

Connecting Gender Inequality to *The Muslim Next Door*

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In *The Muslim Next Door*, Sumbul Ali-Karamali presents a great deal of evidence indicating that the Qur'an was radically progressive, recognizing and upholding women's rights even though this was unheard of in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, if we export this worldview to the 21<sup>st</sup> century unmodified, it is backward and repressive, promoting gender inequality. This is because we have made great strides toward gender equality since the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is also because many people interpret and apply the Qur'an incorrectly, which continues to this day. For example, the Qur'an says men may have up to four wives, but only if they are treated with equal fairness (Ali-Karamali, 2008, p. 141). It also says this is impossible, but despite this, some Muslims in Saudi Arabia interpret this as permitting polygyny, while most interpret it as forbidding it. Unfortunately, the perception that Islam is cruel and misogynistic persists in Western culture, even though the American media usually focuses on a small subset of Muslims whose beliefs are radically different from the majority and from what Muhammad taught.

Ali-Karamali says that she cannot believe "a doctrine that provided such freedom for women in the seventh century [could] really have meant to comparatively stifle their freedom in the twenty-first" (p. 150). Consequently, the Qur'an and *Sunnah* should be reinterpreted separately from the prejudices, and limitations of their times. The same has been done for the Bible—some passages are now understood to be overstatements, such as the one saying stubborn and rebellious children should be stoned to death by all the men of the city (p. 201). Similarly, the passages of the Qur'an regarding cutting off the hand of a thief or stoning to death adulterous

married persons may have been homiletic. In the Qur'an's defense, even these passages provide many safeguards and set the burden of proof so high that these punishments should almost never occur. This may be further evidence that inequality and cruelty in Muslim cultures is primarily a matter of misinterpretation or outright disregard for the Qur'an.

While there are some oppressive Islamic cultures, there are also many examples of women having leadership positions in government in predominantly Muslim nations, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria (p. 119). These nations doubtlessly still have gender inequity—all nations do—but Islam has been beneficial, emphasizing progress, knowledge, and education. The Qur'an encouraged women to get an education, empowered them to own land and receive inheritances, acknowledged their right to divorce, and granted them custody of young children at a time when these ideas were radical and unheard of. It is a shame that countries with “a low proportion of Muslims” are associated with egalitarian gender role ideologies (Matsumoto & Juang, 2013, p. 164-65), as this is likely the opposite of what the prophet would have wanted.

Another common misconception is that Islam condones slavery and concubinage. However, “it is clear from the Qur'an—despite the way those early male Islamic scholars and rulers justified their desires in guise of Islamic law—that [concubinage] was never meant to be practiced” (Ali- Karamali, p. 159). Nevertheless, the harems of the Ottoman sultans, adorned with verses from the Qur'an, remain firmly associated with Islam in the Western psyche, even though they violated the spirit of the Qur'an (p. 157-58). Although the Qur'an accepts slavery, it constrained and discouraged it at a time when it was firmly entrenched (p. 155). It prohibits slave owners from having sexual relations with slaves outside of marriage, and encourages them to set their slaves free if they choose to marry them (p. 156). It forbids separating slave children from their parents, and declares that children born of slaves are free. Even until the 19<sup>th</sup> century in

America, slaves had none of these protections—it was very common for American men to rape their slaves, separate slave children from their families, and own or sell multiple generations of slaves. It is clear to Ali-Karamali that the Qur'an intended for slavery to be abolished (p. 157), and given the great body of evidence indicating the Qur'an was radically progressive, promoting gender equality at a time when sexual abuse of slaves and concubines was the status quo, it is difficult to view the Qur'an as detrimental to women. However, certain Islamic cultures, such as the highly androcentric culture in Saudi Arabia, definitely exhibit a great deal of gender inequality, which is arguably hypocritical.

Clitoridectomy is often associated with Islam, but is contrary to Islam and has been declared as such by Egyptian Islamic clerics in 2007 (p. 159). It is practiced by Christians as commonly as Muslims in Egypt, which shows it is primarily a cultural issue, since neither religion condones it. Infanticide is expressly prohibited by the Qur'an, as are “honor killings”—only married women who have had extra-marital sex observed by four eyewitnesses and convicted in a court of law can be executed (p. 160). This burden of proof is so high that such executions should be exceedingly rare. The Qur'anic verse stating that two women can take the place of one man in testimony in court may actually promote gender equality—it applies only to financial cases (which were outside the knowledge of most women of the time), only one woman must testify (the other provides support), and most importantly, such support may discourage men in the court from coercing or intimidating the women, which was common then (p. 161-62). While the Qur'an says husbands can lightly strike their wives in the case of *nushuz*, the broadest interpretation of which has included rebelliousness and disobedience, one must recognize that in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, husbands were allowed to be far more abusive to their wives for any reason or no reason at all (p. 162-63). Finally, wearing the *hijab* is a personal choice in most Muslim

countries, and almost all scholars agree covering the face and hands is unnecessary. The Qur'anic verse commanding modesty explicitly applies to both women and men, and is open-ended with no mention of veiling. Veils worn by Islamic women range from the all-encompassing *burqa* to a simple head scarf, but the former is disproportionately acknowledged in Western culture. The Islamic veil is commonly considered oppressive, but Jewish women, Rastafarian women, and nuns also cover their hair, without the associated stigma (p. 129-31).

For the preceding reasons and others, the Qur'an is progressive and supports gender equality, but while the rest of the world has become more equitable over the past millennium, some Islamic cultures have disregarded social norms and the words of the Qur'an, becoming more oppressive toward women. Such regression can be found in certain cultures in every major religion, so it is inequitable to judge Islam as a religion or Muslims in general based on the actions and statements of a minority subset of the Islamic population. As Ali-Karamali argues, no one connects Christian holy war with Timothy McVeigh's bombing, even though the Christian Identity movement sanctions such actions. Likewise, the logic behind connecting the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks with jihad is lacking, especially considering the Qur'an clearly condemns such crimes (p. 186). While it may be culturally acceptable in the United States to condemn Islam as condoning terrorism and female oppression, a thorough investigation of the facts presents a far more nuanced and compassionate picture. Education and awareness of Islam and its history should be encouraged, so that Westerners gain a more accurate understanding of the 23% of the human population who identify as Muslims (Pew Research, 2012).

## References

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