As I researched and joined political actions responding to the Muslim ban—the third iteration of which remains permanently in place—I was appalled by the trend of responses lacking any sort of feminist and/or queer analysis. When responses did mention gender, they wittingly or unwittingly reified the dynamic of centralizing forms of gender violence that can be explained through cultural and religious frames while obscuring the realities of gender violence inflicted by the US state and the Muslim ban itself.

Consider for instance the brief that urged the US Supreme Court to strike down the Muslim ban due to its impact on LGBTQ people from Muslim-majority countries. Reflecting dominant liberal LGBTQ solidarity with queer Arabs and Muslims, a great deal of the brief details the "oppressive conditions for LGBTQ

people living in the countries named in the travel ban" and explains "how Trump's ban prevents LGBTQ people in those countries from joining their families and loved ones in the United States, increasing their exposure to persecution in their home countries." Co-signers explain that the Muslim ban will "inflict unique harm on LGBTQ people in the eight target countries by foreclosing escape from the venomous, and often vicious, anti-LGBTQ conditions that prevail there."

The brief describes these "venomous" conditions, giving extreme examples from each country—repeating detail upon detail of violence against LGBTQ people, country by country building an emotional response to these places as sites of pure evil and barbarity.

I do not intend to imply of course that violence against gender non-conforming and LGBTQ people does not take place or that all of the co-signing organizations share the same simplistic analysis of the Muslim ban and its impact. In fact, at least one organization supporting the brief (the National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance) has done extensive work against US-led racism and racial profiling of LGBTQ Muslims in the United States.

Of course, these organizations may have had good intentions, and may have even strategically used cultural or societal analyses that ignore or downplay US state violence against people from the countries in question in order to end the Muslim ban. My point is not to critique these organizations per se but to point to how the responses that are going to be heard pose a set of dangers of their own—especially since notions about venomous homophobic culture and society form the very basis of justifications for anti-Arab/South Asian/Muslim racism and war.

But what is at stake in this strategic use of orientalist rhetoric?

Muslim Backwardness Again

Many people concerned about President Trump's Muslim ban are unaware of the significance of discourses about Muslim misogyny and homophobia to the current ban of people from Muslim-majority countries from the United States. The first legislation Trump issued, Executive Order 13669, implemented 27 January 2017, includes this clause:

The United States cannot, and should not, admit those who would place violent ideologies over American law…in addition to those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred (including "honor" killings, other forms of violence against women, or the persecution of those who practice religions different from their own) or those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation.

The second one, implemented 16 March, Executive Order 13780, similarly mandates the Department of Homeland Security to collect and make publicly available "information regarding the number and types of acts of gender-based violence against women, including so-called 'honor killings,' in the United States by foreign nationals."

The Trump administration's idea of protecting American women from foreign nationals reflects longstanding anti-Arab/anti-Muslim discourse that has been used for decades to justify US imperialism. It is an imperial feminist and queer strategy similarly deployed by many European countries and Israel that presents white western Europe, Israel and the United States as safe havens for women's rights and LGBTQ people (and therefore democratic and just). Pinkwashing refers to Israeli state efforts to promote the country as a safe haven for LGBTQ people in contrast to Palestinian and Arab homophobia and backwardness.

Here, the Muslim ban, one of the latest strategies of the war on terror, sensationalizes the idea that foreign nationals (read: Muslim immigrants) come from places where violence against women and LGBTQ people is normalized and accepted, and that "their" violent norms of gender and sexuality pose a serious threat to the US nation. Implicit here are images of what Sherene Razack calls the "imperiled Muslim woman"—and imperiled LGBTQ people in Muslim majority countries—as if to say, do not bring your gender and sexual savagery to American shores.

The Muslim ban accentuates the apparent gendered and sexual "backwardness" of "Muslim" foreign nationals, operationalizing imperialist feminism and pinkwashing. In doing so, the United States turns attention away from its own imperial and anti-immigrant violence and covers up how US empire and war depend on the very sexualized violence the United States claims to protect Americans from.

Indeed, the discourse of Muslim gender and sexual oppression reflected in the Muslim travel ban parallels US histories that many Black feminists have been critiquing all along. They point to the way in which the idea of protecting white women and their sexuality was used to justify the lynching of African Americans and contemporary state and individual-led acts of anti-Black racism. Discourses that justify the criminalization of Latinx people similarly rely on concepts of "Latino hypersexuality" and machismo just as white colonizers have justified the colonization of Native American land through discourses about Native sexual savagery.

As scholars and activists have been writing for decades, sensationalized responses to cultural forms of gender violence in Muslim majority countries overshadow the ways US state violence against Arabs, Muslims, South Asians, and so on is itself a form of gender violence. Consider for instance, that organizations and governments rise up en masse against gender violence enacted by harmful

"venomous" Muslim societies whereas few to no voices on the very gendered harm the Muslim ban enacts directly and indirectly have entered mainstream discussions. The New York-based LGBTQ lawsuit says the Muslim ban is harmful because it obstructs LGBTQ people from fleeing "venomous societies" but it does not say the Muslim ban is harmful because banning people based on country of origin is itself racist and harms women and LGBTQ people.

Consider the situations of women who are now separated from their families. The sister of Yemeni Muad Almogari from Hamtramak, Michigan, for example, was unexpectedly separated from her brother when her paperwork and that of her five children went into limbo. There, militarized violence (backed by the United States) put them in serious risk of injury and death. Also during this period, one thousand Yemenis who were expecting to be united with their families in the United States were stranded in Djibouti. Among them were children as well as a baby who was nursing who were granted visas while their mothers were not. Consider the impact of the deportation of Syrian doctors on the Syrian refugee women they were serving in the United States.

The US as a Safe Haven, or Where Homophobia, Sexism and Racism Intersect

There are countless stories whereby LGBTQ Muslims have faced harmful experiences of racial profiling in the US, especially after September 11. From invasive pat-downs and harassment by TSA (Transportation Security Administration) at US airports, to separation from loved ones due to immigration policy, anti-Muslim racism is compounded by US-based homophobia and transphobia and targets persons with non-normative sexual orientation or gender presentation in distinct, exceptionally violent ways.

LGBTQ Arabs and/or Muslims in the United States have been forced to engage with the co-constituted realities of homophobia, transphobia, and anti-Arab/anti-Muslim racism for decades. The Unites States never was a safe haven and entering the United States does not guarantee their safety. Hana Masri, writing on the impact of such discourses on queer Syrian refugees explains that orientalist/racist concepts about queer Muslims reinforce rather than challenge their excludability:

There lurks a paradoxical—and much more sinister—potential behind narratives that offer Western nations as liberated safe havens for queer refugees; when such stories are painted with a brush coated in stereotypes, not only do they affirm historically violent (and inaccurate) understandings of "backward" Arabs who have not progressed enough to embrace sexual openness and diverse gender expressions, they also put all Syrian refugees at risk by bolstering the very same narratives that justify their inherent excludability from allegedly more progressive nations.

In a piece called, "Reflections of a genderqueer Palestinian American lesbian mother," Huda Jadallah (founder of one of the first public networks for Arab lesbians in California in the 1980s) reminds us that the US is indeed no safe haven for LGBTQ and gender non-conforming people perceived to be Arab:

Growing up I was always keenly aware of being marked as dangerous, "a terrorist." I never understood as a child that this was not simply a result of racial marking or being identified as Palestinian, but was also in part due to being marked as gender queer. My gender non-conformity manifested itself in being stereotyped as violent and dangerous as opposed to submissive and oppressed as Arab women who conform to gender roles are often perceived. One specific site where I experience the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality is public restrooms. Upon entering or exiting or actually while I am inside a public women's restroom, I am often mistaken for an Arab man. The fear in women's eyes as they recoil away from me cannot be mistaken. The stereotype of Arab men as violent and hypersexualized is, I believe, a major aspect of why these women fear me. They fear being raped. They fear being hurt. They mistrust. The fear has been so intense at times that I have felt compelled to assure women of their safety, assure them that indeed I am a woman. But, of course, I cannot assure them that I am not Palestinian. And what of those who are transgender, those who do not have the luxury to assure others that they are indeed the "right sex in the right bathroom stall?" Do I betray them in my assurances? Do I betray myself as I seek to comfort those who are uncomfortable with my race, gender, and sexuality?

Women of color feminisms have shown that indigenous women, women of color and queer and trans people of color often resist calling the police or reaching out for support in cases of intimate partner violence out of fear of criminalization (of themselves, their partners/family members, and so on.). It would not be a stretch to expect that the Muslim ban is having a direct impact on protections for survivors, especially LGBTQ Arab or Muslim survivors who might risk disproportionate levels of sexualized racism by police (though this has yet to be fully researched).

According to Nawal Ammar's preliminary research, Muslim women indicated that protecting their spouse is one reason why they may avoid calling the police. Indeed, given US government policies of racial profiling and criminalization of Arab and Muslim communities — from surveillance to FBI entrapment of men perceived to be Muslim — there is a lack of trust in state/police. It is understandable that women facing intimate partner violence are not going to call the state, as police and immigration authorities are systematically targeting people as potential terrorists and any interaction with authorities could lead to arrest, detention, deportation and so on.

As Razack argues, "You can't fight violence against women with racism because racism is likely to strengthen patriarchal currents in communities under siege." Rising realities of anti-Arab/anti-Muslim racism that the Muslim ban was borne of certainly contributes to patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia

within communities. On my campus in Chicago, I regularly interact with Arab-American women students whose families prefer their daughters limit their activities on campus or in the evenings out of fear of Islamophobic targeting/violence against their daughters.

The orientalist privileging of societal and cultural forms of gendered and sexualized violence obscures gendered and sexualized US state violence enacted on bodies perceived to be Muslim. It ignores the ways societal and cultural patterns of gendered and sexualized violence in the Arab region are often an outgrowth of state crackdowns that have as much to do with histories of European colonization and contemporary US-backed neoliberal and imperial securitization agendas as they have to do with dominant cultural sensibilities as illustrated by scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Leila Ahmed, Sabiha Allouche, and Paul Amar. And it also ignores the powerful activism against sexism, heteronormativity and homophobia within and between Arab and Muslim majority countries.

It is as if one kind of violence (societal/cultural) not only takes precedence but also pushes out of view and erases other kinds of violence (state violence). Challenging societal forms of violence that align with long-standing sensationalist corporate media and state discourses about the treatment of women and LGBTQ people in "Muslim countries" becomes more urgent than ever before. The society and culture are sensationalized as horrific and must be acted upon, whereas violence enacted by the US and US-sponsored dictators is not even seen.

We need responses that do not fall back on orientalist imperialist cultural notions, that can account for the multiple forms of violence women and queers from Muslim-majority countries are facing and the significance of US-state violence and war (including the US backing of authoritarian dictators) to sexualized-racial violence.

[This article was originally published on Mada Masr*.]*