

Muslim Assumptions About Women

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Since the 1970s, in many Muslim societies, forces of religious conservatism have systematically reduced the status of women.

This has occurred through a process generally referred to as “Islamization,” which has led to the imposition of highly discriminatory laws such as the Hadud ordinance in Pakistan, a law that restricts the testimony given in rape cases to that of four male believers.

Such laws have passed even in relatively progressive countries because it is considered self-evident in all Muslim societies that women are inferior to men. So far, political action by women’s groups has done nothing to reverse this trend.

I grew up in a family descended from the Prophet Mohammed, in the historic Muslim city of Lahore in Pakistan, a country created in the name of Islam. But it was not until 1974, when I began to explore feminist theology in the context of Islamic tradition, that I first realized the great discrepancy between ideal Islam and actual Muslim practice.

The more I saw the justice and compassion of God toward women reflected in the Koran, the more anguished and angry I became seeing the injustice and inhumanity to which Muslim women are subjected in everyday life.

Consider these points:

Today, Muslim boys and girls go to Western institutions for their higher education. When the young men return, they are called “modernized”. But when the young women return, they are considered “Westernized.”

Many Muslims see the emancipated woman in a highly negative light, one that connotes Western social problems, such as promiscuity, substance abuse and neglected children.

Muslim societies still believe in maintaining a barrier between “private space,” or the home where women belong, and “public space,” or the world at large where men belong.

In the mid-1980s, I was asked by several women activists in Pakistan to provide them with an ideology they could use to counter the torrent of anti-women legislation, literature and propaganda unleashed by the “Islamization” process.

Through personal experience and research, I was able to identify several religious assumptions on which the superstructure of men’s alleged superiority to women has been erected, not only in the Islamic, but also in the Jewish and Christian, tradition.

For example, the ordinary Muslim believes, as seriously as the ordinary Jew or Christian, that Adam was God’s primary creation, and Eve was made from Adam’s rib. Another widely held belief is that Eve was the primary agent of expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

However, neither of these assumptions has any basis in the Koran, which describes the creation of humanity in completely egalitarian terms.

The injustice to which Muslim women are being subjected cannot, and should not, be seen as God derived. And I would argue further that if man and woman have been created by God, who is the ultimate arbiter of value, then they cannot become unequal, essentially, at a later time.

The average Muslim woman is poor, illiterate and lives in a rural environment. Citing the 1948 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights will mean nothing to her.

However, by reminding her that God is just and merciful and that she is entitled to justice and protection from every kind of oppression and inequity, it is possible to reach her heart and mind.

I have seen the eyes of many Muslim women who have lived in hopelessness and helplessness light up when they realize what immense possibilities for freedom and development exist within the belief system that defines their world.

In much of contemporary Muslim society, it is virtually impossible through political means alone to overturn laws instituted in the name of Islam.

In fact, I do not believe that any viable model of self-actualization for Muslim women or men can be constructed in present-day Muslim societies outside the framework of Islam, the matrix in which all other factors are grounded.

Women in general, and Muslim women in particular, need to know the point at which they became theologically derailed to reclaim their proper place in the world.

In my view, development of feminist theology in the context of Islam is essential if the continuing assault upon the rights of Muslim women ever is to be reversed.

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