

Solidarity Across Difference



As an interreligious team leading the GTU's Women's Studies in Religion seminar, Mahjabeen Dhala and Sheryl Johnson illustrate what solidarity across difference can look like.

By Jennifer W. Davidson

When Mahjabeen Dhala and Sheryl Johnson participated in the GTU's Women's Studies in Religion (WSR) seminar as doctoral students last spring, they found it an exceptional experience. "I think what I valued most was having the chance to form community and develop our own scholarly interests in a supportive, challenging, and empowering community of co-learners," said Sheryl, a PhD candidate in the department of Theology and Ethics.

Her colleague concurs. "Undoubtedly, the WSR seminar was one of the most memorable classes I have taken during my MA and doctoral work at the GTU," said Mahjabeen, who holds an MA in Islamic Studies (2017) from the GTU and is now pursuing a doctorate in Sacred Texts and Their Interpretation. "It was a holistic learning experience where students from diverse backgrounds engaged complex theoretical work intellectually, emotionally, and even physically."

Now, these two student-scholars have been awarded a prestigious Newhall Fellowship to teach the same Women's Studies in Religion seminar in Fall 2019, becoming the first international, interreligious team to lead the course.

Since its establishment in 2006, the Women's Studies in Religion Certificate Program has enabled students in degree programs at the GTU and its member schools to incorporate an emphasis on women's studies into their work in religion or theology. As part of WSR's commitment to provide students with opportunities for professional development, the steering committee seeks to identify outstanding doctoral students who might teach in the program. When Mahjabeen and Sheryl were invited to apply for a Newhall Fellowship to teach the WSR seminar, their experiences as students in the course led directly to their desire to teach the course together, "We simply could not pass up this opportunity," Mahjabeen declares.

Sheryl is also enthusiastic. "The chance to partner with Mahjabeen is incredible. We bring such different life experiences and academic perspectives; yet, we have such solidarity for and commitment to understanding one another and growing through that experience. It's amazing to be able to teach a course that is not only *about* feminist theory but is really grounded in feminist pedagogy, so that we are also self-reflective about academic institutions and the classroom space itself."

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Mahjabeen and Sheryl’s varied life experiences and faith traditions make them exceptional candidates for teaching the seminar. Born in India, Mahjabeen has been a religious motivational speaker for most of her life and has traveled to several continents engaging with Muslim women of all ages situated in various socio-economic climates. For her final project as a student in the WSR seminar, Mahjabeen designed a five-day pilgrimage to Iraq, which she then led in June 2018. Later that summer, she took a women’s studies course in Tehran that “when combined with the WSR seminar at the GTU, gave me a broad overview of the methods used in women’s studies in both the east and the west.”

A native of Canada, Sheryl double-majored in religion and women’s studies for her undergraduate degree. She brings a global perspective to women’s studies, drawing on her experience participating in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and her work with the World Student Christian Federation, a global federation of student Christian groups that connects two million members in more than 90 countries.

Even as Mahjabeen and Sheryl engage their work as doctoral scholars, they continue to seek out opportunities as global leaders. Sheryl recently participated in the Bartimaeus Institute, an annual gathering of scholars and activists in the Ventura area of Southern California. This year the focus was on land and indigenous experiences, a topic close to Sheryl’s heart and a part of her former work in Canada with KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives. With KAIROS she worked to help Canadian churches and communities participate in Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission and engage issues of indigenous rights.

Mahjabeen recently returned from India where she spoke nine times in three different community centers across Mumbai. There, she brought together young female Muslim artists

and helped to raise 100,000 INR through an exhibition of their work. The proceeds were donated toward the relief of Yemini refugees.

Sheryl and Mahjabeen are keenly aware of the benefits that the Women’s Studies in Religion course provides for students across the GTU. “The WSR seminar provides lenses of analysis that can be brought to any other course, religious organization, social movement, or life situation,” says Sheryl. “Sex, gender, and sexuality are so prominent in these areas, yet we don’t always focus on it explicitly or pay attention to how it is operating.”

Mahjabeen concurs: “The course also gives students opportunities to engage in power analysis and to learn forms of analysis that connect to other expressions of privilege and marginalization, which are often intersectional with gender and sex.”

“It’s transformative to engage with women scholars of religion and theologians that we may not otherwise encounter,” says Sheryl.

“And specifically,” Mahjabeen adds, “giving students a chance to engage directly with visibly Muslim female voices is powerfully unique, especially given the current climate in the United States.”

As a Muslim and a Christian teaching the course together, Mahjabeen and Sheryl know “the two of us cannot represent everything from our respective traditions,” says Sheryl. “But we hope we will be able to practice and demonstrate ways that different concepts we encounter in class will resonate differently based on different contexts and experiences. Through our teaching together, we can also offer a picture of what solidarity across difference can look like.”

Since its inception, the Women’s Studies in Religion program has graduated far more women than men. These numbers are evident in the classroom, where it is common for

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there to be only one or two men taking the WSR seminar. “I think one of the common misperceptions of women’s studies in religion is that it only addresses concerns of women,” Mahjabeen explains, “or that it has no larger implication on matters of social and economic justice for the community as a whole.”

“Similarly,” Sheryl adds, “I think people believe men or gender non-binary people wouldn’t be welcome, or that they would not have important insights to bring to the discussion about how sex and gender operate in our world and religious communities. Related to that is the worry that women’s studies in religion is only concerned about gender in isolation, and that it is really only for white/straight/able-bodied women.”

Nonetheless, the Women’s Studies in Religion course at the GTU takes a global, intersectional, critical approach that decenters the white, North American, and European narrative of feminist movements, troubles the category of gender, and foregrounds local particularity and solidarity-in-diversity through coalition building and brave dialogue. “Women’s experiences, defined broadly as well as with specificity, deeply inform knowledge production in the scholarship we address in class,” remarks Mahjabeen.

Mahjabeen and Sheryl are committed to pedagogical approaches that are participatory, multi-sensory, embodied, and process-focused. “We look for opportunities to be reflective on the classroom experience itself,” Sheryl says. “We want to pay attention to the ways certain dynamics we are studying in the wider culture may also be present in the classroom. These micro-dynamics can be important windows into understanding larger systems.”

“I always enter a classroom ready to learn, regardless of whether I am taking the class or teaching the class,” adds Mahjabeen. “I believe in making room in one’s mind and heart for new paradigms, new ways of understanding. And to accomplish this, we need to strive to provide a safe, nonjudg-

mental, amicable space for sharing experiences and facilitating active learning.”

“Yes,” Sheryl continues, “and sometimes that means engaging content that some people might not think of as worthy of scholarly exploration, like popular culture or popular religious practices. But when we unpack these practices intentionally and critically, it’s amazing what comes into view about larger systems and theories that are at play.”

The Women’s Studies in Religion seminar is not the only opportunity GTU students will have to take a class from these two powerful scholars. Mahjabeen Dhala will be teaching “Introduction to Islam” at Church Divinity School of the Pacific this summer, where she will particularly include readings that highlight the experiences and perspectives of Muslim women. And Sheryl Johnson will teach another Newhall course, “Faithful, Ethical Fundraising?” in spring 2020 that will explore aspirational economic ethics and ideals of social justice that are not fully lived up to in progressive North American churches, while also providing practical tools for fundraising and finance in religious contexts.

When it comes to the WSR seminar, both women are eager for the opportunity to weave together their scholarly, personal, and professional passions—and to provide the space to invite students to do the same. Mahjabeen concludes: “I think this combination will effectively demonstrate the feminist pedagogy of student-centered learning, maybe especially because the teachers are also students. In this course in particular, the feminist approach of incorporating student experiences will be transformatively applied in an interreligious setting that is truly the signature feature of the GTU. We can’t wait!” ♦

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