

The truth about Islam and women

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HOW EMBARRASSING. For the first and (I hope) only time in my life, I found myself agreeing a little with the irritating Boris Johnson as he argued with Harifayah Haleem, a Muslim writer, on BBC Radio 4's Today programme. They were discussing Johnson's latest claim that the terrorists who attacked the US did so because they despise the liberation of women. Ms Haleem (who was at a disadvantage because she did not have the confidence of her antagonist) responded by saying that Islam gives women many rights and by quoting some gem by the late puritan Ayatollah Khomeini.

Excuse me? Why should I care about what Khomeini said? He was an astute politician who knew how to manipulate his population. I abhor what he did to women, particularly educated women who refused to bow to the harsh, grey, controlling, joyless Islam he promulgated. Some of these intellectual women were tortured, often killed; others, such as the brilliant Iranian child psychiatrist Homa Darabi, burnt themselves to death in public places because they objected to the draconian laws which forced women to cover themselves.

Vocal British Muslims and their organisations hate it when these examples of female oppression are brought up. They want the focus of public debates to be only on the many and growing examples of Islamaphobia. Other apologists, such as Haleem, withdraw into ideals, responding to concerns with "proof" that Islam is supposed to be a religion which promotes and protects women. This knowledge is not used to change sexist attitudes and behaviour; instead it is used to placate or silence the real outrage many of us inside and outside the Muslim communities feel.

I don't want anyone else to enlighten me about what the Koran says on women; what I would like is a robust dialogue about what we can do to stop the cruelties against women and girls in the Muslim world. This oppression is not confined to Muslim countries, of course. But we have an obligation to clean up our own back yards and to tell and confront the complicated truth.

This does not mean that I am part of the brigade which declared its own jihad this week against Islam and other faiths which have never succumbed to their post-enlightenment

values. This is only another kind of fanaticism. Some liberal principles - respect for the individual and equality, for example, deserve to be embraced as part of a universal human rights culture. But western lifestyles which are now so crushingly hedonistic and narcissistic have created new problems. It is right that those who are not yet caught up in these should question them. Women's rights, too, need to be assessed more intelligently, but let us stop making excuses, please. Young Muslim women in this country have significantly higher rates of suicide than do white women. People working in burns units in city hospitals know, but do not talk about, how many of these women end up there.

In the first few days of September, a litany of horrors occurring in Pakistan emerged on a website set up by a brave Muslim academic, Riffat Hassan, a woman of deep faith who has given her life to campaigning for Muslim women's rights.

Among those horrors was the case of Shafugta Bibi, who has two children. She was killed by her father, husband and uncles because she wanted a divorce. Seventy cases of incest were suppressed in Islamabad; several rape victims were "punished"; Naziram Bibi, who had seven children, was murdered by her son who thought she had been "dishonourable"; 20-day-old Alia, and toddlers Mehwish and Sahnish, were shot dead by their father, angry that his wife had only given him daughters. Family murders happen here too - "so what?" you may ask. The point is these violations use Islam and "values" as excuses. That means Muslims have got to become engaged.

We know that the worst oppression of Muslim women and girls is found among the poor, often rural and illiterate groups around the world, here included. But middle-class Muslim women even in volatile countries, are still - just - effective and autonomous and many of them, like Dr Hassan, use their influence to confront the inhumane treatment of women and girls.

In many ways it is an immense privilege to be born female, Muslim and middle class. You get immeasurable family support and respect plus all the freedoms you need to do what you wish. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia elected women leaders who never had to prove that they could bake biscuits (remember how Hillary Clinton had to do this when the American public felt she was too robustly political?) and here Baroness Uddin is a forceful and clever operator whose five children (including one who is disabled) have not stopped

her ambitions.

Shagufta Yaqub, the young editor of a magazine for British Muslims, is a worthy role model because of her intelligence. Bollywood actress, activist and politician Shabana Azmi fights tirelessly for street women and their rights.

Sisters Asma Jehangir and Hina Jilani, both admired international human rights lawyers, risk their lives in Pakistan to protect women. Both live under death threats. Kabul once had educated and militantly independent women, many of whom are joining perilous resistance groups, protected, ironically, with the shroud which they are all obliged to wear.

What worries me is that the influential intellectual and politicised Muslim woman around the world are now being targeted and silenced. As the effects of the Iranian revolution spread to neighbouring countries, women who lived free and fulfilled lives as Muslims found themselves under scrutiny or worse. They have had to prove they are real Muslims by giving up their independence, aspirations and all that their own mothers had taken for granted. This fact remains largely unknown in the west.

In the first half of the 20th century in most Muslim countries there was no sense of contradiction between Islam and modernism. You only have to look at the world of art to see this clearly. Surrealism, Cubism, Abstract Expressionism all flourished in Baghdad, Amman and Tehran.

Real faith should be confident and not fear that it will be knocked away by new technologies or ideas. Today we see panic in too many parts of the Muslim world and this leads to grotesque denials of basic principles.

The Moroccan writer Fatima Mernissi says in her book, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*: "The waves of religion based on terrorism in the 1990's are based on the tormented response of a mutilated Muslim society whose progressive forces have been savagely emasculated. Why on earth is the Arab world so hostile to women? Why can it not see women as a force for development? Why so much desire to humiliate and retard us despite our efforts to educate ourselves and become productive?"

Mernissi and others like her are described even by highly educated Muslims as "traitors". But we will carry on, because we cannot collude in the physical and emotional genocide of our

sisters who are burning, dying, imprisoned without a voice in the name of one of the greatest religions in the world.

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