ABSTRACT

“Clarifying Your Way through America:
Civic and Muslim Identities on Campus”

By: Shabana Mir, Ph. D
(Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK)

In the days following 9/11/01 diasporic US Muslims often felt like imposters, marginal citizens, almost-not-citizens, and, dangerously often, deportation material. Investigations, detentions, and deportations of Muslims along with the pursuit of extremists (sometimes rather broadly defined) at home and abroad generated a climate of fear, surveillance and self-surveillance - a climate that threatened to effectively spoil identities (playing on Goffman’s phrase “spoiled identities”). Many Muslims hastened to claim safe, moderate, good Muslim identities. Some voiced their protest against the attacks on their communities. Others shrank into the private and personal sphere to escape the unremitting gaze of the Panopticon. In my 2002-2003 ethnographic fieldwork at two private universities in Washington, DC, American Muslim undergraduate women constructed a broad range of modalities of being Muslim, American, ethnic, women, and students. This paper draws out their constructions of what it meant to be Americans in the post-9/11 era. The focus of this presentation is the intersection of Muslim identity construction with campus cultures. At elite universities that drew competitive and wealthy students from all over the nation, and as TV news specials on Islamic extremists seemed to run constantly, and oppressed Muslim women seemed to occupy a permanent home on the front pages of newspapers, what did it mean to be an American Muslim female undergraduate? In encounters with American Muslim women, majority individuals often anticipated an Americanness different from normal (Christian Anglo) Americans - the stigma of a discounted American identity, infected with Muslim identity. Muslim women constructed a variety of identities patching religion, gender, and culture together with civic identity. Sometimes they created dialogic encounters based on questions about their Americanness and at times they passed as normal Americans, internalizing their peers’ assumptions that they were indeed less American and needed disguise, but at other times they simply evaded the battle.