



# I AM MALALA:

## *A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS*

**THEME 8:** *Global Feminisms: Speaking and Acting about Women and Girls*

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The Global  
Women's Institute

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY



To expand the reach of Malala’s memoir—*I am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*—and spread Malala’s message to young people and activists, the Global Women’s Institute (GWI) of the George Washington University (GW), in collaboration with the Malala Fund, developed a resource guide for high school and college students around the world. Building on the content of Malala’s memoir, the resource guide supports global efforts to mobilize women and men to address women’s and girls’ rights to an education.

Malala’s memoir opens the door to some of the greatest challenges of our modern world. It is about politics, education, culture, religion and violence against women and girls. It is a moment in the life of a young girl and in the history of a country. To do these broad themes justice, faculty from a wide range of disciplines contributed to the development of the resource guide.

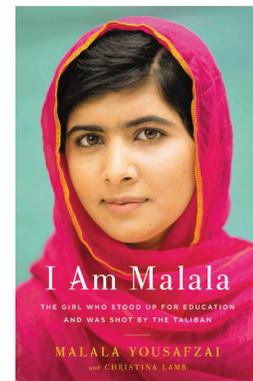
The resource guide challenges students to think deeply, share their experiences, and engage with their communities. Each theme is divided into 4 parts:

- **Part 1** is the narrative with learning objectives to frame the conversation and help plan lessons;
- **Part 2** lists the resources to help students and teachers deepen their knowledge about the theme;
- **Part 3** lists individual and group activities, including some to be done outside of class if students are interested;
- **Part 4** is the high school supplement intended to help high school teachers introduce and discuss some of the concepts and context that appear in the theme narratives.

Each part may be printed separately to be used by teachers or students.

#### THE EIGHT THEMES ARE:

1. **Memoir as Literature and History**
2. **Education: A Human Right for Girls**
3. **Cultural Politics, Gender and History in Malala Yousafzai’s *I am Malala***
4. **Religion and Religious Extremism**
5. **Malala and Violence against Women and Girls**
6. **Malala Leadership Essay**
7. **Malala and the Media**
8. **Global Feminisms: Speaking and Acting about Women and Girls**



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# GLOBAL FEMINISMS: SPEAKING AND ACTING ABOUT WOMEN AND GIRLS

BY RACHEL RIEDNER

PART 1



*Narrative*

My discussion of Malala Yousafzai's powerful book, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*, begins with a simple question: Why and in what circumstances is it necessary for a young woman make a call for "peace in every home, every street, every village, every country... [and] education for every boy and every girl in the world"? (313) The lack of peace, the inability of girls (and boys) to attend school, and the vulnerability of young women to gendered violence are not inevitable. As feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe suggests, the events that Malala describes are the result of choices that are made by communities, by nations, by individuals, by families, by supranational organizations, and by global political institutions.

## **This essay will address the following points:**

- The role of global feminism in responding to acts of violence
- Local and global gendered violence
- The violence of representation
- Generating a feminist response

## **The Role of Feminism in Responding to Acts of Violence**

As feminists look at the world, we have learned to ask difficult questions about how choices are made. As Enloe says, we ask "whether anything that passes for inevitable, inherent, 'traditional,' or biological has in fact been made." Asking how things are made or why events happen, suggests they are made by someone. By looking at Malala's story as the shooting of a young girl who wanted to attend school, we can begin to examine the conditions under which gendered violence became visible and about the motives

of those who give gendered violence attention. Global feminists ask questions and conduct research in order to find clues about how to create activist responses. Ultimately we ask, how can we create change in our own communities, and create alliances and collaborations with women and girls across global borders?

## **Local and Global Gendered Violence**

How do we understand violence against Malala and her two friends Kainat and Shazia by members of the Taliban through a global feminist framework? The answer to this question is not simple: It involves both an understanding of the contemporary history of Malala's community in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, with the emerging of radical religious views, and an understanding of international forces at work. As Malala details in her book, her childhood and education coincided with events that have global and local resonance. In the aftermath of 9/11, the Swat Valley, where Malala lived, was caught up in events closely tied to colonial histories and contemporary struggles over the reach and influence of U.S. and NATO power as well as the situation of the Pashtun people. Taliban insurgents entered the Swat Valley and were able to establish social and political influence. The Taliban introduced public violence against people who were perceived as not fitting into their version of Islamic social practice. As Malala recounts, the Taliban targeted women who danced in public, shopkeepers who sold items considered to represent vulgarity or obscenity (e.g., TV shows, CDs), and others who spoke or behaved in ways that opposed the Taliban's authority. In this fraught context, struggle over social and political control coalesced around gendered behavior and girls' school attendance. Girls were prohibited from attending school, and women were prohibited from appearing in public without a veil.

The gendered violence that Malala describes is not unusual or out of the ordinary. In many local and global contexts, violence used to control women is a commonplace event. For example, anthropologist Patty Kelly documents how police target and harass women whose livelihoods have been destroyed and who, because they lack other economic opportunities, enter sex work to support their families and children. This gendered violence is normalized and built into the felt experiences of daily life. It is difficult to recognize as violence because restrictions on women's lives and limited economic opportunities for women are not seen as out of the ordinary.

Organizing against gendered violence requires understanding local conditions in which women and girls live, act, and speak, as well as understanding how gendered symbols and gendered ideologies operate and how they are tied to global practices and discourses. As Malala shows us, challenging gendered violence builds from understanding how and why it occurs. Just as important, challenging gendered violence entails speaking out, organizing, creating alliances, and changing normal, everyday behavior—as Malala, her father, and her friends did—when faced with efforts to control and restrict women and girls' activities. This twofold focus—attention to real, material conditions of women and girls' lives and, concurrently, acting and speaking—is at the core of the global feminist movement. When we approach gendered violence, we always ask, "How do women and girls, 'as historically situated actors, cop[e] with, and seek to transform the conditions of their lives'?" (Kabeer 54)

## Violence of Representation

As we ask questions about gendered violence, global feminists are attentive to the ways in which gendered violence is understood by differently situated people and communities. Feminist scholars of language argue that ideas about gender are formed through political discourses: interpretations and particular ways of seeing that are tied to powerful ways of viewing women and girls (Dingo, Scott). For example, the violence against Malala is often discussed in the U.S. media and other Western institutions through pre-established ideas about Islam and gender. In this discourse, the violence that Malala faced is seen through an established view of Islam as inherently patriarchal and violent toward women.

As feminists work to create political responses, we take into account how events are perceived, particularly events that are tied up in established beliefs about gender and religion. In a global feminist analysis, the worldwide attention that Malala received after she was shot by the Taliban is filtered through common-sense ideologies held by the Western world about Islam, Muslims, and women. Post 9/11, women and girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan are viewed through gendered rescue narratives, in which women and girls are considered to be victims of religious-based patriarchy who

are in need of saving (Hesford). Rescue narratives have been promoted and circulated by prominent political figures such as Laura Bush, by global economic institutions such as the World Bank, and by NGOs and other prominent international actors. In gendered rescue narratives, Islam is seen as patriarchal, and, therefore, violence against women is seen as systemic to Islam. As global feminists have pointed out, Western discourse does not adequately acknowledge a nuanced understanding of the many practices of Islam. Like other major religions and in other communities, some of these religious and community practices are patriarchal and some are not.

Building from a feminist analysis of discourses about Islam, global feminists are concerned with *how* Malala's story is understood through pre-established ideas about women and Islam. In a context in which Islam is perceived as inherently patriarchal, global feminists ask what happens when Malala's story circulates in contexts where people read it through preconceived notions of Muslim women. Our role in this situation is to ask provocative questions: When global institutions such as the U.N. invite Malala to speak, is a claim being made that gendered violence as a whole is being addressed? Is there a danger that, by focusing on individual women's experience, attention is diverted from the systemic gendered violence that exists in multiple locations, including Western nations? Does recognizing violence by extremist and religious-based groups in Pakistan mean that violence experienced by women in other locations is not addressed? Does drawing attention to violence experienced by one young woman, as Malala emphasizes, divert attention from other important political discussions, including the invasion of Afghanistan, drone strikes in Pakistan, or demonizing the Muslim world?

## Generating Feminist Responses

The public responses to the events of Malala's life remind us to carefully navigate how the image of a young, brave Muslim woman may be complicated by a wider analysis of other forms of violence, i.e., U.S.-ordered drone strikes, poverty, war, social and political conflicts, and violence that takes place privately, often within families or communities. Malala herself suggests this nuanced approach to women's and girls' empowerment. As she points out in her discussion of drones and poverty, the conflict situation that women and girls face in Pakistan extends beyond a critique of extremist religious Islamic use of violence against women. She notes that imperial violence and gendered violence have a detrimental impact on women and girls and inhibit their capacities to live safe and fulfilling lives.

In fact, Malala's book does the important work of creating a complex, multifaceted analysis of and response to gendered violence and social and material conditions in which women and girls live. In addition to analyzing gendered violence, Malala asks us to pay attention to the social and material conditions in which women and girls live in Pakistan,

Afghanistan, and elsewhere. Malala points to the economic constraints that factor into women's and girls' lack of agency. In a short passage in the book, Malala observes a young girl selling fruit by the side of the road. This young girl is not in school, and therefore, the possibilities for her advancement are limited. Malala's analysis shows that poverty, as well as multiple forms of violence and conflicts, limits women's freedom and voice. Her ambition to get an education that would enable her to be economically independent suggests women's participation in formal economy can create context for autonomy and independence. Economic opportunities, as Malala shows, are an important aspect of women's empowerment.

In sum, Malala's memoir shows us that the situation of women and girls must be informed by a multifaceted analysis of women in relation to *local* economic conditions, political situations, ideologies of gender (not to mention other social categories) *as well as* analysis of women in relation to *global* economic arrangements, political alliances and histories, and ideologies. It is within the recognition and analysis of how these local and global forces intersect that we, like Malala, are compelled to speak and act (Dingo). With a robust and responsive understanding of the world

in which we live, gendered violence can be made visible, experiences that create social exclusions can be recognized, and the material conditions that prohibit individuals and communities from reaching their full capacities, such as poverty, can be addressed.

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## *Individual and Group Activities*

1. Discuss the following points about global feminism. Why and how do global feminists (like Malala):
  - Ask questions and tell stories about gender and gendered violence, and the material conditions in which women and girls live?
  - Advocate for realization of the full human potential of women and girls, including their political and economic enfranchisement?
  - Emphasize education for women and girls as a means to create independence and social voice?
  - Work for the economic participation and empowerment of women and girls as a means of securing independence?
  - Work within their own communities, and with feminist organizations, to share information, strategies, and ideas that translate into action?
2. How might we need to understand multiple categories that work together to construct Malala's experiences of gendered violence, including but not limited to gender, race, community, nation, state, religion, culture, tradition, ability, age, and sexuality? What other categories might we need to consider?
3. What is the difference between Malala Yousafzai the singular example and historical figure who has spoken so eloquently and passionately about her own experience for education and Malala who is held up as a symbol of globalized political system that claims to offer recognition and support to women in the Global South? Why, for feminists, is it important to distinguish between Malala Yousafzai the person and Malala Yousafzai the symbol? Is Malala including the global agenda or vice versa? How is Malala influencing the global agenda for the rights of girls (and boys) to an education and the feminist movement?
4. How might we expand our analysis of gendered violence that women and girls face in local communities to consider wider systems of violence that Malala discusses? For example, how do drone strikes by the U.S. military destabilize political, social, and community life, creating openings for extremist views and groups such as the Taliban? How might poverty that is produced, in part, by global economic structures contribute to the restrictions placed on women's lives?
5. Given differences among women and girls across global and local borders, how might these differences be negotiated to create networks of support, alliance, and activism? Along these lines, what mutualities, tensions, and co-responsibilities do we have with and for each other? How do the historical experiences of girls in the United States, for example, or in other locations, illuminate the historical experiences of girls in Pakistan, and vice versa? How are our interests intertwined? In terms of women's and girls' activism, how are movements in both countries connected or disconnected? How might cross-cultural solidarities be imagined for women and girls globally? Where do we find mutuality and common interests across borders?
6. How might you work with local communities and organizations to address violence against women and girls in your own community? As you do this work, how might you connect with feminist organizations in other communities to share strategies, experiences, and information and to collaborate around issues that are both similar and different?
7. How might you conduct feminist research that could inform feminist activism? What would this research look like? Who would benefit from it?



## *High School Supplemental Information*

# *Global Feminisms: Speaking and Acting about Women and Girls*

### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. How can a global feminist perspective help us to respond to acts of global violence against women?
2. What is an appropriate response to sweeping acts of global violence against women – individually and collectively?

### CONTEXT

#### What do we mean by feminism?

While framed differently across cultures, feminism at its core is the belief that women should benefit to the same degree as men from equal access to justice, political power, education and economic opportunities. Feminist movements are organized initiatives in support of women's rights and interests and may be centered on a specific issue or cause.

While sharing common beliefs in the importance of equality for women, feminism adapts to a variety of cultural frameworks and may take on different aspects according to the host culture.

#### What is gendered violence/gender-based violence?

In 1993, the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women offered the first official definition of the term "Gender-based Violence": *"Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."*

Because gender-based violence has had a greater impact on women and girls, the term has become in many areas interchangeable with the term, "Violence against women."

For more details on this topic, please see the theme, "Malala and violence against women and girls" in this guide.

#### What is a patriarchy and why/how is it associated with violence against women?

Patriarchy is a social system in which the authority figures are men; all key spiritual and temporal leadership positions are occupied by men and where husbands and fathers control their wives, women and children. In a patriarchy, property is inherited by the male child. Examples of inequity between men and women in a patriarchal society can include the following:

- Absence or limited number of women in political office
- Household chores are primarily done by women
- High rates of gender-based violence
- Lower wages for women
- Commodification/objectification of women through media and popular culture.

## KEY TERMS AND NAMES

**Pakistan:** The Islamic republic of Pakistan is located in South Asia. It borders the Arabian Sea, India, Afghanistan, Iran and China. The capital city of Pakistan is Islamabad while the largest city is Karachi. It became independent on August 14, 1947.

**The Swat Valley:** The Swat Valley is an area of mountains and lakes. Swat is part of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and used to be separate from the rest of Pakistan. Malala is from the town of Mingora, the largest town in the Swat Valley.

**The Pashtun people:** "Pashtuns are a group of people split between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The code they have lived by for centuries is *Pashtunwali* which means to be hospitable to all guests and value *nang* or honor." *I am Malala*, p.14. *Pashtunwali* is the traditional behavioral code of Pashtuns.

**Taliban:** The term comes from the Arabic word for "students" and now refers to Islamic fundamentalists who came to power in Afghanistan in 1995. They rose to power in Afghanistan during the civil war in Afghanistan enforced a strict moral code on all inhabitants, notably women.

**NGO:** The acronym NGO stands for non-governmental organization. In some parts of the world, they are also called non-profit organizations. NGOs are usually organized around an issue or cause and exist to provide services and assistance. NGOs are usually supported by grant money and private or corporate donations. Some well known NGOs working around the world are the Red Cross/Red Crescent; World Vision, Save the Children and Habitat for Humanity.

**Agency:** The capacity of a living being to act in the world and to make choices that will determine the course of their lives.

*We would like to thank Michele Clark, Larissa Warhol,  
Judy Rogers, and Fernanda Bianchi for their contributions to the high school supplement.*

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