

4.3 Equality in the Name of Islam

by Helen Hajjaj

Men's monopoly of interpreting the Qur'an has contributed to keeping women in the Muslim world down. Yet, a growing number of women believe that Muslim women should draw arguments from the Qur'an in their demands for equality.

The Woman in Islam

Imagine a world, where a woman has the right to divorce if her husband does not satisfy her sexual needs. Or where the man has to support the entire household economically, while the woman decides by herself how she wants to spend her income. That is how society would look if the teachings of Islam were implemented.

According to Muslim women around the world, Islam places the genders on equal footing in a way that neither Christianity nor Judaism does. Therefore it is with the Qur'an that the battle for equality should be won. This is what Asma Barlas, professor of political science with speciality in Islam at Ithaca College in the USA, believes. "The Qur'an establishes the complete ontological equality between women and men quite clearly," she says and therefore sees no hindrances in being both a Muslim and a feminist.

This opinion has spread over the last 15 years, where focus on the woman's role in Islam has grown both in the West and in Muslim countries, explains Riffat Hassan, professor of religious studies at the University of Louisville. "It all depends on how one defines feminism. To me feminism is a philosophy according to which women have the same right to develop as men. They are human beings and therefore have equal human rights. The Qur'an places so much emphasis on rights given to women, so I do not see a problem in being a Muslim and a feminist," she says.

The beginnings of equality between the sexes are seen in the Islamic version of the tale of Adam and Eve. Even though more Muslima, in line with Christians and Jews, at first

would say that Eve was created from Adams rib, nothing in the Qur'an supports this. Instead of *Adam and Eve*, generally common gender words like *the people* or *mankind* are used. The word *Adam* does appear but then it is most often meant as the self-conscious human and not as the man. That many Muslims still believe the tale of the rib is because of different Hadiths (the story about Prophet Muhammad's practices) that mention that the woman is created from a rib.

But it is not only in the Story of the Creation that the woman appears in a more positive light in Islam, author and lecturer Aminah Tønnsen tells us. "It says in the Story of the Creation that Satan made THEM – both Adam and Eve – stumble, THEY tasted from the tree. But, as famous Islamic scholars have argued many hundreds of years ago, a part of the assertions found in the Hadith literature was influenced by the local Jewish-Christian way of thinking," says Aminah Tønnsen.

Men's Monopoly

Tønnsen has lived ten years in Morocco, where she directly experienced the oppressive behaviour towards women, supported not only by tradition but also by legislation. It was not until she returned to Denmark, and converted to Islam that she realised the way women were being treated was influenced by religion. "As a Dane I naturally did not want to take on traditions that belonged to another culture and were contrary to my fundamental beliefs whose primary source is the Qur'an," says Aminah Tønnsen.

Most Muslim countries have laws discriminating women and justifying oppression in one form or another. This does not discourage Asma Barlas from using the Qur'an as a tool to gain more rights. "The problem is that historically only men have interpreted the Qur'an and that the political and sexual contexts that it has been interpreted in have been patriarchal. So it is not surprising that dominant Muslim readings of the Qur'an in themselves are patriarchal and support prejudice against women," she says.

Sherin Khankan from the Forum for Critical Muslims agrees with that assessment. "A female Pakistani scholar has discovered that in the Qur'an's over 6.000 verses there are only six verses that can be interpreted as an argument for a gender hierarchy. But they can also be interpreted the other way. The problem is that men have had a monopoly of the interpretation," she says.

Active Women

As a Muslim woman, Sherin Khankan is placed in the unusual role, in the Forum for Critical Muslims, of the head of a mixed group with both women and men. Among other things, the association wants to establish a Mosque in Denmark, where women can lead the Khutba (Friday sermon). In that way, girls and boys would be raised in listening to women and to see it as a natural thing that a woman is standing in front of the Mosque and speaking to the group.

“In the prophet’s time, women were active in spreading the message of Islam. And in Mecca, women and men walk around the Kaaba together. The pilgrimage is the ultimate symbol of equality, where all distinctions – gender, economical and racial – are lifted. Why not implement that in everyday life?” says Sherin Khankan.

A glimpse back in time shows that there are examples, where women, with the help of the Qur’an, have increased their rights. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, all women were at first thrown out of the universities that before had been for both sexes. But by referring to education as a fundamental Islamic right for both sexes, the women insisted that new universities be opened for them. And it happened!

It is exactly stories like this that make well-educated Muslim women see hope for the future. Because it shows that it is the culture and not the religion that keeps women down, Riffat Hassan emphasises. “But at the same time it is important to say that there is a difference between religion and culture. And these things are now being challenged. If you go to the Muslim world, you will see that the biggest steps of progress that have taken place over the last 30 years have come from women’s groups, for example about the knowledge of their own legal rights. This has been a big issue because women simply did not know their rights about marriage, divorce and inheritance. But now it is no longer taken for granted what the Mullahs are saying.”

Historically both Muslim men and women have turned to the Islamic scholars when they had to learn about the religion. There is no tradition for the individual person to interpret the religion by himself or herself. According to Aminah Tønnsen, it is therefore important that men also become involved in the fight for women’s rights.

“Women have gotten more education and therefore have better opportunities to read the scriptures themselves. But men have to be convinced that it is also to their advantage that

women get the rights given to them according to Islam. And actually in the last 15 years there have been only a few men who support women in their demands. But even if for example Morocco has changed the laws to give women more rights, it of course takes some time before these laws become judicial practice,” she says.

Even though the Qur’an equalizes the genders, all the women agree that there is still a long way to go. There is an increased awareness among both sexes in the Muslim world, but the societies are still organized in such a way that for many families – and especially women – it is a daily struggle just to survive. According to Asma Barlas, social, political, economical and cultural reforms are necessary to create an environment which would allow women to interpret the Qur’an themselves.

“To be able to read the Qur’an as a liberating text for women, Muslims need to approach it as the word from a God, who is just and who supports human rights, a God who is not masculine and a God who does not prefer men. If one begins with these theological assumptions, then one can reach a fundamentally different reading of the Qur’an which is favourable towards women,” she says.

This article, published in Danish in: Dagbladet Information, 6 March 2006, was awarded an honorary mention by the Anna Lindh Foundation and the International Federation of Journalists for their first Euro-Med Journalist Prize for Cultural Diversity on 10 September 2006. The article was published in English, French and Arabic translations in the ALF publication: EuroMed Jornalist Prize for Cultural Diversty. The Winning Articles. Alexandria 2006. (www.euromedalex.org)

The Jury qualified Helen Hajjaj’s article as follows: “The article is on a hot potato named ‘Feminist Islam’. There are associations of Muslim women who firmly believe that true Islam places men and women on equal footing and do not want to leave the interpretation of Islam to men only. Similar to the feminist Christian movement, they insist that God is neither male nor female, and that God does not prefer men to women. Helen Hajjaj challenges standard European perceptions of Islam.”

Further reading: A very concise and factual analysis of Qur’anic references to equality or discrimination between men and women provides Ikbāl al-Gharbī, “Les femmes”, in: Le Monde des Religions, septembre-octobre 2007, no. 25 “Ce que dit vraiment le Coran”, pp. 30-31.