

## Decolonising white feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand: An interview with Anjum Rahman

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### Abstract

What does decolonising white feminism really mean in Aotearoa/New Zealand? How can our Muslim communities contribute to this project, and to what extent is Aotearoa/New Zealand 'ready' to confront the experiences of 'othering' and marginalisation that so many Muslim women absorb on a daily basis? This interview with Anjum Rahman provides first-hand insight into these issues, as well as an exacting and uncompromising analysis, as told through Anjum's irrepressible political life story of triumph and struggle, of what decolonising white feminism in this country might look like. The interview (conducted by Kirsten Locke) took place in December 2019 at the Shama Ethnic Women's Trust centre in Hamilton, an organisation that Anjum has been involved in at a governance level and is currently managing a project hosted by this organisation. Shama, as it is commonly known, is a charitable trust that offers holistic and comprehensive support to ethnic minority women in the Hamilton area through workshops, individual and community support, and advocacy at all levels for ethnic women who may also be recent migrants. From this most appropriate of settings, the following interview traverses Anjum's views on contemporary feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

### Keywords

*Decolonialisation, feminism, Muslim faith, racism, migrant, activism, politics*

### Introduction

One of the remarkable dimensions when talking to Anjum Rahman is the paradoxical experience of having startling and often uncomfortable information delivered in a calm, unhurried and gently articulated manner. Anjum Rahman is a direct communicator. There is no doubt about meaning or intention, yet the uncomfortable truths Anjum articulates about living in Aotearoa/New Zealand as a woman of 'faith and race' have the power to move and unsettle. This interview was undertaken at the beginning of December 2019, when the Christchurch mosque terror attacks were still raw and present in the lives and nightmares of many. The wounds inflicted and the annihilation of life of that day will arguably never heal or disappear. Yet talking to Anjum dispels any notion that this tragedy (existing as it does within the New Zealand landscape of race relations) was unexpected or unpredictable. Indeed, there had been repeated calls for this society to wake up to the discrimination and often blatant racism that shaped the realities of Muslim people and which often found a particularly ugly and virulent form of expression online. The attacks, rather than existing in a vacuum, emerged from a subterranean rumbling of hatred that existed for many Muslims in this country long before 15 March 2019.

While already a public figure in many forums, it was during the immediate aftermath of the mosque terror attacks that Anjum Rahman became a familiar and constant presence in mainstream New Zealand media. Morning after morning, evening after evening, day after day, Anjum performed a crucial role, fronting to the media as one of the key spokespeople for the

Muslim community. My interview with Anjum traverses this time, but it does so through the broader context of her own story of growing up as a woman of faith and race in Aotearoa/New Zealand. While the spectre of the mosque terror attacks is always present, so is the story of Anjum's struggles to articulate the rights of women within the often-inhospitable context of Pākehā feminism. As such, the interview draws attention to the intersectional character that feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand would do well to engage, work and struggle with, to ensure stories are told other than through the voice of white feminism. Anjum discusses the necessity for decolonising white feminism in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This interview engages explicitly with this plea.

## Interview

***KL: I want to start off this interview by asking if you could say a little bit about yourself, specifically in terms of a feminist agenda and how this has played out in your life and career.***

AR: I came to New Zealand in 1972, just before I was 6 years old. It was a different world in terms of gender roles and gender expectations. I went to high school in the 1980s, here in Hamilton, and that was the decade of 'girls can do anything'. We happened to have a woman mayor, Margaret Evans, who came to our seventh-form camp. I remember her being really inspiring in terms of the message of women's empowerment. During that period, I was really struggling with expectations around what women should be and do, versus my own ambitions about what I might want to be and do. Even then, women didn't really have careers: they worked until they got married and then they stayed home to look after their babies. So, it was a difficult time for me; managing my identity in terms of where I belonged and how I fitted in.

There were myriads of people and structures that made sure to make me feel that I did not belong. There were messages and ways of doing things that put me, quite firmly, in the space of an outsider. For example, going to a meeting or dinner and there was absolutely nothing I could eat because – vegetarian – what's that? Forget about halal. 'Just pick the ham off and eat it'. No notion about prayer times, no concept of that ... Just a very Pākehā way of doing things. There wasn't even much flexibility for Māori who were still struggling and fighting for their issues and the Treaty of Waitangi, and all of those things just hadn't happened. It was a world in which I was certainly an alien and didn't belong. It was a dual fight for my own space as a person with an identity that included faith and race, as well as the fight for being a woman. Women's empowerment was defined from a white cultural perspective. I grew up thinking that was what I had to conform to in order to be free and successful. It took a long time to figure out that wasn't true or right, to push back on the notion that somehow Pākehā women had all the ideas of what liberation meant and provided the framework that we had to live in. So, those challenges were at a personal level, within my family, within society and community, and within wider mainstream society. My life always felt like one big fight: never finding a space where I could just be, belong and feel comfortable. There were very few people that I could be that comfortable with.

There is also a sense of isolation because I grew up here; the migrant narrative of being a newcomer in a new land didn't work for me. When I sit with migrants and they talk about their issues, they aren't my issues or my interests and I don't connect with them. Those are my parent's issues. My issue was not fitting in with what New Zealand culture and society was at the time, which was absolutely designed a certain way. I never felt good enough. I was struggling a lot of the time.

***KL: Did you end up going to university?***

AR: Yes, I did. I got a degree in accounting because I was told that was a good career for a woman and I could work from home, and blah, blah, blah. I didn't feel passionately about anything else. If there had been something that I wanted to do instead I possibly would have fought for that, but nothing sang out to me. My highest marks were in accounting so I thought, 'Okay, I'll do that'.

Then I got a management degree at the University of Waikato and I got quite interested in information systems. I finished my degree and straightaway I got married. I was offered my dream job – it was not an accounting job – it was a systems management job. But, because the person I was marrying had a job somewhere else, I was pretty much put in the position of, 'No, you can't have that, you have to go where your partner is and you will have to find another job'.

So, I got a job in an accounting firm and that was really frustrating in terms of the societal restrictions around expectations for Muslim women, where you went and what you did. We are talking about the late 80s now: it was still unusual for women to be working their whole lives. Yes, there was childcare, et cetera, but even within wider society, it was not common. There was a lot of shaming of women who went to work and left their kids in childcare. There were a lot of restrictions around who you could be and what you could do. Then I had my own cultural and faith restrictions on top of that, which I find very interesting because the country you migrate from moves on and develops.

***KL: What country was that?***

AR: India. The people who leave it at a particular point in time – that is what they know and that is what they want to preserve in terms of their cultural heritage, so they don't move on. Meanwhile, that country has moved on. Cultural preservation becomes a restriction. Also, the understanding of religion is so fraught and very much determined by how its texts and traditions are interpreted. It is a minefield. I think a lot of women of faith connect to that because of how religion is used to shape you or to make you feel bad and is used as a tool against you. It depends who is doing the interpreting, how they are interpreting religious traditions and why, and what they are bringing to it from their own preconceived thoughts of how the world should be. There is a lot of that in terms of the way religion plays out. It's an additional layer of the guilt that is put on you for even wanting these things that are somehow bad, sinful or wrong.

I have written a spoken word poem called 'Spiritual abuse', which is a conglomerate of a lot of women's experiences from various faiths. It speaks of how people will tell you that you are going to hell if you won't be a good wife, you can't be like this, or do things like that.

***KL: And in terms of really living with that dissonance and of trying to find yourself and having these different layers of religion and gender to deal with, how did that play out in terms of your career as an accountant?***

AR: I didn't, and I still don't, really have a career as an accountant. Partly because I would rather be doing other things than accounting. Accounting is a job that earns me money and means I can do other things. At my age, with the work experience I have and what I've achieved, I should be a partner at a major firm ... but I spend my time at Shama Ethnic Women's Trust. I spent my time doing politics and standing for political parties. I have stood for central and local government.

**KL: Tell me a little bit about your growing political awareness. What led you, and what gave you the courage to do that?**

AR: I got to my 30s and I looked at my life and thought, ‘This is not who I want to be, it’s not how I want to live. This is a life that is chosen for me’. *The Truman Show* came out and it just resonated with me so much in terms of this life that was safe and manufactured. I also went to see the Samuel Becket play *Happy Days*. It’s just a monologue with one woman and she is buried up to her waist in something – she can’t move. She says something like, ‘I have got an umbrella here, the sun is shining, I’m doing well, I’m all right’. She is completely restricted and has no movement and the whole monologue was her justifying or trying to say everything is fine when it clearly isn’t. In the second half of the play she’s up to her neck. All you see is her head and she still says, ‘I’m good, I can still move around, I can still love’. What this said to me was how you become okay with your own oppression ... how you justify it to yourself and you think it’s okay to be in that situation. Things like these were starting to percolate for me in terms of realising this wasn’t the life that I had envisaged for myself. I think that was leading up to a lot of happenings in my personal life, but also within the wider world.

We entered the 1990s and the strong anti-Asian political rhetoric that we were seeing from the New Zealand First party became acceptable and was playing out in real-life incidences of violence and emotional and verbal abuse and harm. I remember feeling the powerlessness within that. Then of course 9/11 happened, and suddenly this very harsh, negative spotlight was on our community and we had no power or ability to speak back.

**KL: Why do you think that was?**

AR: In those days, the media, the television programmes, had all of these experts speaking about us without us having any chance to respond. We didn’t get interviewed. Nobody said, ‘What does a Muslim person think about this?’ We had no voice – we had nobody with media training in our community. Again, there was that feeling of being powerless and not having any ability to speak back. By the way, it has only gotten worse in terms of social media and the negativity you see in this context.

In 2002/2003 Dr Ashraf Choudhary was the first Muslim member of parliament and happened to be a family friend. We had known him from when he first came to New Zealand. He was visiting my parents in the midst of my angst about everything that was going on. I mentioned to him that I wanted to get more involved in the community and in wider things. I was already involved with the Islamic Women’s Council and we’d started the meetings and discussions that led to this place [Shama] after the previous women’s centre was shut down, but I still felt I needed something more and something else. So, I mentioned that to Dr Choudhary. I said, ‘I just want to get more involved in community’, and he replied, ‘Why don’t you go to the Labour Women’s Conference in Wellington?’ And so, he hooked me into that. The Labour Government of that time was quite different to what it became in 2006/2007. At that time, they were a government that paid attention and listened – ministers would turn up to conferences with pen and paper and they would be writing things down. You felt like you were being heard and something was being done about it.

**KL: Is this when Helen Clark was around?**

AR: Yes, and Steve Chadwick and a lot of really good Labour women. After that conference, I came back and joined the Labour Party. Our local MP for Hamilton East was Dianne Yates

and she was a great mentor. I remember being invited to her house with my then husband. We were having a discussion and I think she was just watching how that went. She really took me in and supported me and suggested that I stand for the list.

I then went through my divorce, so I was dealing with having to be on my own, look after the kids alone, as well as campaign and be a candidate. It was quite a difficult time but, as a person who had very little self-worth and very little confidence, it was a way for me to feel like I was valuable. It was a way for me to feel like I was worth something. I was connecting to people who were welcoming and accepting and I was feeling like I could make a difference. With the Labour Party, I became the regional chair at one point. I was on the policy council and later in around 2008 or 2009, I got onto the New Zealand Council. I had various positions, including where I was involved with helping to set up the ethnic sector in Labour. It all felt like we were doing things that were having an impact on policy and on government and it was really affirming.

Around 2006, I became a trustee for the local Community Access Broadcaster. I had also started building up a media voice. I got media training within the Labour Party as a candidate, but the Office of Ethnic Communities also provided some media training and I did some workshops. I was starting to write for the local papers. I remember something getting published in the *Sunday Star Times*, and I was learning to write press releases ... I think my big TV break came from Willie Jackson on *Eye to Eye* in 2004. I had written a submission for the Hate Speech Inquiry which they somehow found out about or got hold of. They asked me to be on the show that consisted of a panel of two people speaking for a topic and two people against. I think the first one I went on was with Chris Carter and opposite me was Judith Collins and someone else. I debated the issue and it was fabulous – *Eye to Eye* were just so supportive. Then they had me back on the show a year later and I was opposite Winston Peters. The format of the show was one where you could actually talk through the issues. Willie didn't try to have people being hostile. He facilitated the debate. He was supportive of me, personally. He had a programme with John Tamahere and they came down to Hamilton and did a session with me, then Willie went onto Radio Live and asked me to call in on a couple of issues.

In 2005, Winston Peters did his 'end of tolerance' speech and TVNZ picked it up and put me on *Close Up* to debate him on prime-time television and I totally got the better of him. Then Radio New Zealand called me to be on the next morning and I had him speechless. He didn't have an answer. It was the first time that he had ever had to speak with a person from the target group that he was going after politically – it didn't play out well. That 'end of tolerance' speech was horrendous. Then we had the whole Don Brash-Orewa thing going on and that outpouring of hatred for Māori. Don Brash gave everyone permission to say their worst thoughts out loud and what we became as a country was just awful. So, to be a part of the Labour campaign that won that election was huge.

Around 2007/2008, I started blogging and I was asked to be a blogger with the *The Hand Mirror*, which was the top feminist blog in New Zealand for a while. Some of those debates and arguments shaped my thinking to some extent. It opened my eyes to certain issues, for example the whole notion of victim blaming. One of the first things that I read on *The Hand Mirror* was around an ALAC [Alcohol Advisory Council] ad which depicted a woman going into a bar, getting drunk and it finishes off with her staggering out of the bar and a guy following her down a dark alley. And the message is: don't get drunk or you will get raped. *The Hand Mirror* were pushing back on that because it was victim blaming. It was an award-winning ad! It took me a while to get why victim blaming is wrong but having been in that space, having those debates, hearing the arguments ... I found it educational.

I also found blogging difficult in terms of managing the comments and putting yourself out there to the world where anyone could say anything, but we had a good moderation policy and we stuck to it. But there were other things happening on the blog that were race-based and were very harmful.

***KL: What kinds of things were happening on the blog?***

AR: I remember having a debate with one of the other bloggers – we were commenting back and forth on the blogs publicly. She was talking about going out with a man who had a child with another woman, her whole view of the lack of discipline in the child's life, how the mother was, and that it wasn't good for the kid, et cetera. And I thought, hang on – this is your cultural view of what motherhood should be. She was saying how kids need to be prepared to move out of the house at 18 and have to fend for themselves. Well, I know Indian kids whose parents would pack food for them for the whole week at that age, the kids never cooked for themselves and they were perfectly fine, upstanding members of society.

***KL: That's an example of a Pākehā view of childrearing.***

AR: Yeah, these are the kids that are in bed by seven and there is regimentation and rules ... whereas we are so much more fluid. We don't need our kids to leave home and we don't need to be told what is good and bad in terms of parenting.

I think where I really fell apart was around the porn arguments because I remain strongly anti-pornography. Then you had women on other blogs who had a much bigger following than mine. I got into a stoush with one of them which involved people attacking me for being anti-pornography. They were arguing it was a woman's choice and women's empowerment and if a woman chose to participate in pornography, then a good feminist would support women's choices. But I said that all choices aren't feminist choices and we need to provide better choices for women. It was fraught and I felt like a real lone voice within that argument. My blog numbers dropped right down. Whilst I was blogging for *The Hand Mirror*, I had also set up my own personal blog and the stats took a real dive. I tried to stay away from some of the stuff because it was just not good for my health. It was also framed as 'all these religious people with sexual suppression' and whatever. It was that dynamic between third-wave feminism and second-wave, and the third-wave feminists being all sex-positive. There is nothing around anti-porn not being sex positive – I am all for good sex! But the way that things were framed, it was just really hard.

I don't want women who work in the sex industry to be harmed. If that's what they are doing and if that is their individual choice, then they should be safe. They shouldn't be hurt and they shouldn't be harmed. Beyond that, we should be able to have a societal discussion about whether we can offer better choices and whether these are the best choices. Feminists then turn around with, 'We support you in wearing a hijab and we don't say that's a bad choice and it's oppressive, so why would you not support our choices?'

***KL: That is a horrible argument and it is not logical.***

AR: That is what we have to put up with as women who wear headscarves. I've seen women wear burqas and I'm always put in the position of having to defend those women because I believe they have the right to make that choice. I've done a lot of blog posts around this to say yes, they have the right to make choices. It's not a feminist choice but it is their choice and we can't ban it.

So, my arguments around porn were never that we have to ban porn. It was more about how we can, as a society, give women better choices so that sex work isn't their best option to get out of poverty, or pay off their student loan or feed their kids. When there are structural imbalances in society, such as the gender pay gap and lack of access to leadership positions, then people are unable to make fair and free choices.

***KL: Tell me about the other things that you are doing.***

AR: Moving into this decade, I still do politics but I stepped back a little bit from it. I ran for the Labour list in 2005, 2008 and then I skipped 2011 and then ran again in 2014 but never got very far. I didn't get much support – internally or externally. Like when a retailer won't give a Muslim woman in a hijab a job – it's not because they think there's anything wrong with her, but they are afraid their customers might turn away.

***KL: That's really disappointing to hear.***

AR: My article published in the *Women's Studies Journal* (Rahman, 2011) details my view of how I think politics plays out for me. I'm sure all the parties were the same. If you want to be successful in politics, you have to bring in the votes and you have to bring money. You have to show that you are doing both. Those two things always favour white men. White women are figuring their way through that, but it is not actually just about skills. If it was just about skills then I would put my skills up there, even standing for council in terms of who is in council now and being able to do the job. If anyone thinks that the list or politics is about merit, well that is a joke – it really isn't. That is the argument we always got and that women always get: 'Oh well, we just get the best person for the job and if that happens to be a man, well, it is'. It almost always happens to be a man, without any notion of the fact that women don't get a chance to get the level of experience and skills because those places aren't open for them. For women of colour, that is even more so.

All through the 2000s and earlier this decade, all the activism and arguments around pay equity and the gender pay gap were only about the difference between men and women's pay. For a long time, nobody would say, 'Oh let's get some parity between Pacific women's pay and white women's pay'. Nobody would. They didn't care. There was just one aggregate number and then when you broke down the ethnic pay gap, Pasifika women got paid 67 cents to the one dollar of the white male, whereas white women are at 82 or 92 cents – a much higher level. Māori women fall in between. Asian women earn a bit less than white women, but not too much less compared to Pasifika women. But who was taking up the baton for them? We can put out the stats for gender but let's put out stats for this: what are the options and how can they get better options and better pay? Why are they stuck as the cleaners and in hospitality and the low paid jobs, and how do we get more equity?

That has been a real blind spot in feminism. Some of the harshest criticisms I get are from white women. Women who say they are feminists. 'You must be so thankful that you get to live in New Zealand and not in Saudi Arabia. You must be really, really grateful for that'. I had a client say that to me. As my client, I can't push back on her. I tried to do it politely and said, 'I'm not grateful – this is my country. It's where I am'.

***KL: It is just a real lack of understanding, isn't it?***

AR: That's right. It's a lack of having that experience. I've been talking about this recently and I read it a lot. When people talk about gender equality and diversity, what they mean is getting more white women into the boardroom, getting more white women into senior management, and I think that is what is happening. What I heard is happening within the public services is that lots of white women are getting top-paying jobs they weren't getting before, but it is just white women. For example, look at the voting patterns in the American elections: 52 percent of white women voted for Trump and 90 percent of black women didn't. People will put race over gender. Even if they know that 'this person is bad for me as a woman, but my issues around race are so great that I will put aside my own self-interest as a woman and vote for them'. Many women would deny it, it's really frustrating.

I remember watching a documentary quite a few years ago about Saudi women's activism, what they were doing ... they specifically said, 'We don't want any western notions of liberation. We want what we want for us and our way and what works for us'. Racism within feminism is so strong in terms of saying, 'We know what is the best way, we know how everybody should live their lives'. Or then there is, 'We support all choices and every choice is valid – feminism is about supporting all those choices'. It isn't either of those things. Having the ability to say that, actually, 'You haven't got it figured out'. Look at the level of sexual violence and family violence in this country – it's really high which indicates we haven't figured it out. The number of women on private company boards is very low, so we haven't figured it out. Sometimes I will just sit and watch ads on TV. The number of girls that get to be actively doing something is much less compared to the number of boys that get to be actively doing something. Rather, the girls will be adoring or passively listening or just cleaning or doing the laundry or whatever. My response is: 'No you haven't found the answer. So don't come and act like you are some kind of special somebody with some kind of special knowledge that is better than my knowledge and my view of where and how I want to be in the world'.

It is about decolonising feminism – it hasn't happened. A lot of white feminism is patriarchal and colonial. In New Zealand, I think it is not as bad as Europe and the United States. Feminists coming out of Europe, banning the burqa and the hijab and putting restrictions on women by saying, 'This is our culture' or 'You are oppressed, and we are freeing you'. It's ridiculous. What these groups are saying is that we don't have the capacity to free ourselves. Why does our freedom have to look the same as what you think freedom looks like? When you think about the invasion of Iraq, look at how much feminist discourses were used to justify those activities and illegal occupations. The narrative around Iraq when Bush declared victory was, 'Now they're free, they can all wear miniskirts'. Really? They can wear miniskirts, but they have to be afraid that their children may be bombed every single day they go to school? That is after the American coalition had stopped bombing. The country fell apart and then they had ISIS. Is wearing a miniskirt likely to be a priority, do you think?

I challenge people and say that white feminism is killing Muslim women. It is literally harming us. It is not helping us. If that is what feminism is to you, if that is what liberation looks like to you, then it is actively harming us.

***KL: What needs to happen then, let's just say here in New Zealand?***

AR: How do you go about decolonising feminism? How do we give space to other voices and understandings? How do we move ourselves from the position of 'We know best, our way is best and this is the answer'?

After the horrific events in Christchurch, I have been working on the project called the Inclusive Aotearoa Collective Tāhono [described as a collaboration of people across the country committed to building a socially inclusive Aotearoa/New Zealand] and it was born out of the fact that we were having all these discussions with government. There was an issues paper that I helped edit. We were saying that, to address this, you need to take a strategic approach. You need a strategy around diversity and inclusion.

***KL: What do you mean by that?***

AR: We need to go out and talk about all the various ways we can connect with communities, with people, and get various voices speaking. At the same time, trying to map what activities are happening already so that we can see where the gaps are; or, if one community is doing something really well, how can we translate that to another sector or another region? Bringing some strategic thinking, bringing things together and thinking about it. Accepting that it is going to be a living document, we hope to have the strategy document done towards the end of next year and then we want to implement it using the constellation model.

***KL: What is the constellation model?***

AR: You have these constellations which are work hubs. So, each constellation would be focused on a particular goal or target of what they wanted to achieve. You bring all the people together that are interested in that topic. One that worked in the United States was around reducing teen pregnancies. In Oregon, they got anti-abortionists and pro-choice people altogether to work on it. Even though they had strongly differing views on abortion, they got in the room because they could all agree that they didn't want teen pregnancies. So, that is kind of the model.

We bring a goal that people can agree on; yes, we want to reduce online hate or yes, we want to educate people about diversity ... whatever it is. Bring them together, making sure you have real diversity, making sure you have voices from lots of different communities in the space.

The role of the secretariat is to bring those people together, to facilitate those conversations, to start to work out how to implement the strategy. For example, this is something that people have said they want to happen, what can we as a group do to work together to achieve that goal?

***KL: Is this going to be administered through a government structure?***

AR: No. We've got philanthropic funding and we're doing it. We've got staff now and we have a three-year programme of how we are going to do all this. I'm really quite excited about it. To me, it's like we're changing the way we think and work depending on your perspective. This is a civil society project; I'm not going near government. It is about communities and working in the NGO space and saying, 'Let's get together, what can we do, what can we share? What are the needs, what are the issues, what do people want to happen, can we bring some commonalities?' Find the common things in that and then we will aim to start with three constellations and see how that goes. One or two of them might fail, but you have got to try things out.

***KL: What was your experience of being part of the Christchurch Call<sup>2</sup> and how do you feel about that?***

AR: Going to New York was amazing. Being on an international-level discussion and to have a voice in that, to be able to push back on some of the narratives, was really useful. Coming back, having some of those connections and networks was really good. There was a video game published from the point of view of the shooter. The character had almost the same name (changed a couple of consonants and a vowel) of the alleged killer and, in the game, you get to be the killer and go around shooting Muslims. I haven't seen it but, because I have those connections, I could go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the Human Rights Commission, and various other government departments. Then Foreign Affairs got back to me and said, 'We have sent it off to the GICT [Global Institute of Cyber Technology], they have a hash sharing data base'. That means all the social media platforms can ban the hashes.<sup>3</sup> So, nobody can promote the game using any of the major social media platforms.

I would not have been able to have access to that so quickly and effectively without having gone to New York, even though it's our own Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Before, I didn't have those connections and I wouldn't even have known that was something I could access and use to prevent harm.

***KL: Do you ever think you will go back into formal politics again in New Zealand?***

AR: Probably not, because I feel like what I'm doing now (with the Inclusive Aotearoa Collective Tāhono) has the potential to have a significant impact. I have always been more of a grassroots person – I don't play politics well. In terms of what my skills and strengths are, the design of the political system doesn't work for me. I was asked to stand for local body again this year but I was in the middle of designing this project and I thought, 'Why would I do something local when I could have an impact at an international level?' I questioned how much power I would have as a backbench MP on the list in terms of how the party works, how would I be heard, and then the trade off with other parties – how would that be heard and received, would anything I say carry weight within that whole process? If you see the way that Golriz [Ghahraman, MP for the Green Party] was being attacked ... it was a targeted political attack that has gone directly to her, and the same with Marama [Davidson, leader of the Green Party]. They specifically picked the women of colour, chose them to be the target and then have gone after them in a specific way. I don't need that in my life. I can make change without all of that.

***KL: One of my students wrote a very brilliant paper in this journal that talks about 'the grateful immigrant' (Thiruselvam, 2019), and she really critiques the way the media dealt with Jacinda Ardern after Christchurch as yet another story of the white woman coming in and taking over. I was really shocked by that critique. I was trying to work out why I was shocked by it and it was a completely valid critique and it really made me look at what role the media has, the visualisation of what was acceptable – non-Muslim women wearing headscarves – alongside my own assumptions. I don't really know what this question is other than, how was that for you as a woman of faith?***

AR: There was the 'wear-a-hijab day', which I was completely opposed to, but someone within the community had said yes to it before we had a chance to say no. Of course, a lot of people were trying to show support for us, therefore we should be really happy with that, even within our own community. Given where we were with everything, this was not the time and

place to have that debate. I turned down about 27 or 28 media interviews and just said I'm not commenting on that topic. My view was that I wasn't interested in performative measures. That day was about healing for the people who felt bad about what happened in Christchurch. It wasn't actually about the Muslim community. Everybody wanted to be doing something to show their support and that was a quick and easy way to do it. You are not addressing the difficult questions and the hard challenges that you need to face. It is just a very superficial move. The hijab means something to us as an expression of faith, an act of worship. Just wearing it for a day when you don't have any of that ... don't do it. It is not worth it.

I got a call from a woman MP afterwards, a woman in the first sitting of parliament, and she said, 'We are all thinking we will wear a hijab and go into parliament', and I said, 'Please don't', so they didn't. Thankfully, someone bothered to ring me and ask. I said, 'I'm not interested in you women MPs going and wearing a hijab as if it means something. I'm not interested in your performance politics. I want to hear what you guys are actually going to do so that this kind of thing doesn't happen again – I would prefer if you didn't'. That message went around, and nobody wore one. To be fair to the group that did the 'wear-a-hijab day', they also asked some other Muslim women, and a couple of the women they spoke to said, 'We are fine with it, go ahead'. I thought, 'I'm not going to create division within the community and I'm not going to create bad feeling within the country if people want to do it. Just because I disagree with it, it's not the time to start that debate'.

***KL: And one final question in terms of representative politics, do you think there will ever be a day where there are groups of Muslim women representing New Zealand government?***

AR: Yeah, I think it will happen. The reason why I think it will happen is because I think our young people are so much better than us at this stuff. They have grown up with diversity, they accept it, they understand it, and it's just a matter of time.

I went to a church service very close to here, and one of the questions from the congregation was, 'Why are all these young people watching violent movies?' As part of my answer, I said 'Look at who voted for Trump – it wasn't the young people, that's not where the issue is'. Our young people are marching for climate change, they are politically aware and active. They don't do things the way we do things. They don't join political parties; they want direct action. They have lost faith in government to a large extent, they see that it is not working for them. These are the first generations in the whole of human history to be worse off than their parents. They have a point – if they wanted me, I'd be marching up there with them. The world that we have structured and designed for them ... we got it completely wrong. As they grow up, hopefully they'll hold onto what they have and hopefully we will see better representation and meaningful inclusion. I'm also working towards that with the work that I'm doing, hoping to make a little dent in that space. If it is successful, in 10 years we'll have 10 constellations all working in various areas and, if that all goes really well, maybe it is a model that we take to other countries to push for social change. But those that are in power will be doing their best to make sure things don't change. It's about how you negotiate around that, how we build our own power base and work collectively. We need to move back from that individualistic view of the world that we got gifted in the 80s and that has just carried on.

***KL: I will end here. Anjum, thank you very much for your time.***

*ANJUM RAHMAN is a human rights activist and New Zealand Muslim community leader who has a strong conviction to advocate for the rights of Muslim women in particular, and a more inclusive society in general. Amongst many talents and achievements, Anjum has previously published in the New Zealand Women's Studies Journal (see Rahman, 2011) and is a prominent media figure who tirelessly articulates the potential that people of Muslim faith can inhabit in making Aotearoa/New Zealand society a better, stronger and more inclusive community that allows all groups to flourish and thrive.*

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## Notes

1. This interview was undertaken at the Shama Ethnic Women's Trust in Hamilton in December 2019. My sincere thanks to Anjum Rahman for her generosity with her time and her support for this interview project. I contacted Anjum through her Facebook page and was delighted that she responded, and responded positively to being interviewed. My sincere thanks also goes to Charlotte Johnson who was available to me as research assistant – support made available through the staff mobility fund during lockdown. Charlotte's work was crucial in formulating this interview article and, with Anjum's blessing, is listed here as an author in recognition of her contribution towards getting this article through to publication.
2. Led by Jacinda Ardern and the French President Emmanuel Macron in response to the March 15 Mosque attacks, the Christchurch Call brought together Heads of State and Government as well as leaders from the tech sector to commit to a set of collective actions with the aim of eliminating terrorist and violent extremist content online.
3. For a good explanation of how this works, go to <https://www.sentinelone.com/blog/what-is-hash-how-does-it-work/>.

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