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# Feminism in the Muslim World

Sevinc Karaca

2009

Sevinc Karaca, a Turkish anarchist and feminist, describes the fine line that Muslim women must navigate between Islam and the West.

*“In all Muslim countries, women had to wait until the 1970s and 1980s for a feminist movement that questioned the practise of religion and its role in the oppression of women. As Feminists in the West beat around the bush with an air of multi-culturalist political correctness and go out of their way to show respect for exotic religions, there is a growing number of feminists in countries like Turkey and Iran and among the diaspora in non- Muslim countries whose policies and strategies for feminism do not take the route of Western Liberal Feminism. The majority of feminist ideologies and activism in the developed world today do not address and support the struggle of their Muslim comrades openly, directly or sufficiently.”*

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In the Muslim world, the feminist movement took shape in small numbers from the 1950s onwards, primarily in what were then more liberal, secular regimes such as Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Iran and Morocco, Iran fell out of this secular league following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The movement was mostly academic in nature, sometimes voiced by males, and women's rights were seen as a showcase by these regimes to display modernity, progress and democracy. Early feminists in these countries were mainly academics and members of the ruling elite. In Turkey for example, women were encouraged to run for national elections and quotas were used to create positive discrimination as part of the "Westernization and modernization" of Turkish society. However, the emancipation that was offered on a silver plate to the lucky few failed to address the issues of ordinary women. In all Muslim countries, women had to wait until the 1970s and 1980s for a feminist movement that questioned the practise of religion and its role in the oppression of women.

The Prophet Muhammad enforced a series of social, economic and cultural reforms in the early days of Islam. Many of these radical reforms affected the treatment and place of women. The killing of baby girls was outlawed, women's right to control their wealth was granted and women were guaranteed the right to inherit property. Strict limits were placed on polygamy and women were allowed to keep their dowry. It is these reforms, which can be considered radical social and economic changes of their time, upon which Muslim feminists of the religious school base their politics. However, the Koran, explicitly orders segregation of sexes and confers the traditional roles to women.

The Koran forms the basis of family law in the majority of Muslim Countries as it is considered to be the word of God. Hence Koranic regulations regarding women are followed with

**Production** - Immediate studies should be carried out to determine real demand for production, type of production and products.

**Environment** – Sustainable living should be enforced at any cost, due to the imminent risks of environmental disaster

**Domestic Relations** - Domestic work should be organized in collective or other ways to be paid and shared by all involved.

**Education** - Alternative education modules and schools should be facilitated.

**Tax & Spending** - Tax and investment subsidies for big businesses and syndicates should cease and workers should have full say on where the tax revenue generated should be spent.

we want to take the same route. We don't want to serve in the army, we don't want to sit in parliaments which take decisions to go to war and to spend state budgets on buying more arms. We don't want the power to submit our countries' 150 year old foreign debts to the World Bank, We don't want to surrender our lives to the orders of the likes of the WTO who steal the food from our tables.

What we primarily need and want is basic human rights, economic freedom, education, jobs and healthy affordable food. As things stand, in the world we live in today, these rights are denied to the majority of the world's workers and they will not be handed to us either, unless we get out there and organize for radical change where we will have full control of our production and its tools and where all responsibilities are shared mutually.

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### **What Changes Do Muslim Women Really Need?**

**Pensions** - The world gives basic old age care to a lucky few million in the world. This needs to be changed immediately.

**Wealth** - There is an urgent need for land and income redistributions to alleviate extreme poverty

**Debt** - Organizations such as the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF should cease operation immediately and all foreign debts for underdeveloped countries should be defaulted collectively.

**War** - Arms, missile and landmine production must end immediately, all arms should be decommissioned and all debt created for military spending should also be defaulted collectively.

**Wages** - Workers in the disadvantaged regions and countries should be paid the maximum standard for their work, not the minimum.

great strictness. Despite the positive reforms, the Koran states that 'men are superior to women on account of the qualities with which God hath gifted one above the other'.

This author finds that the issues raised by Islamic feminists are not directed at God's word as revealed in the Koran, but with the religious scholars' interpretation of the Koran, and the "contrived or inauthentic traditions of later provenance which either do not reflect what the Prophet said or represent fallible variations of his Hadith." (Hadith: the word or teachings of Prophet Mohammed) Nazira Zayn al-Din, a scholar of Muslim feminism, goes further and blames early and medieval interpreters of the Koran for "disregarding the holy word of Prophet, in family law and his teachings about respect for women." However, this in no way makes Mohammed a leading feminist.

This widely popular version is contradictory to a class based analysis of feminism as it reinstates the hierarchy of patriarchy. Although a step forward, and some political scientists believe that it may lay the groundwork for democracy, it is not concerned with the radical changes that are necessary to improve the lives of most women in Muslim countries, both Muslim and non-Muslim. There is also a problem with the notion from a libertarian point of view: it sounds great, but why would and should feminism serve to the benefit of religion in the first place? It is supposed to serve women. There is a great danger in Muslim feminists' search for solutions within sharia. It facilitates effortless and cheap PR exercises and spin by misogynist Sharia regimes; it is ironic that while these regimes condemn the Western Media as servants of evil, they so desperately want to be seen by them as "not so bad after all". Over the past ten years or so, Iran has seen the publication of a number of journals aiming to address the issues of Muslim women. A short search on the Internet leads one to thousands of articles about the feminist movement in Iran and the great star of Iranian Feminism, former Ayatollah Rafsanjani's daughter

Faezah Hashemi, who participated in the parliament that delivered little to the women of Iran over the last ten years. The nauseating smell of “emancipation delivered on a silver plate” that surrounds the whole affair manifests itself most clearly in her failure to mention the hypocrisy of a regime which benefits hugely from women’s cheap labour, contrasted with the lack of respect for the work they do in a war-torn country. Hashemi has been busy publishing Tehran-based *Zonan* and *Zan* which promotes the idea that “*Western feminism has promoted hostility between the sexes, confused sex roles, and the sexual objectification of women*” – a correct analysis of certain sections of the feminist movement, perhaps, but it fails to provide a “feminist” alternative. A number of its writers have proposed an Islamic-style feminism that would stress “gender complementarity” rather than equality and that would pay full respect to housewifery and motherhood while also giving women access to education and jobs. This is enough to tell you where our comrades get it wrong.

Saudis use this spin for fear that their secret affair with the American, British and French arms industries will come to an end. Following the BAE investigation in the UK, there is growing discomfort over the Saudi Kingdom’s interference in the British Courts. In the US, families of soldiers are organizing against the war and questioning the Bush regime’s heavy flirtations with Saudi financial power. This is the “elephant in the room” that feminists in Muslim countries are afraid to take on and endure more hostility than already exists towards them in their countries. Our feminist comrades elsewhere shouldn’t have to wonder why all solutions are sought within religion itself. Even among the secular groups it is taboo to blame religion for the problems surrounding the fundamental values forced upon women in our societies, such as virginity, marriage and divorce. A class based analysis of the women’s issues had to wait until recently.

Muslim women have little to expect from a feminist movement that is identically incapable of confronting a system built by and for men (capitalism in the case of Western feminists). The majority of feminist ideologies and activism in the developed world today do not address and support the struggle of their Muslim comrades openly, directly or sufficiently. Trust, which is necessary to make radical change together, has not been built yet. They may have to face the fact that their feminist discomforts may be seen as petulant and they may have a tough time mobilizing their Muslim comrades to join the fight for equal membership in exclusive golf clubs.

Muslim women also struggle to overcome their permanent role as the helpless and voiceless victim. It is a delicate balance between demanding to be seen and heard in all areas of life, to celebrate achievements while trying to voice the violations of their rights.

We don’t want to be equal with men in a Sharia regime and this is the common ground for non religious feminists of all tendencies in relatively more liberal secular Muslim countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Morocco and Algeria. The non-believing, non-practicing members of this broad concept of “Secular Feminism” simply reject any rule by religion, some of them suggest the separation of state and religious affairs as if they do not exist to serve each other and accept the existence of its values in the society. This may be due to the fear we mentioned earlier.

Little in the lives of the women in the “modern” world suggest that theirs is a good model to achieve emancipation. Muslim women are well aware of the ills of capitalist society and they want to protect themselves and their children from these ills; Britney, MTV, Hello, Posh & Becks, fashion, the porn industry, the obsession with looks and girl power to name a few. This is where our well meaning non Muslim comrades get confused. In conclusion, we don’t want to arrive at the ridiculed place they arrived at. Although they made great gains, we do

for their basic old age pension care on their respective countries exchequers' desks, what will we do about them then, as gassing them is not an option? The cheapest "humanitarian" approach is do "nothing" and keep them uneducated, powerless and unhealthy.

Gaining an understanding of the real issues faced by ordinary Muslim women, and the radical changes in our lifestyles and production culture required in order to address them, is as good a place as any to start for those who want to aid the workers of the world. One third of these workers are Muslim women and children. If this sounds too unrealistic – radically changing the lives of Muslim and non-Muslim women workers alike, our struggle is not respected and we are simply lied to. "Realistic" alternatives may well take a very long, two steps ahead – one step back, journey which feminism in the Western world experienced. But that feminism ended up being cornered into a ridiculed space in the social political arena.

You can not rise up in a regime like Iran without a consciousness that is set against imperialism and you definitely do not rise up to die, but to succeed. It is humiliating to see how ignorant we are viewed at times. As the West banter over mile-long newspaper columns and films and TV shows about the hijab and burka, the majority of Muslim women are struggling to put food on the table, and get basic health care and education for their children.

Muslim women get this hard love from the world, while they seek justice under dire and simply unsafe conditions, They are bullied into justifying their way of life, not by their immediate oppressors, but by their so called allies. Why is it that the hijab and the hijab alone is the only subject of interest when it comes to women in Muslim countries? Could it be because very few in a broad spectrum of political correctness are able to overcome their underlying prejudices? The remaining are happy only to pay attention when a woman's (or a child's) hijab or worse , her vagina, is the subject matter.

Egyptian scholar Nawal El Saddawi has produced one of the first class based analyses of Muslim women's issues and oppression. She states that women's oppression is "*not essentially due to religious ideologies ... but derives its roots from the class and patriarchal system. Islamic history paints a picture of pre-Islamic society where women's sexuality is 'chaotic, all-embracing , [with] rampant promiscuity whose essence is woman's self determination'. The male is left with a lack of initiative, and is unable to control relationships through a position of privilege. Such fears are behind the construction of Muslim sex roles, which find their basis in the assumption that proper social order relies on the curtailment of female sexuality.*"<sup>1</sup> One of the worst manifestation of this sexual fear is the mutilation of female children's labia and clitoris. Though having no basis within the Koran or any authentic Hadiths, clitoridectomies are still forced on children in the name of Islam. The practice predates Islam, and is possibly pre-Judaic.

There are still societies today where women are considered to be simple commodities and part of the livestock. They are modern day slaves, sold for marriage and labour at ages which the rest of the world considers that sexual contact amounts to a criminal offence.

Pre-Islamic society cannot be classified as simply being at a feudal stage of political chronology, as is the tendency in official history. Such a label is not comprehensive enough to describe the economic and political systems and structures through which pre-Islamic society operated.

There are so many examples of brutality and oppression against women in Muslim countries that if we were to imagine women and men as two nations, we would end up with the longest, most ruthless invasion and war of the history of

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<sup>1</sup> Mernissi, Fatima, (Mary Jo Lakelan, trans.), *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992.

humanity. It is this longstanding hostility that needs explanation first. It is important for Western feminists to have first hand knowledge of these events in their communication with Muslim Women to let them know first of all that “*they are aware*” and “*interested*” and secondly, that they will support them in their struggle to end this brutality. It is not difficult to compile a list of atrocities and human rights violations against Muslim women, there were two major news reports in the Guardian alone in the week during which this article was being written, about brutalities against women in Iraq and in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, interest in such stories in the mainstream media only appeared after the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, and these atrocities are often simply used as excuses by the American war machinery. The rhetoric against the oppression of women that they use does not serve to the benefit of women in places such as Afghanistan but to their detriment. The plight of Afghan women is used in turn as a warning by regimes such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries against women who demand more freedom.

As Feminists in the West beat around the bush with an air of multi-culturalist political correctness and go out of their way to show respect for exotic religions, there is a growing number of feminists in countries like Turkey and Iran and among the diaspora in non- Muslim countries whose policies and strategies for feminism do not take the route of Western Liberal Feminism. For those feminists, Western feminism’s high priestesses are the likes of Condoleezza Rice, Thatcher and Mary Harney and its prime products are the Spice Girls and Sex in the City. The same media and pop- culture machine portray the brutality and oppression of women in Muslim countries as the manifestation of Muslim Ideology, yet it never attaches “Christian” or religious to the headlines about brutality and oppression against women in non Muslim countries.

The notion that “*women are oppressed in Muslim countries because of Islam*” is one of the root causes of the confusing

and complex stand off between liberal feminists and the Muslim Feminists of all schools, including the author of this article. Muslim women are oppressed precisely because they live in a patriarchal society where religion is still the principal agent of the system’s brutality against women. It is essential to understand that one of the main issues facing Feminism in Muslim countries is to analyze whether the issues of the feminist movement are ‘religious’, ‘cultural’ or ‘social’ in nature.

This article is neither in defence of the religion nor in agreement with Muslim Feminists who seek a solution within the structure of Islam. Their desperate search within Sharia Laws and their regimes may achieve a few limited steps forward within a realistic time frame and radical changes are not likely to come overnight; the brute is too big and too damn powerful. These movements also provide relative safer spaces of freedom of expression through which women develop their ideologies towards the more radical-non religious space.

In the “developed” world, there is a great need for awareness; the only place for Muslim women in global media coverage is that of the victim. They are depicted, written about and heard only when they are victims. Also, observers from the West tell them from the West what their identities and problems are and how to live. The achievements of Muslim women in education, health and art production, their struggles and gains are always explained as “concessions” and “rights” which are “granted” by the regimes they live in. Over half a billion women and children have not received even basic education, they lack the power to demand their basic human rights, they produce one third of all the world’s wealth, getting paid very little or nothing, costing next to nothing to their employers or their states in health services or education, all of which leads them to die young. The reckless and hungry profit economy benefits hugely from this work force. Imagination calls for a place in 30 years time where Muslim women will have reclaimed their basic human and workers rights and will have landed the bill