with what Bonnie Honig argues when emphasising the importance of holding up your own practices to the same critical scrutiny as you do with others' practices. She challenges fellow Western feminists, bent on reforming other cultures: "For the sake of a future solidarity of women as feminists, the question of what constitutes gender (in)-equality must be kept disturbingly open to perpetual reinterrogation."[33]

Conclusion

Many women are oppressed and made to suffer violence by a patriarchal system that values them less than men. Yet, at times they are also complicit in this system by supporting beliefs and practices that subjugate them, by condoning VAWG and even by perpetrating violence themselves. Those advocating for gender equality and the empowerment of women often tend to interpret these counter-intuitive practices based on a simplistic patriarchal resistance/compliance model. A woman's agency is only recognised in relation to resistance or compliance to patriarchy: she has agency if she resists, and she does not if she complies. This is especially the case with religious women, whose devotion to a religion that decrees her subjugation is often challenging to feminists fighting for gender equality.

Yet, this article has argued that what is needed is an analytical project that takes religion seriously. Religious women's actions should not automatically be interpreted only in terms of patriarchal resistance or compliance; their religious meaning-making acts should be taken into account. Their actions can be a profound act of agency, but it can be missed and misinterpreted if it is only analysed from the perspective of patriarchal resistance or compliance.

[33] Bonnie Honig, "My culture made me do it," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, ed. Susan Moller Okin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 40.

I have argued, in line with Mahmood, that a splitting of the feminist project is needed: the analytical project that strives to understand actions from the perspective of the doer, is separated from the political project that strives to bring change for the betterment of women. Both feminist research with religious women and feminist practitioners engaging with religious women will greatly benefit from more intentionally separating the analytical from the political. By doing this, we do not automatically "explain away" counter-intuitive cases where women enforce the patriarchal system or condone VAWG. We grapple with the complexity of it, by taking seriously the religious worldviews that might be driving these actions. We are then also willing to grapple with the tension between the analytical and the political, with the constant challenge of trying not to let our vision of how things should be, dominate our understanding and interpretation of the current context. Both research and intervention practices benefit from a dual analytical project, whereby the positioning and worldview of the outsider is also interrogated. Neither the analytical nor the political project can be fruitful if there is no attempt to unpack it and be more transparent about this.

What does all of this mean for our engagement with religious women around gender inequality and VAWG? I would argue that it serves as not only a justification, but also a call for faith-based engagement with religious women. First, understanding and appreciating what religion is and how it functions, is critical for the analytical project. Those who are not simply "faith literate" (which seems to currently be the skill *du jour* in international development circles) but have an insider status, are uniquely positioned, such as faith leaders, religious institutions, and faith-based organisations. Where individuals and institutions are themselves religious, it gives authority and trust, enabling the encounter with religious women to be more authentic.

Second, you *can* and *should* engage religiously, often regarded as a controversial request. Engaging religiously does not mean that you have to suspend all critique and desire for change. On the contrary, if religious framing is driving women's support for VAWG and patriarchy, you *have* to engage religiously. It will require an understanding of their framing of religion, a critical reflection on one's own framing of religion, as well as a religious framing of the alternative (political project) that is being proposed. An example of such engagement is how many faith-based development organisations are increasingly engaging in the reinterpreta-

tion of sacred scriptures (e.g. the Bible and Qur'an) with religious leaders and communities, in their efforts to address VAWG.[34]

This is a unique value-add of faith-based agents, as being "of the faith" can allow them to engage influentially in a critical conversation about religion and religious beliefs. Because of their own religious framing and understanding, they can often also critically engage with others' religious framing and understanding in a more open and transparent conversation around how their shared religion is understood and interpreted. The feminist Islamic scholar Amina Wadud is one example of this kind of positioning. As one of the founders of Islamic feminism, she is consciously and outspokenly both Muslim and feminist, and argues for gender equality and justice through her rereading and reinterpretation of the Qur'an.[35] From her position "within," she is able to critically engage for transformation. Consider this in juxtaposition with a Christian development practitioner. Such a person would not have the ability or authority to critically reread the Qur'an and have these reinterpretations recognised by the Islamic community.

Taking religion seriously not only allows for a fuller, more accurate understanding of the agency of religious women, but it allows for an entirely new avenue of engagement with religious women. If you take religion seriously, engagement can (and should) be around shared religion. This is the unique value-add of faith-based agents, who are insiders in the sense that they are of the same religion and can speak into it.

For anyone bent on improving the lives and status of women, the continued subjugation and violence suffered by many women is challenging. The drive to immediately bring change can take precedence. Yet, ignoring the full scope of the agency of women will mean not only that intervention efforts can be in vain, but that they can strengthen the patriarchal system by having local women react defensively.

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[34] Elisabet le Roux and Selina Palm, *Tackling the roots of religious resistance to ending child marriage* (London: Girls Not Brides, 2018), 26.

[35] Amina Wadud, "Islam beyond patriarchy through gender inclusive Qur'anic analysis," in *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family*, ed. Zainah Anwar (Malaysia: Vinlin Press Sdn Bhd, 2009), 95-112.

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