

# World's Apart

**Jennifer Recktenwald**

*Religious Studies and Humanities Professor Dr. Riffat Hassan is known widely and well for addressing colliding regional views about religion, women, and human rights. Her presence at two recent world conferences, along with a lifetime of scholarship and political activism, has thrust her into the foreground of the fight for change on Muslim soil.*

At the United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, China in September, Riffat Hassan set the stage for the emancipation of Muslim women. A lifetime of research, teaching, and activism culminated into Hassan becoming an international spokesperson for progressive Muslim thought.

At the Conference, and throughout her career, Hassan has challenged the conservative Muslim belief that women are inferior to men. A “Westernized” Muslim woman, in the eyes of a conservative Muslim, represents promiscuity, substance abuse, and neglected children. Those who consider themselves the guardians and custodians of Islam still believe in maintaining a barrier between private space, where women belong; and public space, the domain of men.

“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,” Hassan says of the fight for women’s rights in Muslim society. “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.”

Hassan’s career as a “feminist theologian” began in 1974. While teaching at Oklahoma State University, she began a 10-year study of the Qur’anic text, becoming aware of a gap between what the Qur’an outlined for women and what was actually happening to women in Muslim society. “It was the first time in my life I realized how many things had happened to me personally because I was born female in Muslim society. It became for me a very personal study. I was trying to make sense of my own life as a Muslim woman.”

During the mid-1980s, “*Islamization*” - the process instituted by law-makers in a number of Muslim countries to restore their societies to a “more Islamic” state - was reaching its height. “It was targeting women - putting them ‘back in their place’,” Hassan says. At that time, Hassan was asked by progressive Muslim activists to provide them with an ideology to fight “*Islamization*”.

“*Islamization*” manifested itself in laws such as Pakistan’s *Hadud* Ordinances,

which restricts testimony in rape cases to that of “four male believers.” Laws such as the *Hadud* Ordinances reduce women to lesser beings who are “secondary, subordinate, and inferior to men,” she says.

Hassan asserts that three foundational myths rooted in the book of *Genesis* have played a pivotal role in legitimizing discrimination toward women not only in the Jewish and Christian traditions but also in the Islamic tradition. These myths declare that Adam was God’s primary creation and that Eve was created from his rib, thus being secondary; that Eve was the primary agent of expulsion from the Garden of Eden, therefore “daughters of Eve” are to be regarded with suspicion and distrust; and that not only was Eve created *from* Adam, but also *for* Adam, which makes her instrumental while Adam is fundamental. Even though none of these myths is supported by the Qur’an, the vast majority of Muslims believe them to be true.

Hassan gives a straightforward rebuttal. There is not inequality between men and women because of these myths, she says. Instead, these myths, which came into the Islamic tradition from Christian scripture, are used to support and legitimize gender inequality. Contrary to these myths, the Qur’an describes the creation of humanity in completely egalitarian terms. The injustice directed toward Muslim women cannot, and should not, be considered to be God-derived.

Hassan is motivated by knowing that she can make Muslim women aware of their rights.

“There is tremendous enthusiasm among Muslim women who want their rights,” she says. “What amazes me and humbles me is that when you give them a little bit of hope, by telling them that the Qur’an is deeply concerned about human rights – particularly of disadvantaged persons – it brings a light into their eyes. You start seeing a transformation right away in their attitudes.”

In September 1994, Hassan served as a major speaker at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, representing a non-governmental organization called the Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics. A major purpose of this Conference was to draft an international policy on population and ecology for the next 20 years. However, it also became the scene of a clash between progressive and conservative Muslim thinking – with Hassan’s own concepts about family planning arousing sharp debate. Her presentation focused on the average Muslim woman who, she says, is poor, illiterate, and living in rural environs. “Citing the 1948 U.N. Declaration on Human Rights means nothing to her,” Hassan says. “However, by reminding her that she’s entitled to justice and protection from every kind of oppression and inequity, it is possible to reach her heart and mind.”

Daniel Maguire, President and Founder of the Religious Consultation on

Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics, praised Hassan's courage to speak in favor of change while facing opposition. "She told them, 'Muslim sisters, you have rights given to you by God. Don't let any man interpret them for you.' She brought the audience to its feet," says Maguire, a Marquette University Ethics Professor.

A year later in September 1995, Hassan again gained recognition at the Non-Governmental Organizations Forum of the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women in China, which drew more than 40,000 women from all over the world. As the only university professor asked to speak at the plenary session, she represented both U of L and the Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics.

Despite opposition from conservative Muslims, Hassan was an undisputed star of the gathering. Feminist writer Betty Friedan asked Hassan to join a panel discussion titled "From Backlash to New Vision," on the reaction to the feminist revolution.

"(Friedan) said we have to work beyond gender politics, which was the theme in the sixties, and we have to work toward a concept of community," Hassan says. "The center of global women's power is moving west to east, from North America and Europe to Africa and Asia. I don't think Western women are going to react very well to that initially because it's difficult to let go of power."

"In order to actualize the slogan 'Sisterhood is Global,' we have to have a global dialogue in which people come as equals," Hassan continues. "These sessions brought out not only what is common to women but also what divides them and the lack of dialogue between Western and non-Western women. It's not like Betty Friedan could write *The Feminine Mystique* and capture the whole world again. The contemporary world has become very complex and requires a multifaceted dialogue between diverse groups of women and men in the world."

The presentations with Friedan, and similar events, fascinate Hassan's students back on the U of L campus. Although political activism and teaching are two separate arenas of work, Hassan incorporates her theories on women's equality into her teaching.

"A lot of the things I do have a direct relevance to what I'm teaching. I can talk about the conferences I've attended and that's exciting because these are new developments. You bring a whole global, multicultural aspect into the classroom," she says. "Students tend to be very interested in first person testimony and personal narratives. It's different from book learning."

In spite of her efforts to change the Muslim society into which she was born, Hassan has remained strongly nationalistic and loyal to her country of origin. She returns to her birthplace of Lahore, Pakistan, whenever possible.

After earning B.A. Honors in English and Philosophy from St. Mary's College at the University of Durham in England in 1964, Hassan taught briefly at the University of Punjab in Lahore. She received a Doctorate in Arts from St. Mary's in 1968. Realizing that the Western world opened doors for scholars from abroad, she moved to the U.S. to teach and research in 1972.

"It was a very difficult experience for me to go back (to Pakistan) and realize that, given the different culture, it was virtually impossible for Muslim women to do what they wanted to do," Hassan laments. "The decision to leave my country was not made lightly, but the major motivating force was that I began to feel that I really couldn't do what I wanted to do with my life there and, therefore, needed to be in a different place."

Hassan worked as a Visiting Lecturer and Professor at Villanova University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Oklahoma State University before landing at U of L in 1976. She has served as a Visiting Professor at Harvard University and the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado and continues to work as an Adjunct Professor at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In 1991, Hassan was selected by U of L's College of Arts & Sciences as a "Woman of Achievement." She speaks about the Muslim faith at local schools, churches, and civic organizations on a regular basis.

In addition to her scholarly work, Hassan raised her daughter Mehrunnisa a senior theatre arts major at U of L, as a single parent. "She's been an inspiration in many ways. Traveling abroad with her made me feel comfortable about being in the public eye," Mehrunnisa Hassan says. "She's given me a lot of sense of where I needed to be in my own life."

Mehrunnisa Hassan recently starred in a "long play" for Pakistani television and hopes to break into film. She says she owes part of her career success to her mother. "Acting isn't considered a noble profession in Pakistan. I was discouraged by everyone but my mother."

Riffat Hassan's own future plans, no doubt, include continuing to fight for the rights of Muslim women. "I'm very interested in doing action-oriented research. I spent so much time doing theoretical research, so now I want to apply those theories to practice," she says. "I'm also very interested in the issue of women's reproductive rights and health issues. My hope is that there will be other opportunities to do research abroad. And I want to talk about what I'm doing in the academic community."

"World's Apart," by Jennifer Recktenwald, in *U of L Alumni Magazine*, Spring, 1996, p. 18-20