

Muslim Women's Rights: A Contemporary Debate

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AMONG THE ISSUES that have come to the fore after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, none has attracted more world attention than the situation of Afghan women. The Taliban imposed their own distorted and brutal understanding of Islam upon Afghan women, whose plight had been a matter of deep concern to a number of individuals and human rights organizations before September 11. Unfortunately, however, the victimization of women in Afghanistan, grave as it was, was not an issue of such import for the United States or the international community that military action would have been launched to liberate these hapless human beings from unspeakable tyranny.

The “liberation” of Afghan women from Taliban rule occurred as a by-product of the U.S.-led military action in Afghanistan. If the events of September 11 had not occurred, had not shaken the United States and the international community, then I believe that Afghan women, like countless others in situations of great pain and peril, would have continued to live and die in horrific conditions under Taliban rule.

I do not know exactly when my “academic” study of women in Islam became a passionate quest for truth and justice on behalf of Muslim women—perhaps it was when I realized the impact on my own life of the so-called Islamic ideas and attitudes regarding women. What began as a scholarly exercise became simultaneously an Odyssean venture in self-understanding. But “enlightenment” does not always lead to “endless bliss” (in Buddhist terms). The more aware I became of the centrality of gender-justice and gender-equity in the Qur’anic teachings regarding women, the more troubled I felt seeing the injustice and inhumanity to which many Muslim women are subjected in actual life.

Despite the fact that women such as Khadijah and ‘Aishah (wives of the Prophet Muhammad) and Rab’ia al-Basri (the outstanding woman Sufi) figured significantly in early Islam, the Islamic tradition has, by and large, remained rigidly patriarchal to this day. This means, among other things, that the sources on which this tradition is based, mainly the Qur’an (which Muslims believe to be God’s Word transmitted through the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad), *Sunnah* (the practice of the Prophet Muhammad), *Hadith* (the oral traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), and *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), have been interpreted only by Muslim men, who have arrogated to themselves the task of defining the ontological, sociological, and eschatological status of Muslim women. It is hardly surprising that until now the majority of Muslim women, who have been kept for centuries in physical, mental, and emotional bondage, have accepted the situation passively. Here it needs to be mentioned that while the rate of literacy is low in many countries, the rate of literacy of Muslim women, especially those who live in rural areas, where most of the population lives, is among the lowest in the world.

While I have continued to pursue my theological research on issues relating to women in Islam, I have been increasingly engaged, since 1983, in sharing my research findings with diverse groups of Muslim women and youth in many countries. Believing that knowledge is power, I have endeavored, through travel and participation in educa-

tional meetings, to disseminate, particularly among Muslim women and girls, evidence of rights that are accorded to women in Islamic sources. I believe that given the centrality of religion to the lives of the vast majority of people in the Muslim world, the best way—if not the only way—to counteract the negative ideas and attitudes regarding females so widespread in the culture is by reference to the authority of the Qur'an or the ethical principles of normative Islam.

Following this principle, I have pursued research that demonstrates on the basis of an analysis of the Qur'anic text that the three assumptions on which the superstructure of the idea of man's superiority to woman has been erected, not only in the Islamic but also in the Jewish and Christian traditions, are unwarranted. Briefly put, these three assumptions are, first, that God's primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man's rib and is, therefore, derivative; second, that woman was the primary agent of "Man's Fall," and hence all "daughters of Eve" are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt; and third, that woman was created not only from man but for man, which makes her existence merely instrumental.

In none of the thirty or so passages in the Qur'an that describe the creation of humanity is there any statement that supports the first assumption, that is, that asserts or suggests that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created from man. This means that the inequality of women and men in almost all Muslim (and many other) societies cannot be seen as having been willed by God, but must be seen as a perversion of God's intent in creation. Second, in the context of the story of the "Fall," the Qur'an provides no basis whatever for asserting or implying that Eve was tempted by Satan, in turn tempted and deceived Adam, and led to his expulsion from the Garden. Though no "Fall" occurs in the Qur'anic narrative and though there is no doctrine of Original Sin in Islam, patriarchal Muslim culture has used the Biblical myth to perpetuate the myth of feminine evil, particularly in order to control women's sexuality, which it associates, as does St. Augustine,

with “fallenness.” Third, the Qur’an does not support the view, held by many Muslims, Christians, and Jews, that woman was created not only *from* man, but also *for* man. Not only does the Qur’an make it clear that men and women stand absolutely equal in the sight of God, but they also are “members” and “protectors” of each other. In other words, the Qur’an does not create a hierarchy in which men are placed above women.

The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo, Egypt, in September 1994, was an extremely important landmark in raising global consciousness with regard to 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. One of the fundamental issues underlying the deliberations of the Cairo conference was that of the “ownership” of a woman’s body. 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, however, though women have traditionally been identified with body, they have not been seen as *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. Muslim societies are far more concerned with trying to control women’s bodies and sexuality than with granting women their human rights. When many Muslims speak of human rights, they either do not speak of women’s rights at all, or they are concerned with how a woman’s chastity may be protected. (They are apparently not worried about protecting men’s chastity.)

The great breakthrough of the Cairo conference was the fact that Muslim women forcefully challenged the traditional viewpoint not only with regard to women’s identification with body, but also with regard to the assumption that women are not *owners* of their bodies.

Having successfully challenged age-old definitions of womanhood imposed on them by patriarchal cultures, women were confronted by a new challenge as they journeyed from Cairo to Beijing. This challenge

was to shift from the reactive mindset of those who are subjected to systematic discrimination and made to feel powerless, to the proactive mindset of those who have a strong sense of personal identity, autonomy, and efficacy as makers of their own lives. I hoped, as I went to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), with thousands of others, that women in general, and Muslim women in particular, would be able to build on the hard-won gains of the Cairo conference and begin to speak of themselves as full and autonomous human beings who have not only a body but also a mind and a spirit.

Unfortunately, however, what happened at Beijing was a reversal, almost a betrayal, of the promise that had been seen and felt at Cairo. Instead of engaging in a critical dialogue on the existential situation of the majority of Muslim women in the world who have three characteristics—they are poor, illiterate, and live in a village—the spokespersons of the most visible groups of Muslims at the NGO (nongovernmental organization) Forum in Beijing denied that Muslim women had any serious problems that needed to be addressed. Instead of confronting the indisputable fact that Muslim culture, like other patriarchal cultures, is pervaded by anti-women biases that have a negative impact on every aspect of women's lives, these spokespersons not only defended but glorified whatever goes under the name of Islam in traditional Muslim societies. As the Beijing conference drew to a close, it seemed that the hope of a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive thinking that had come to birth at Cairo was likely—like female children in pre-Islamic Arabia—to be buried alive.

For “liberal” Muslims there were important lessons to be learned from the experiences at Cairo and Beijing. Paramount among them was the need to understand the role of religion and culture in Muslim societies and communities and the discrepancy between the norms or ideals of Islam's primary sources and Muslim practice with regard to women and women-related issues. A deep analysis of Muslim history, particularly of modern times, and the political, economic, social, and psychological factors that have had a formative influence on Muslim consciousness was also required.

That “liberal” Muslims in general had not done the hard work required to make a compelling case in support of a “liberal” or “progressive” approach to understanding Islam was apparent at Beijing. Perhaps like many other “liberals,” they had assumed that what they had to say was inherently so reasonable or rational that it could be regarded as self-evident, requiring no corroborative data. But what the conferences at Cairo and Beijing have demonstrated is that the greatest impact is made by those who have done their homework best.

If liberal Muslim women are capable of insensitivity to the painful contradictions in their own movements, it is hardly surprising that Western feminists can be guilty of an incomplete understanding of the reality of Muslim women. The aversion to religion, especially Islam, that pervades the U.S. women’s movement undercuts their genuine efforts to empower Muslim women. They hope that after “liberation” from the Taliban, Afghan women will throw off their *burqas*, cast off their Islamic and Afghan identities, and become “secular.”

Every one of the Afghan women I have known in the United States, Pakistan, and elsewhere has made it clear to me that for them the reconstruction and reform of Afghan society does not mean an abandonment of Islam or Afghan cultural heritage. Afghan women are going to need a lot of support from women all over the world in rebuilding their lives and their country. The women’s movement in the United States, which is diverse in so many ways, being multireligious, multicultural, and multiethnic, is certainly called upon to play a major role in providing this support. Yet the support that is offered to Afghan women, whether it is political, economic, medical, social, or any other, must be given without the expectation or the demand that Afghan women will follow a donor-driven agenda, especially one that is rooted in aversion to Islam and Afghan culture.

From my perspective, one reason why religious extremism became so vocal and visible in the last three decades was that Western donors poured a huge amount of support into “antireligious” organizations, which insist that human rights and Islam are incompatible. To many

Muslims the Qur'an is the Magna Carta of human rights. A large part of the Qur'an's concern is to free human beings from the bondage of traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic, or any other), tribalism, racism, sexism, slavery, or anything else that prohibits or inhibits human beings from actualizing the Qur'anic vision of human destiny embodied in the classic proclamation: "Toward Allah is thy limit."

After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when both superpowers reacted in panic to what they saw as the impending threat of the spread of Islamic "fundamentalism," many Western donor agencies began to support a number of "secular" human rights and women's organizations in Muslim countries. While in its classic sense, the word "secular" refers to what is outside of ecclesiastical authority, or "nonreligious," in Muslim societies it is generally understood as "antireligious" or "anti-Islamic." One kind of extremism feeds another kind of extremism, and the more the "antireligious" extremists in Pakistan expressed their aversion or antagonism to Islam, the more the "religious extremists" raised the slogan of "Islam in danger" to rally people behind them.

In my view, anyone who says that human rights and Islam are incompatible has not read the Qur'an, which strongly affirms fundamental human rights. The fact that in recent decades, particularly since the Iranian Revolution, a number of Muslim countries have turned to normative Islamic teachings in their effort to establish a framework for their temporal as well as spiritual development does not mean that these countries cannot have a just social system. On the contrary, any paradigm of human rights or self-actualization that is constructed outside of the belief system of the people living in a particular society is likely to be regarded as irrelevant. In societies that are overwhelmingly and profoundly Muslim, as is the case in Afghanistan and Pakistan, programs of action that violate or disregard what is of central value and meaning to the masses of people are doomed to failure.

Since the modern notion of human rights originated in a Western, secular context, Muslims in general, but Muslim women in particular,

find themselves in a quandary when they initiate, or participate in, a discussion on human rights, whether in the West or in Muslim societies. Based on their life experience, most Muslim women who become human rights advocates or activists feel strongly that virtually all Muslim societies discriminate against women from cradle to grave. This leads many of them to become deeply alienated from Muslim culture in a number of ways. This bitter sense of alienation oftentimes leads to anger and bitterness toward the patriarchal systems of thought and social structures that dominate most Muslim societies.

Muslim women often find much support and sympathy in the West so long as they are seen as rebels and deviants within the world of Islam. But many of them begin to realize, sooner or later, that while they have serious difficulties with Muslim culture, they are also not able, for many reasons, to identify with Western, secular culture.

Much attention has been focused in Western media and literature on the sorry plight of Muslim women who are "poor and oppressed" in visible or tangible ways. Since the rise of the Taliban, and especially since September 11, the U.S. women's movement, in an urgent desire to help Afghan women, have lent their support to the most radical and Westernized element of the Afghan women's movement. Hardly any notice has been taken, however, of the vast majority of Afghan women who are struggling to maintain their religious identity and personal autonomy in the face of the intransigence of Muslim culture on the one hand, and the imperialism of Western, secular culture on the other hand.

At the Beijing conference, the slogan that acquired global currency was "Sisterhood is Global." If sisterhood is indeed global, then I hope that those groups in the U.S. women's movement that have a hegemonic mindset and may seek to pressure Afghan women, especially those whom they have patronized in difficult times, will do something extraordinary. I hope they will be able to transcend their personal agendas and support their Afghan sisters in attaining goals that they have set for themselves within a framework of their own choosing.

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