

Backlash at Beijing

Riffat Hassan

For more than twenty years, Dr. Riffat Hassan has been engaged in developing the discipline of feminist theory in the context of Islam, and is seen by many as the prime theoretician of the Muslim women's movement in many Muslim countries.

Born in Lahore, Pakistan, and educated at the University of Durham in England, she received her Ph.D. in philosophy in 1968. Dr. Hassan has taught at the University of Punjab in Lahore, worked as deputy director for the Bureau of National Research and Reference for the Pakistani government, taught at Oklahoma State University and at Harvard University, and is chairperson of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Louisville.

Patriarchal Muslim culture which did not accept her intellectual autonomy led her to develop a feminist theology to prevent the exploitation of Muslim women. Dr. Hassan has written extensively on Muhammad Iqbal as well as on women, human rights, and peace education in Islam.

She was a major spokesperson for progressive Islam at the Population Conference in Cairo in 1994 and headed the delegation from the Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics at the U.N. Women's Conference in Beijing.

I almost didn't go to the U.N. Conference on Women in Beijing, even though I was scheduled as a plenary presenter at the NGO Forum. I had just gotten back from Pakistan and had become very ill with severe bronchitis and arthritis. I didn't know whether I had the strength to make the long trip to China. When I told my daughter how I was feeling, she said, "Look, Ammi, you have worked hard preparing for this conference. If you don't go, you may never forgive yourself." Mehr was right, of course. This conference was too important to miss, even for illness.

But to talk about Beijing, I must talk about Cairo first. I see the U.N. Conference on Women at Beijing as part of a continuum that began in 1985 with the World Conference in Nairobi. The U.N. Conference on Population and Development was held in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994.

This was our most controversial conference in terms of the content – human sexuality and the underlying question of who controls women's bodies. What gave the Cairo Conference a particular historic importance was the fact that it dealt with some of the most intimate and intricate issues pertaining to women's lives, as well as human sexuality and relationships, that have ever been discussed at an international forum. Ultimately, the fundamental issue of debate

was whether women are the owners of their bodies.

Women's identification with body rather than with mind and spirit is a common characteristic of the dualistic thinking that pervades many religious, cultural, and philosophical traditions. Ironically, women have not been seen as the owners of their bodies, and the issue of who controls women's bodies – men, the state, the church, the community, or women – has never been decided in favor of women in patriarchal cultures. The fact that Muslim women forcefully challenged the traditional viewpoint in Cairo indicates they are no longer nameless, faceless, or voiceless.

I was involved in eight or nine presentations at Cairo. These included some of the major discussions of the program, and it was a tremendous experience for me. The Vatican and several Muslim groups put up a lot of resistance, but overall it was a victory for women. We won our bodies in a major breakthrough. Women's voices were being heard, and a sense of momentum was building. I came back from Cairo very energized.

My experience in Beijing was very different. The Conference there was huge and very spread out, almost chaotic in its logistics. It was difficult to get a sense of the whole, so here I will only speak out of my experience, as a woman studying the impact of religion – Islam – on women. For me, as for many Muslims, it is the matrix in which everything else is grounded.

At Cairo, the major resistance came from conservative Muslim men. At Beijing, the resistance came from conservative Muslim women - a sea of women dressed head to toe in black. Their physical presence alone was impressive. They made themselves very visible in the way they moved together in groups in the public areas of the sprawling forum site.

A significant number of bearded Muslim men were supporting these women, mainly by distributing publications and other religious materials. One such piece was a large poster of a woman wearing a head-and-neck covering, which stated that Islam was her religion and that "*hijab*" was her dress. What was implied by this poster was that the wearing of "*hijab*" which covered the whole body from head to foot, was an indication not only of a Muslim woman's faith but virtually of her Islamic identity.

These conservative Muslims had tremendous organization. They had been extremely busy between Cairo and Beijing. Not only had they been able to secure an extraordinary number of slots for workshops and presentations when most NGOs had been able to get only a few, but they also managed to bring in a vast amount of religious material for free distribution. (Some NGOs, including the one I represented, found that religious materials shipped to China were not released by the Chinese authorities.) Whether this was accomplished by hard work or skillful strategy or both, certainly the presence and performance of the conservative Muslim groups at Huairou left a mark on the Conference.

I attended a session by one of their major spokespersons, a Sudanese Professor, to try to understand what the conservative Muslims were saying. Though she began by saying that Islam

regarded the woman-man relationship to be one of equality and mutuality, she soon reverted to the commonplace Muslim ideas about men being the guardians and caretakers of women. The conservative, “party-line” position is that Islam is a wonderful religion for women – that a woman is given all the rights she needs, she does not have to work, and is treated like a queen.

“What business is it of a secular organization like the United Nations or western feminists, most of whom are lesbians anyway, to meddle in the internal affairs of Muslim people and to stereotype Muslim women as victims of discrimination and oppression?” was the question raised by spokespersons for the conservative Muslims. “Why are you so jealous of us that you want to take away our privileges? We are better off than you western feminists.” They were not willing to acknowledge that a large number of Muslim women are being discriminated against in multiple ways.

The methodology used by the conservative women speakers was highly flawed. Islam derives from many sources – the Qur’an, the Sunnah and Hadith (the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and the oral traditions attributed to him), “*Ijma’*” (consensus of the community) and “*Ijtihad*” (independent reasoning of qualified Muslims). When the Sudanese presenter referred to “Islam,” she mixed and matched everything from popular interpretations of some Qur’anic texts to custom, culture, folklore, and superstition. Had she cited her sources, I could have challenged her. When I objected to the speaker’s non-scholarly approach. I was cut off by her group members.

The conservative women came to Huairou not to dialogue, but to dominate. They tried to shout down “liberal” Muslims like myself. They had no response to the substantive points I raised when I spoke in the plenary session on the theme of religious conservatism and its impact on women. But immediately after I finished my presentation, the Islamic Assembly of North America put a message on the Internet denouncing me for making a “scathing attack on Islam, religiosity, and moral values.” I am a believing Muslim and consider my work an earnest endeavor to remain faithful to its essence as embodied in the Qur’anic teachings and the Prophetic example. I was dismayed by the misrepresentation of what I said.

From a psychological point of view, I’d say these Muslim women are in a state of denial. In order to redress the problems faced by Muslim women, the first stage is acceptance that such problems exist. But they see no problem. I said to them, “You obviously know that what you are saying is wrong. Thousands of Muslim women are brutalized. I don’t understand how you can deny this.” They retaliated by saying that I was a product of Western, secular brainwashing.

As the Conference in China drew to a close, it seemed that the hope of a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive thinking which was born at Cairo was likely – like the female children in pre-Islamic Arabia – to be buried alive at birth. That liberal Muslims in general had not done the hard work required to make a compelling case in support of a progressive approach to Islam was apparent at Huairou. The greatest impact was made by those who had done their homework best.

But in the larger picture, it is important to remember that Cairo and Huairou were not destinations but stations along the way in a long journey toward a better world in which more and more human beings will find ways of actualizing their human potential. The U.N. Conferences are over, but the larger historical process of which they were a part, continues. The challenge which confronts us today, both individually and collectively, is how to participate creatively and constructively in the shaping of this process.

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