

Dialogue on gender equality: Images of Women and Women's Rights in Islam and in Islamic Communities

Riem Spielhaus

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Along with the invitation to this lecture came a list with questions that are on the one hand old to a person who studied Islam. In fact, one of the first lectures I was invited to after graduating from University in Islamic Studies was this well known title: “Islam and Women”.

And yet, many things have somehow changed during the last two decades:

- 1.) Islam and Muslims have become much more central in debates about international and national politics – during the last year debates about Islam have merged with debates about refugees,
- 2.) Muslim women have become much more outspoken in fighting for their rights in Muslim majority countries as well as in Islamic communities in the minority situation,
- 3.) and also (academic and other) reflections on debates concerning Islam and women’s rights have also changed considerably,
- 4.) last but not least new ideas of what feminism is about have occurred that stress the need to diversify, to build coalitions, to think about how solidarity and support can really look like and to acknowledge intersections of different forms of exclusion, marginalization and discrimination – not focusing gender alone but being alert to additive and overlapping way discrimination can work.

When I will now speak about recent and current developments in the fight of Muslim women’s fights for their rights, I have to also include some thoughts about why we are discussing these things at all and what this has to do with European, German, Danish or French identities and self-understandings. This means I will oscillate between how women are viewed among Muslims (not so much in Islam – but we will come to that in a minute) and how Muslims and their gender practices are discussed in our public debates with a special focus on Germany. Besides introducing you into discussions about female prayer leaders I will talk about what the interest in this topic tells us about the role of women in societies that develop heated debates around Muslim men and burkas. After all, we can learn more about Europe when we look at debates about Islam than about Muslims. And why this is so, I will try to explain when thinking with you about gender and Islam.

This means I will speak about what happens when Islam and feminism meet, about the emancipative power of Muslim women and the problems they are facing among Muslim men AND in societies where the dominant narrative is that Muslim women are either victims of patriarchy or accomplices of an oppressive religion. But let me also mention what I will not

speak about: what Islam says about women. Well, I can tell you about how Muslims read the Qur'an and what they derive from it. I cannot and do not want to tell you what the "real Islam" says about women and their role in societies. But if there is one thing I want you to take home this evening, it is, that there are many interpretations of the word of God and that there are many ways of living the religion called Islam.

This is – and I am very aware of that – the opposite of what fundamentalists would tell you. Who argue, that there is only one literal reading of the Quran. Surprisingly, many non-Muslims agree with the most conservative among the Muslim scholars and rulers, that Islam is misogynist and oppressive of half of the population. I think we need to ask why!

When Feminism and Islam meet

But before we go deeper into our debates and why we tend to believe bearded men and those who rely on them easier than tough women, we will have a look at Muslim debates about women's rights.

"It is with great reservation that I use the term feminism [...]. There is no equivalent term for it in Persian although as a consciousness it has always existed. This consciousness in its indigenous form remains largely unexplored in the Muslim context. Studies of feminism in the Muslim world predominantly deal with its expression among the Westernised and educated elite and align it with its Western counterpart." This is how Ziba Mir Hosseini, a scholar of Islamic law and a women's rights activist from Iran living in the UK, explains her relationship with feminism.¹ And I could quote many other Muslim women who are fighting for women's rights. What is feminism all about? Well, Ziba Mir Hosseini defines feminism as "... a broad concern with women's issues and an awareness of their oppression at work, in the home and in the society, as well as action aimed at improving their lives and changing the situation".²

But this is not what many Muslims understand when they hear the f-word – feminism. They think of colonialism. And this is why: At the turn of the century a remarkable person was ruling Egypt: Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, British diplomat and General Consul in Egypt 1883–1907. There he was fighting for the rights of women – who according to him were oppressed by Egyptian men and had to be freed by the British. A narrative that was used to legitimize the use of colonial power and the presence of the English in the Middle East and North Africa. So he was a very good person fighting the oppression of women by Muslim men. At home in Great Britain, however, the Earl of Cromer was fighting women's struggle for voting rights as the cofounder and head of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage in the United Kingdom. Another example of the use of women's emancipation is the fight against the Algerian independence in which the installment of female education and public unveiling of female Algerians by French women played a role.

¹ Ziba Mir Hosseini, "Women and Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran: Divorce, Veiling and Emerging Feminist Voices," in *Women and Politics in the Third World*, ed. Haleh Afshar (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 149-69.

² *ibid.*

These stories even if they are not well known in Europe, are a basic knowledge of populations of the former colonies and in fact Muslims around the world. To Muslim men and women, Western arguments for women's emancipation sound more like 'we will tell you what to do'. And so on the one hand-side, female Muslims who call themselves feminists are often confronted with harsh criticism of betraying their culture, religion and country. Because emancipation did come with that price in the past. And many Muslim women are not at ease with Western feminism, because it has been complicit in dominating men AND women from the global south. Their religion and culture, characterized as being backward and misogynist while Western values were gender equality, have served as an important argument in this. And we do not need to look to far back into the past for examples like the wife's of French generals uncovering Algerian women in the late 1950ies. Lila Abu-Lughod gives us another example in her article "Do Muslim women need saving?" That is Laura Bush supporting her husband just after 9/11 in 2001 to go to war with Afghanistan in a public speech. Her argument to win the rather pacifist democrats was the alleged aim to free Afghan women.

In a book based on ethnographic field work in different countries with a Muslim majority including Afghanistan that came out in 2013, Abu-Lughod further questions a mindset that has justified all manner of foreign interference, including military invasion, in the name of rescuing women from Islam and provides portraits of women's actual experiences, and of the things they want to change as actors and not as recipients of the help or domination of others. Their livelihoods were shaped not alone by religion but also by poverty and authoritarianism—conditions not unique to the Islamic world, and produced out of global interconnections that implicate the very countries that uphold a narrative of the oppressed Muslim women—are often more decisive.

Another good read on what Muslim women actually want has been provided by Jennifer Selby, a Canadian researcher who went to the suburbs of Paris – the banlieues – to actually ask Muslim women about their situation. One of the major outcomes is that Muslim women want to decide themselves about their life styles or dress codes. Not their fathers, husbands or sons and not the French prime minister or other French women. And their biggest critique on the headscarf bans in schools and the burka ban on French streets was that they were never asked and that their very basic needs for instance to find work and fight discrimination in the job and housing market were not addressed at all.

As Jennifer Selby argues, the French state and dominant voices among French secular feminists have entrenched a narrative in which laïcité, democracy, and modernity are characterized by gender equality, which then is understood as opposed to Islam. The narrow focus on Muslim women's supposedly subordinate status as both an impediment to laïcité and as something laïcité can resolve serves to effectively discourage debates about issues Muslim migrant women are concerned with (Selby 2012).

Both Abu Lughod and Selby claim, that all the fuss about Muslim women's rights that was made did not support the women they interviewed, it did not better their situation but actually worsened them. In the first case with the bombing by literally killing them or the male breadwinners in the family or by excluding Muslim women from the job market and public life like in France. More examples on this are given by Anne Korteweg a Dutch-Canadian scholar and Gökce Yurdakul, a Turkish-German scholar, who compared debates and policies

on forced marriages in three countries of Western Europe and Canada. Their finding was, that hot debates have led to different outcomes. In some countries they were answered by tightening the immigration laws in others Muslim women's groups and activists have been invited to discuss measures and effectively supported in order to provide a structure for counseling and shelter in actual cases. Unfortunately this has not been the case in Germany - where since the headscarf debate has started in 2004 the funding for women's shelter has decreased and support for Muslim women's group is so far the exception.

The question of support and the way support is offered is, in my regard, the major question in this issue. And I will turn back to this question in a short while when I come to the recent developments in Germany.

Islamic Feminism, Muslim feminists or Muslim women's activism?

We have had a look at the ambivalence many Muslims including Muslim women discuss the term feminism. Now I want to give you some information on what the debates among Muslims look like.

Among Muslim men and women, a frequent answer on questions about the role of women in Islam is that the faithful of both gender are treated equally and that Islam brought many improvements for the situation of women on the Arab peninsular in the sixth century. This is however an answer that shuts down most discussions about laws and societal arrangements or structures today, that put women in a subordinate position, discussion closed. Muslim women's activists agree with this position insofar as they argue that Islam in its essence brought many improvements for women and conveys a message of equality of all people including both sexes. However, cultural patriarchal influences have deteriorated women's positions and therefore the message of equality has been lost and needs to be rediscovered regarding societal structures, family live and by rereading the Qur'anic text.

In her article "A Study of Islamic Herstory: Or How Did We Ever Get Into This Mess" Azizah Al- Hibri presents the view that 'Islam as it is practiced today is utterly patriarchal, but that true Islam is not' (Al-Hibri, 207). With this simple statement she contradicts both what 'western' media believes Islam to be and also some of the traditional interpretations of Islamic texts. Further, Al-Hibri presents several reasons for why Islam is both good for women, especially in comparison to pre-Islamic Arabia- a period called 'Jahiliyyah' (208). It is brought to the reader's attention that the Jahiliyyah period (most commonly the last century before Islam (208)) was in fact very patriarchal and extremely oppressive for some women.

However, al-Hibri indicates that there may have been a form of matriarchal society before the period of Jahiliyyah, This is evidenced by practices of some northern people of the time that built shrines to goddesses, for example, or the fact that some tribes appeared to be 'matrilocal as well as matrilineal' and by the examples of women being included in combat and battle.

This being said it is quite clearly evidenced that patriarchy was the more dominant structure of the time. For example there was female infanticide (boys were considered more valuable than girls, though this was becoming less common towards the beginning of Islam (209)), men could have up to 100 wives and once dead their sons decided the fate of those wives

(209). At this time, AL-Hibri argues, tribal power structures were based on patrilineage as the maternal side of the family usually came from a different tribe (212). The article does say, interestingly, that women were not kept out of positions of power because of weakness but were rather seen as ‘powerful and dangerous’ and needed to be ‘contained’ (211).

Al-Hibri highlights the contributions Islam made to freeing women and toppling the existing form of patriarchy of the time. Among these were: men not being allowed to cast menstruating women from their home, a limit on how many wives a man could have, women being able to inherit property and not being inherited as property after their husbands death. Female infanticide became ‘a crime against God’ and killing woman became an act equal to that of killing a man. Education was also seen by Islam as important for both men and women and women were no longer to be forced into marriages (212-213). More were mentioned in the article, but these few do give a clear indication that Islam itself is not supposed to be favored towards men or patriarchal power. As further evidence for this, Al-Hibri goes on to cite various writers who quote the Prophet. These quotes suggest that the Prophet thought of women on equal terms, not least when his wife Aisha became a religious authority after his death (213).

Al-Hibri addresses three issues within Islam that are deemed patriarchal and unfair to women: Polygamy, Divorce and Supremacy of men over women. In her evaluation of these issues she carefully uses passages of the Quran that suggest that men should only have one wife(216), women can and should be able to divorce a man when she pleases (she points out that this is becoming more common place among upper class women) (217) and she addresses the verse 34, which has traditionally been interpreted to mean that men should have power over women, and argues that the previous interpretations are ‘unwarranted’ and ‘inconsistent’ with other Islamic teachings (217). The article argues this because there is no mention of men having more mental or physical strength in the actual passage, only in the interpretation and that it is inconsistent because the Prophet as well as other parts of the Quran teach that everyone is equal under God (218).

Finally Al-Hibri concludes stating that her aim was to ‘dispel major misconceptions’ about women and Islam from the perspective of an Arab Muslim woman. To this end the article was successful and brought to the fore things about Islam that would not be known by many in ‘western’ culture who condemn Islam without knowing about it fully. Additionally, it is an empowering read from a solely female perspective as the passages are interpreted to be fair to women and can be done so without much argument, thus showing her original aim of discussing how Islam itself is not patriarchal but that patriarchy has warped the true message of Islam in some aspects and places. However it is also specified in the conclusion that religion is not only a ‘patriarchal tool’ (219) and that her aim was to present Islam from a female understanding of the past without the interpretations of the ‘western colonizer’ (219).

This is a line that many Muslim women’s activists and theologians take up extensively while presenting rereading of specific Qur’anic verses that have been interpreted in a patriarchal manner. Sadiyyah El-Sheikh from South Africa suggests to systematically unread patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an in what she calls ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. Amina Wadud, an African-American convert to Islam has given us examples of rereading of verses (this will be

extended with examples during the lecture) concerning the (alleged) beating of women, the creation of men and women and the ejection from paradise.

Imagining the 'actual' Islam and the 'actual' Europe

When Safet Bectovic published a book on five Muslim philosophers in Denmark, the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten published a review that concluded, '[T]he weakness of the book (...) is that it is not about the actually existing Islam. It is based on an imagined and idealised version (...)'. The nice stories of moderate Islam he presented were just not the 'real' Islam for Jyllands Posten, the newspaper that had published the Mohammed cartoons which stirred the 'cartoon crisis' in 2006. Bectovic, a Danish citizen of Bosnian origin was accused of glossing over the nasty aspects and presenting only exceptions, while most of the review was used to explain how ugly the 'actual' Islam was – including gender issues.

The concept of the semantics of the actual (Semantik des Eigentlichen) is very useful to understand this agreement between patriarchal Muslims and those who just discovered women's rights as an important issue. Heiner Bielefeldt, a German philosopher and "Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief" for the United Nations applied the 'semantics of the actual' to the discourse on Islam: First there is an image of 'real' Islam, which in its essence and core is claimed to be violent, anti-liberal and misogynist. This is, what in the dominant discourse is called the 'actual Islam'. The lines of this discourse have been established long time ago and can be traced back into history, back to Martin Luther and even further.

Whatever is presented in counter-narratives to show a differentiated picture tends to be neatly fitted into the image of 'real' Islam, which in its essence and core is claimed to be violent, anti-liberal and misogynist. With this figuration, moderate, successful and integrated Muslims can be easily portrayed as either skilful deceptions or exceptions.

An example of this is the media perception of the mixed gender prayer led by Amina Wadud, an African-American Muslim woman, in 2005. In Germany, the idea that women could—according to 'proper' Islam—not lead prayers or teach Imams was introduced into the public debate only by the coverage of this event. Those who supported the stereotype of the misogynist Islam were quoted as opinion leaders and 'real' interpreters of Islam, and therefore, the picture of the 'real' Islam remained untouched or was even affirmed. Amina Wadud became a symbolic figure, portrayed as a victim of patriarchal Islamic scholars. Even though she had proven, that she had a group of Muslim women and men who literally stood behind her in prayer.

As a result, Muslims frequently experience that either their liberalism or belonging to a European state or their Islamic identity is questioned. Often in an implicit (but sometimes in a very explicit) way, it is assumed that the 'liberal' attitude or 'integrated' lifestyle of a Muslim must be doubtful or potentially endangered, or the Muslim is suspected of not being a 'real' Muslim. Any other Muslim needs to be described as not anti-liberal (i.e. moderate, liberal or progressive) or his or her Muslimness is highlighted, while the norm, the 'actual' Islam, is portrayed as being embodied by the Taliban or preachers from Saudi Arabia. Only 'extremist'

or at least ‘conservative’ Muslims, recognisable as anti-liberal according to the figuration of the liberal in this context, are accepted as ‘real’ representatives of Islam.

The counter-image to the ‘actual’ Islam is the ‘actual’ Europe, Germany or France etc., which implies that these societies have achieved gender justice; democratic participation of all citizens; equal treatment of religious, racialised or ethnicised minorities and consequently do not need to engage any longer in substantial discussions for instance about gender inequality within dominant structures. This seems to be a main function of the discursive ‘actual’ Islam, to cover up deficiencies with respect to values that are largely presented as universal and European; for instance, to cover up the on-going exclusion of women in European societies from positions of decision making.

Therefore, even the most positive and convincing presentation of Islam or Muslims or their contribution to present societies will not change the basic assumptions of the ‘actual’ Islam. This discursive figure is able to re-establish the image of Islam by selectively calling any unfitting cases exceptions or simply not true. The core of the image of Islam as incompatible is not touched but even strengthened with every positive individual or example that is presented. And this discourse has an important function – which, by the way is not necessarily helping any women to better their situation:

In such debates Islam becomes a mirror that serves as the counterpart to how the beautiful self is imagined, as Sarah Bracke the Belgian scholar of Gender Studies explains. It is the background in front of which the ideal European society with equality between men and women, freedom of religion and lifestyle, tolerance towards sexual orientation and equal treatment of racialised and ethnicised individuals and communities can be drawn. These are invoked values that claim to portray a consensus in European democracies. But often they are not followed sincerely by those who ask the alleged newcomers to subscribe to these values.

Let us look at gender equality as an example: Especially conservative politicians, who for decades refused to engage in discussions on issues of gender equality, now present themselves as saviors of women’s rights and pedagogues of liberal gender norms towards Muslims, which are correspondingly portrayed as backward. While speaking of the Muslim woman’s suffering, however, women’s suffering is not addressed. Even victims of domestic violence and oppression in Muslim families are not always helped by the activities undertaken in their name.

Simultaneously, those who demand gender equality within Muslim communities mostly shy away from addressing deficits concerning gender equality in ‘western’ societies like different payment of women for the same work; of forced prostitution and trafficking; or structural exclusion of women from leading positions in academia, economy and politics. This leads to a reformulation of the main challenges concerning gender equality in which discrepancies between men and women within the dominant society are proclaimed minor discrepancies in relation to the main difference of culture. This way, the focus on the oppression of Muslim women is (mis)used to preserve the status quo.

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