

**Muslima Discussion Toolkit:
Who Are Muslim Women?
muslima.imow.org/muslimatoolkit**

Introduction:

Presented by the International Museum of Women, *Muslima: Muslim Women's Art & Voices* is a virtual exhibition of groundbreaking thought pieces and artwork from contemporary Muslim women from around the world. Through their art, leadership, and community involvement, these women are defining their identities and, in the process, shattering pervasive stereotypes that persist about Muslim women. Through the exhibition, viewers can explore the work of artists, photographers, poets, writers, filmmakers, and activists who are addressing the topics of Power, Leadership, Appearance, Myths, Generations, Faith, Change, and Connection.

By presenting a broad spectrum of Muslim realities and identities, *Muslima* aims to inspire cross-cultural dialogue that will help to break down myths and stereotypes and build truer and deeper cross-cultural understanding. Through the exhibition's "Speak Up! Listen Up!" campaign, *Muslima* viewers can show their support for efforts that challenge belittling stereotypes of Muslim women. By changing attitudes, communities around the world can help to bring about a more just, equitable, and inclusive world.

Overview:

What is the *Muslima* Toolkit?

The toolkit is designed to help facilitate conversation, better understanding, and actions between diverse communities. It's a companion piece to the *Muslima: Muslim Women's Art & Voices* exhibition presented by IMOW. This toolkit can be used at town hall meetings, in discussions at schools, after school programs, houses of worship, senior citizen centers, community centers, faith- and interfaith-based organizations, businesses, nonprofits, and book groups.

Participants can view selections from the *Muslima* exhibition and then engage in conversations about fears and stereotypes of each other; discuss whether the arts can help build bridges between communities; and how various societies can benefit from deeper awareness and appreciation of differences in order to bring about a more inclusive world.

Why Host a Discussion Group?

As the host of the discussion, you are a vital part of the movement to dispel stereotypes. You are an ambassador of the *Muslima* exhibition, helping to share the rich material gathered from around the world to transform lives. As an agent of change, you know that stereotyping one group negatively impacts everyone, and you are doing the vital work of bringing about the end of belittling attitudes that keep women from becoming complete and meaningful contributors to their societies.

Goals of Discussion

The most important aspect of any discussion is that everyone's opinions are heard and respected, even those that may provoke disagreement. The questions that follow the selected works from the exhibition are meant to be discussed, picked apart, and initiate a deeper discussion about what brings communities together and, also, what holds them apart. Do not feel limited by the questions provided. Instead, use them to help initiate the discussion and inspire questions and thoughts of your own.

What Will You Need?

- Computer(s) with internet access to muslima.imow.org
- Screen if you want to project images and text
- *Muslima: Who Are Muslim Women?* PDF with discussion questions

Lesson Plans:

I. Identifying Stereotypes

Ice Breaker Exercise: 10-15 minutes

This exercise introduces participants to the concept of stereotypes and generalizations.

Stereotype: The automatic application of information we have about a country or culture group, both positive and negative, to every individual in it. This information is often based on limited experience with the culture so it's incomplete at best and downright inaccurate at worst.

Generalizations: Generalizations are based upon incomplete or false information; the searching for general patterns in the culture in order to understand it while assuming that not everyone is the same.

Step 1: Begin by discussing how people often use labels or categories to describe others. These labels can be based on such characteristics as clothing, appearance, the way a person talks, or the groups to which s/he belong. Categorizing things or people is a natural human inclination. However, people often make assumptions about groups of people they don't know. For example, what comes to mind when you hear the word "jock" or "computer geek" or even "feminist"? What do you think of when you think of the French? Italians? Americans?

Step 2: On a piece of paper, have each person in the discussion group write down her/his thoughts to this question:

What is the first image that comes to mind when you think about a Muslim woman? (E.g., veiled) Each person should write a minimum of 4 descriptive phrases or words.

Step 3: Take a sampling from the group of some of the images they have come up with. Some process questions:

1. What images or ideas did people think of?
2. Does anyone think any of these images could be considered as stereotypes? Why or why not?
3. Where do you think people get their perceptions about Muslim women? E.g., which sources do you think might have contributed to these perceptions? Media? Friends? Personal experience? Travels? Books? Etc.
4. Do we have stereotypes that impact our own lives as well? For example, “Women are caregivers.” “Men are breadwinners.” “Assertive men are considered ambitious while assertive women are considered ...”
5. If we can notice ways in which stereotypes impact our own lives, we can explore the voices and images in the *Muslima* exhibition and discover how we might counter negative ideas about the lives and realities of Muslim women.

Can we come up with ways to look more critically at news media and other sources of negative stereotypes?

6. What information do you need for a truer understanding of Muslim women and the reality of their lives?

World Map: 10-15 minutes Awareness Exercise

This exercise is meant to provide greater understanding about Muslims and where they live.

Step 1: Answer the following questions with either “ True,” “False,” or “I Don’t Know”

1. The Middle East is where most Muslim women live.
2. Most Muslim women live in Indonesia.
3. Islam is growing fastest in Europe.
4. Muslims live in every region of the world.

Step 2: To view the correct responses to these questions, visit the following link to see the infographic, “Where In the World Do Muslim Women Live?”

<http://muslima.imow.org/content/where-world-do-muslim-women-live>

Discussion questions:

1. Did any of the facts surprise you? Which ones?

2. Why do you think most people believe that the largest population of Muslims is in the Middle East?
3. Some people think that Islam is demeaning to women; yet the infographic points out that the religion is growing fastest among women in the U.S. and Europe. What are your thoughts on this fact?
4. If Muslims live in every region of the world, do you think it's possible that you know more Muslims than you think?

II. Muslim Women & The Veil: Analyzing Stereotypes Through Images

View the following series of images:

1. Sadaf Syed, iCover <http://muslima.imow.org/content/icover>
In her powerful book, iCover, American photographer Sadaf Syed chronicles the lives of American Muslim women who choose to cover.
2. Helen Zughaib, Changing Perceptions <http://muslima.imow.org/content/changing-perceptions>
A Christian from Lebanon, artist Helen Zughaib mixes familiar Western motifs with traditional Islamic veils in an attempt to bridge the East and West and, in the process, dispel stereotypes about women who choose to wear the veil.
3. Boushra Almutawakel, The Hijab/Veil Series <http://muslima.imow.org/content/hijab-veil-series>
In her Hijab Series, Yemini photographer Boushra Almutawakel explores the many ways to look at the veil and how it affects viewers' assumptions about the women who choose to cover.

Discussion Questions

1. What one thing strikes you most about these series of images?
2. Which of these three series of images most interested you? Give us a few reasons why.
3. Sadaf Syed writes that she decided to veil after a "long and arduous debate with myself." Does it surprise you to learn that veiling is not a foregone conclusion for a Muslim woman?
4. Where do you think women might not have a choice about covering? Why do you think this is so?
5. Sadaf Syed goes on to describe both her interactions with others, including other Muslims. She writes, "Some Muslim friends assumed that I now thought I was better than them, holier-than-thou and in a constant state of judgment, although my attitudes

towards them hadn't changed in the least. Trust me, I appreciate a new hair-style more than anyone, and never hesitate to compliment girlfriends on how attractive they are looking. My husband cringed at the idea of 'wearing our religion on our faces,' and it was particularly difficult for him when we patronized a trendy new restaurant and were met with sideways glances. If there's one thing I know for sure now, it's that this light strip of cloth sure does carry a lot of weight." - See more at:

<http://muslima.imow.org/content/icover>

In what ways does it surprise you to learn that a woman who chooses to veil must face judgments from both communities? Describe one experience when you've been judged yourself for a personal choice you made. What were your own judgments?

6. Although an Arab Christian, Helen Zughaib writes that the "*abaya* represents tradition, modesty, and in many cases, shelter and comfort. In my experience, I have not seen the *abaya* as restrictive or inhibiting" - See more at:

<http://muslima.imow.org/content/changing-perceptions>

In what ways do you think her art successfully expresses this point of view? Which of these pictures did you think are the most engaging or appealing? Why?

7. In your opinion, does the image of Wonder Woman dressed in the *abaya* (veil) promote empowerment? If so, how? If not, why not?
8. Do you think these images express Helen Zughaib's desire to blend East or West? Or do they simply repackage the same old stereotype of the West being empowered and the East being veiled/submissive?
9. Study Boushra Almutawakel's photos. What do they say to you? Do you think she was successful in her desire to be "careful not to fuel the stereotypically widespread negative images most commonly portrayed about the *hijab*/veil in the Western media, especially the notion that most, or all women who wear the *hijab*/veil, are weak, oppressed, ignorant, and backwards." - See more at:
<http://muslima.imow.org/content/hijab-veil-series>

Sadaf Syed says, "A picture is worth a thousand words." While Zughaib writes that she would like to use her art to "address issues that affect both Muslim and Christian women, especially after 9/11."

What role do you think art can play in breaking down stereotypes?
Do you think these artists are successful or not at doing so?

10. Boushra Almutawakel uses the iconic American symbol of the woman (the Barbie doll) and dresses her in the iconic symbol of the Muslim woman (the veil). In your view, do both of these iconic symbols of women impact and limit women of all faiths?
11. From these images and artist statements, can you identify some ways in which choosing to wear the veil might be empowering to women, regardless of faith? Are there any similarities with how you express yourself through your dress?

More to think about: Many people believe that all Muslim women veil. But many choose not to. In fact, the first American woman to translate the Qur'an into English, Laleh Bakhtiar, says that the Qur'an gives women the right to "decide for themselves whether or not to cover." - See more at: <http://muslima.imow.org/content/how-islam-confirms-women%E2%80%99s-rights>

III. Female Agency: Challenging Stereotypes

Read the following interviews:

1. Half-Value Life: Interview with documentary filmmaker Alka Sadat and Afghan's only female prosecutor general, Maria Bashir. <http://muslima.imow.org/content/half-value-life>
2. Pioneer in Peace: Interview with the first Muslim woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Shirin Ebadi, <http://muslima.imow.org/content/pioneer-peace>
3. Wipe It Off And I Will Paint It Again: Interview with Egyptian graffiti artist, Soraya Morayef <http://muslima.imow.org/content/wipe-it-and-i-will-paint-again>

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the obstacles these women are facing? What are some of the ways they are overcoming them?
2. What one word would you use to describe these women?
3. Although each of these women lives in a different part of the world, what common issues do they focus on?
4. How do the issues relate to larger women's issues? To issues you might be facing/seeing in your own community?
5. Although these women share concerns, identify two contrasting perspectives to indicate their essential differences from one another.
6. Choose one quote from the selected interviews that particularly inspired you. Write it down. What inspires you about this quote? Who used the quote you chose? Does the quote reveal anything about the place she lives in or the culture she speaks about? If so, what?
7. Do some cultural analysis. If you're a female who is not Muslim, could you have said this? Could a woman of a different faith background have said this same thing?
8. What kinds of risks are these women taking to do their work? What motivates them to take those risks? Is faith part of the equation?

9. Put yourself in these women's shoes. Would you put your safety at risk in similar ways? When is it worthwhile to put yourself at risk to bring about justice? When isn't it?
10. What commonalities might you share with these fearless reformers? Think about a time when you have taken a risk for something you believed in, no matter how big or small.

If You Only Have 15 Minutes

Defining Yourself

1. Read through at least 7 different *Muslima Stories*. Notice that they have been asked to define themselves using a few words and images.
<http://muslima.imow.org/#muslimastories>
2. Do the same for yourself. In a few words (no more than six), answer the following question: Who are you today?
3. Looking over your answer, would anyone disagree or be surprised by what you've written? Why do you think that this person(s) has a different impression of you than you have of yourself? How does that make you feel?

Conclusion:

Tying It All Together

The *Muslima* exhibition is revolutionary because it brings together a wide spectrum of Muslim women on one platform. It illuminates the diversity of women ranging from geographic differences to differences in how these women express themselves – through photography, art, film, music, poetry, social justice, and much more. It reveals the various ways in which these women express their faith – from those who are fervent followers of Islam to those who've stopped believing in any religion altogether.

After experiencing the exhibition through the help of this discussion guide, tell us what else you would like to know about Muslim women to help you understand them better.

Join us on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/InternationalMuseumofWomen>

Or connect with us on Twitter at @IMOWomen

You can email us directly at: team@imow.org

We take your thoughts seriously so please do reach out. We would love to hear from you!

Three other ways you can be heard:

1. After each selection on the website, we have reserved a space at the bottom of the page for visitors to write their comments. Please include your own comments, especially after experiencing the exhibition in this unique and intimate way with the discussion guide.
2. Does any particular interview or image resonate with you? Tweet it or include the link to your own Facebook page. You might even consider asking others to join in the conversation with you.
3. Add your name to the Speak Up! Listen Up! Campaign.
<http://muslima.imow.org/campaign>

In post-9/11 society, Islamophobia remains one of the few acceptable prejudices. All too often our media, leaders, and communities project an image of Muslim women that is distorted, negative, and one-dimensional. When we deny the diversity and potential of Muslim women, we deny our world of ideas, imagination, and solutions. When you join the SPEAK UP! LISTEN UP! campaign to help change the global conversation about Muslim women, you'll receive occasional email updates about the campaign, including ways you can take action in your daily life to support the efforts of Muslim women and others worldwide who are leading the movement for a more just, equitable, and inclusive world.

SPEAK UP! When you hear or see someone perpetuating negative stereotypes about Muslim women, be it online, in the media, or in your daily life, don't remain silent. Speak up against these negative voices and change the conversation.

LISTEN UP! Create a more just and fair world by listening to each other speak to the reality of our lives.

Thank you for your support!

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