

ISLAMIC TRADITIONS AND THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT: CONFRONTATION OR COOPERATION?

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Whether living in the Middle East or Africa, in Central Asia, in Pakistan, in Southeast Asia, or in Europe and the Americas, Muslim women tend to view the feminist movement with some apprehension. Although there are some features of the feminist cause with which we as Muslims would wish to join hands, other features generate our disappointment and even opposition. There is therefore no simple or "pat" answer to the question of the future cooperation or competition which feminism may meet in an Islamic environment.

There are however a number of social, psychological, and economic traditions which govern the thinking of most Muslims and which are particularly affective of woman's status and role in Islamic society. Understanding these can help us understand the issues which affect male and female status and roles, and how we should react to movements which seek to improve the situation of women in any of the countries where Muslims live.

PART 1 ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

a. The Extended Family System

One of the Islamic traditions which will affect the way in which Muslim women respond to feminist ideas is the advocacy in Islamic culture of an extended rather than a nuclear family system. Some Muslim families are "residentially extended" - that is, their members live communally with three or more generations of relatives (grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, and their offspring) in a single building or compound. Even when this residential version of the extended family is not possible or adhered to, family connections reaching far beyond the nuclear unit are evident in strong psychological, social, economic, and even political ties. Mutual supports and responsibilities affecting these larger consanguine groups are not just considered desirable, but they are made legally incumbent on members of the society by Islamic law. The Holy Quran itself exhorts to extended family solidarity; in addition it specifies the extent of such responsibilities and contains prescriptive measures for inheritance, support, and other close interdependencies within the extended family.[1]

Our Islamic traditions also prescribe a much stronger participation of the family in the contracting and preservation of marriages. While most Western feminists would decry family participation or arranged marriage as a negative influence because of its apparent restriction of individualistic freedom and responsibility, as Muslims we would argue that such participation is advantageous for both individuals and groups within the society. Not only does it ensure marriages based on sounder principles than physical attraction and sexual infatuation, but it provides other safeguards for successful marital continuity. Members of the family provide diverse companionship as well as ready sources of advice and sympathy for the newly married as they adjust to each others' way. One party of the marriage cannot easily pursue an eccentric course at the expense of the spouse since such

behavior would rally opposition from the larger group.

Quarrels are never so devastating to the marriage bond since other adult family members act as mediators and provide alternative sources of companionship and counsel following disagreements. The problems of parenting and generational incompatibility are also alleviated, and singles clubs and dating bureaus would be unnecessary props for social interaction.

There is no need in the extended family for children of working parents to be unguarded, unattended, or inadequately loved and socialized because the extended family home is never empty. There is therefore no feeling of guilt which the working parent often feels in a nuclear or single-parent organization. Tragedy, even divorce, is not so debilitating to either adults or children since the larger social unit absorbs the residual numbers with much greater ease than a nuclear family organization can ever provide.

The move away from the cohesiveness which the family formerly enjoyed in Western society, the rise of usually smaller alternative family styles, and the accompanying rise in individualism which many feminists advocate or at least practice, are at odds with these deep-rooted Islamic customs and traditions. If feminism in the Muslim world chooses to espouse the Western family models, it should and would certainly be strongly challenged by Muslim women's groups and by Islamic society as a whole.

b. Individualism vs. the Larger Organization

The traditional support of the large and intricately interrelated family organization is correlative to another Islamic tradition which seems to run counter to recent Western trends and to feminist ideology. Islam and Muslim women generally advocate molding of individual goals and interests to accord with the welfare of the larger group and its members. Instead of holding the goals of the individual supreme, Islam instills in the adherent a sense of his or her place within the family and of a responsibility to that group. This is not perceived or experienced by Muslims as repression of the individual. Other traditions which will be discussed later guarantee his or her legal personality. Feminism, therefore, would not be espoused by Muslim women as a goal to be pursued without regard for the relation of the female to the other members of her family. The Muslim woman regards her goals as necessitating a balance with, or even subordination to, those of the family group. The rampant individualism often experienced in contemporary life, that which treats the goals of the individual in isolation from other factors, or as utterly supreme, runs against a deep Islamic commitment to social interdependence.

c. Differentiation of Sex Roles

A third Islamic tradition which affects the future of any feminist movement in an Islamic environment is that it specifies a differentiation of male and female roles and responsibilities in society. Feminism, as represented in Western society, has generally denied any such differentiation and has demanded a move toward a unisex society in order to achieve equal rights for women. By "unisex society," I mean one in which a single set of roles and concerns are given preference and esteem by both sexes and are pursued by all members of the society regardless of sex and age differentials. In the case of Western feminism, the preferred goals have been those traditionally fulfilled by the male members of society. The roles of providing financial support, of success in career, and of

decision making have been given overwhelming respect and concern while those dealing with domestic matters, with child care, with aesthetic and psychological refreshment, with social interrelationships, were devalued and even despised. Both men and women have been forced into a single mold which is perhaps more restrictive, rigid and coercive than that which formerly assigned men to one type of role and women to another.

This is a new brand of male chauvenism with which Islamic traditions cannot conform. Islam instead maintains that both types of roles are equally deserving of pursuit and respect and that when accompanied by the equity demanded by the religion, a division of labor along sex lines is generally beneficial to all members of the society.

This might be regarded by the feminist as opening the door to discrimination, but as Muslims we regard Islamic traditions as standing clearly and unequivocally for the support of male-female equity. In the Quran, no difference whatever is made between the sexes in relation to God. "For men who submit [to God] and for women who submit [to God], for believing men and believing women, for devout men and devout women, for truthful men and truthful women, for steadfast men and steadfast women, for humble men and humble women, for charitable men and charitable women, for men who fast and women who fast, for men who guard their chastity and women who guard, for men who remember God much and for women who remember - for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward" (33:35). "Whoever performs good deeds, whether male or female and is a believer, We shall surely make him live a good life and We will certainly reward them for the best of what they did" (16:97).[2]

It is only in relation to each other and society that a difference is made - a difference of role or function. The rights and responsibilities of a woman are equal to those of a man, but they are not necessarily identical with them. Equality and identity are two different things, Islamic traditions maintain - the former desirable, the latter not. Men and women should therefore be complementary to each other in a multi-function organization rather than competitive with each other in a uni-function society.

The equality demanded by Islamic traditions must, however, be seen in its larger context if it is to be understood properly. Since Muslims regard a differentiation of sexual roles to be natural and desirable in the majority of cases, the economic responsibilities of male and female members differ to provide a balance for the physical differences between men and women and for the greater responsibility which women carry in the reproductive and rearing activities so necessary to the well-being of the society. To maintain, therefore, that the men of the family are responsible for providing economically for the women or that women are not equally responsible, is not a dislocation or denial of sexual equity. It is instead a duty to be fulfilled by men as compensation for another responsibility which involves the special ability of women. Likewise the different inheritance rates for males and females, which is so often sited as an example of discrimination against women, must not be seen as an isolated prescription.[3] It is but one part of a comprehensive system in which women carry no legal responsibility to support other members of the family, but in which men are bound by law as well as custom to provide for all their female relatives.

Does this mean that Islamic traditions necessarily prescribe maintaining the status quo in the Islamic societies that exist today? The answer is a definite "No." Many thinking Muslims - both men and women - would agree that their societies do not fulfill the Islamic ideals and traditions laid down in the Quran and reinforced by the example and directives of the Prophet Muhammad, salallahu alehi wasallam. It is reported in the Quran and from history that women not only expressed their opinions freely in the Prophet's presence but

also argued and participated in serious discussions with the Prophet himself and with other Muslim leaders of the time (58:1). Muslim women are known to have even stood in opposition to certain caliphs, who later accepted the sound arguments of those women. A specific example took place during the caliphate of 'Umar ibn al Khattab.[4] The Quran reproached those who believed woman to be inferior to men (16:57-59) and repeatedly gives expression to the need for treating men and women with equity (2:228, 231; 4:19, and so on). Therefore, if Muslim women experience discrimination in any place or time, they do not and should not lay the blame on Islam, but on the un-Islamic nature of their societies and the failure of Muslims to fulfill its directives.

d. Separate Legal Status for Women

A fourth Islamic tradition affecting the future of feminism in Muslim societies is the separate legal status for women which is demanded by the Quran and the Shari'ah. Every Muslim individual, whether male or female, retains a separate identity from cradle to grave. This separate legal personality prescribes for every woman the right to contract, to conduct business, to earn and possess property independently. Marriage has no effect on her legal status, her property, her earnings - or even on her name. If she commits any civil offense, her penalty is no less or no more than a man's in a similar case (5:83; 24:2). If she is wronged or harmed, she is entitled to compensation just like a man (4:92-93; see also Mustafa al Siba'i 1976:38; Darwazah n.d.:78). The feminist demand for separate legal status for women is therefore one that is equally espoused by Islamic traditions.

e. Polygyny

Although the taking of plural wives by a man is commonly called polygamy, the more correct sociological designation is polygyny. This institution is probably the Islamic tradition most misunderstood and vehemently condemned by non-Muslims. It is one which the Hollywood stereotypes "play upon" in their ridicule of Islamic society. The first image conjured up in the mind of the Westerner when the subject of Islam and marriage is approached is that of a religion which advocates the sexual indulgence of the male members of the society and the subjugation of its females through this institution.

Islamic tradition does indeed allow a man to marry more than one woman at a time. This leniency is even established by the Quran (4:3).[5] But the use and perception of that institution is far from the Hollywood stereotype. Polygyny is certainly not imposed by Islam; nor is it a universal practice. It is instead regarded as the exception to the norm of monogamy, and its exercise is strongly controlled by social pressures.[6] If utilized by

Muslim men to facilitate or condone sexual promiscuity, it is not less Islamically condemnable than serial polygyny and adultery, and no less detrimental to the society. Muslims view polygyny as an institution which is to be called into use only under extraordinary circumstances. As such, it has not been generally regarded by Muslim women as a threat. Attempts by the feminist movement to focus on eradication of this institution in order to improve the status of women would therefore meet with little sympathy or support.

II. DIRECTIVES FOR THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN AN ISLAMIC ENVIRONMENT

What can be learned about the future compatibility or incongruity of feminism in a Muslim environment from these facts about Islamic traditions? Are there any general principles to be gained, any directives to be taken, by those who work for women's rights and human rights in the world?

a. Intercultural Incompatibility of Western Feminism

The first and foremost principle would seem to be that many of the goals of feminism as conceived in Western society are not necessarily relevant or exportable across cultural boundaries. Feminism as a Western movement originated in England during the 18th century and had as one of its main goals the eradication of legal disabilities imposed upon women by English common law. These laws were especially discriminatory of married women. They derived in part from Biblical sources (e.g., the idea of man and woman becoming "one flesh," and the attribution of an inferior and even evil nature to Eve and all her female descendants) and in part from feudal customs (e.g., the importance of carrying and supplying arms for battle and the concomitant devaluation of the female contributions to society). The Industrial Revolution and its need for women's contribution to the work force brought strength to the feminist movement and helped its advocates gradually break down most of those discriminatory laws.

Since the history and heritage of Muslim peoples have been radically different from that of Western Europe and America, the feminism which would appeal to Muslim women and to the society generally must be correspondingly different. Those legal rights which Western women sought in reform of English common law were already granted to Muslim women in the 7th century. Such a struggle therefore holds little interest for the Muslim woman. In addition, it would be useless to try to interest us in ideas or reforms that run in diametrical opposition to those traditions which form an important part of our cultural and religious heritage. There has been a good deal of opposition to any changes in Muslim personal status laws since these embody and reinforce the very traditions which we have been discussing. In other words, if feminism is to succeed in an Islamic environment, it must be an indigenous form of feminism, rather than one conceived and nurtured in an alien environment with different problems and different solutions and goals.

b. The Form of an Islamic Feminism:

If the goals of Western feminism are not viable for Muslim women, what form should a feminist movement take to ensure success?

Above all, the movement must recognize that, whereas in the West, the mainstream of the women's movement has viewed religion as one of the chief enemies of its progress and well-being, Muslim women view the teachings of Islam as their best friend and supporter. The prescriptions that are found in the Quran and in the example of the Prophet Muhammad, *salallahu alehi wasallam*, are regarded as the ideal to which contemporary women wish to return. As far as Muslim women are concerned, the source of any difficulties experienced today is not Islam and its traditions, but certain alien

ideological intrusions on our societies, ignorance, and distortion of the true Islam, or exploitation by individuals within the society. It is a lack of an appreciation for this fact that caused such misunderstanding and mutual distress when women's movement representatives from the West visited Iran both before and after the Islamic Revolution.

Second, any feminism which is to succeed in an Islamic environment must be one which does not work chauvenistically for women's interest alone. Islamic traditions would dictate that women's progress be achieved in tandem with the wider struggle to benefit all members of the society. The good of the group or totality is always more crucial than the good of any one sector of the society. In fact, the society is seen as an organic whole in which the welfare of each member or organ is necessary for the health and well being of every other part. Disadvantageous circumstances of women therefore should always be countered in conjunction with attempt to alleviate those factors which adversely affect men and other segments of the society.

Third, Islam is an ideology which influences much more than the ritual life of a people. It is equally affective of their social, political, economic, psychological, and aesthetic life. "Din," which is usually regarded as an equivalent for the English term "religion," is a concept which includes, in addition to those ideas and practices customarily associated in our minds with religion, a wide spectrum of practices and ideas which affect almost every aspect of the daily life of the Muslim individual. Islam and Islamic traditions therefore are seen today by many Muslims as the main source of cohesiveness for nurturing an identity and stability to confront intruding alien influences and the cooperation needed to solve their numerous contemporary problems. To fail to note this fact, or to fail to be fully appreciative of its importance for the average Muslim - whether male or female - would be to commit any movement advocating improvement of women's position in Islamic hands to certain failure. It is only through establishing that identity and stability that self-respect can be achieved and a more healthy climate for both Muslim men and Muslim women will emerge.

NOTES

[1]. For example, see Quran 2:177; 4:7,176; 8:41; 16:90; 17:26; 24:22.

[2]. See also Quran 2:195; 4:124,32; 9:71-72.

[3]. "God (thus) directs you as regards your children's (inheritance): to the male, a proportion equal to that of two females..." (Quran 4:11).

[4]. Kamal 'Awn 1955:129.

[5]. "... Marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice."

[6]. It should be remembered that any woman who wants her marriage to remain monogamous can provide for this condition under Islamic law.

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