

The Women's Movement in Islam: A Turning Point in Reform

One of the most important influences in restoring Islam to its proper place as a forward-looking religion of reform is to be found in the Muslim women's movement. I say 'proper place' because, in spite of the stereotype that Islam is backward, reactionary and regressive, the evidence is that it was anything but this in its origins.

The original Muslim *Ummah* (communities) were characterized by remarkable levels of social welfare, education and healthcare. Additionally, by the time Islam had established itself in Southern Europe in the Middle Ages, it had built grand cities marked out by these features, together with running water and street lighting, centuries before they were regular features of other European cities.

Above all, the original Islam was characterized by its reform of ancient discriminatory practices, be it against minority ethnic groups and religions or the way women were marginalized in most societies of the day. In contrast, Islam imposed laws and expectations around tolerance of minorities and equality for women that were beyond anything the world had known to that point in time.

This is what the modern women's movement in Islam draws on in calling for reform of the many un-Islamic practices that have crept into Muslim societies that have marginalized women in a religion once known for its gender equity. These women are, by and large, devout Muslims who believe fiercely that their religion has been hijacked by uninformed chauvinistic forces that have brought it into disrepute, including around the issue of gender equity.

Leila Ahmed is a renowned Muslim scholar who draws on the earliest sources to show that, for Muhammad, safeguarding the equality of all human beings was an ethical imperative for anyone who wished to be part of the *Ummah*. Amina Wadud, another eminent Muslim scholar, goes further in asserting that the issue of women's equality is the central issue to be found in the *Qur'an*, making it one of the marks of being a true believer. In short, she suggests, those who hold to chauvinistic beliefs have no right to call themselves Muslim.

Needless to say, such views are controversial and considered dangerous in many Muslim societies, and those who hold them sometimes do so at great risk to their personal wellbeing. Nonetheless, the beliefs among the Muslim women's movement are so well founded that they are gradually making a difference even in repressive Muslim countries.

In 2003, Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian lawyer and human rights activist, became the first Muslim woman to win the Nobel peace prize. She did so for her work in defending gender equality and the rights of oppressed people generally. Her work has made a difference to the position of women in Iran. Majida Rizvi, the Pakistani judge, inspired other Pakistani women to march in the streets to protest the very oppressive laws against women's rights that had been passed under the Zia regime. These laws were finally discredited and overturned as a result of the strength of these protests and the clear demonstration by Rizvi and others that the laws were misguided and foreign to all that Islam stood for.

If the women's movement can be so strong in countries like Iran and Pakistan, then Australian Muslim women can take heart that their work of reform will bear fruit. In a recent conference at The University of Melbourne, the issue of Australian Muslim women's social inclusion/exclusion was central. Amidst a variety of views, devout Muslim women spoke out about their segregation in worship, the dress that is often expected of them, and more important issues concerning the attitudes of some imams towards women in general.

Devout Muslim women sparked controversy by suggesting that, in Australia at least, women should be allowed to pray in the same part of the mosque as men. Some women protested that they felt pressure to wear the veil even though they did not believe it was an authentic Muslim requirement. Most importantly, some women expressed the view that there are imams in Australia who do not protect the basic rights of women by turning a blind eye to domestic violence, unfair property settlements and other matters that run counter to the clear directives of the *Qur'an*.

Similar views were expressed by Muslim women and men at a symposium on the place of women in Islam, held at The University of Newcastle late last year. There is a strong and persistent movement for reform in Islam, in Australia and elsewhere. It is particularly strong among Muslim women because women's subjugation is the modern stereotype about Islam that seems most at odds with the evidence from its historical sources. It is important that all Australians know about this struggle, avoid the stereotypes and hasty judgments, and recognize that an increasing portion of the Muslim community is coming to understand its faith as forward looking and very much in touch with the values of being Australian. Internationally and locally, this represents a turning point for Islam.

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