

# **Feminism Women Activism & Human Rights**

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Women hold the half of the sky. In other words, fifty percent of the world population is women. The question is, whether this strength of women is reflected in the real life activities and actions in our family, socio-cultural, political and national events or even in the wider field of international arena. When women raise their voice to assert their rights, they are being dubbed as feminist. How fair is this? As the saying goes, a child is not breastfed unless screams. Women are not likely to get their rights unless they raise their voice. This is true in the sense that the human civilization in our time gave attention to the poor that it deserves when the Marxists came forward with an all-pervading philosophy not suitable for the human nature. But nonetheless the contribution of Marxists cannot be denied in the sense that it was able to draw the attention of the conscious people to reflect on the issue of poverty, made them think and contemplate, and give their considered opinion on how to salvage people in abject poverty. I would, at this stage, like to emphasize that Muslims to day are giving attention to women issues, and their rights, now a days, are considered human rights because of the pressure and weight of women groups and they being vocal about their rights.

In the Muslim society it is not new that women raise their voice to get their due shares and rights. During the life time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), when men got more time and opportunity to learn about Islam compared to women, Madina's women complained, on one occasion, that the men were outstripping them and requested the noble Prophet to set aside additional time to instruct them so that they could catch up men, allot them special time so that they could learn more about Islam and the Prophet accepted their demand. During the caliphate of Umar al Khattab (may God be pleased with him) women raised their voice against fixing of the *mahr*, dower as because Quran did not fix a sealing on the dower amount and the Caliph conceded to the demand of women. Nobody then objected as to why women were vocal and no one did find anything wrong in it and the women of Madina were not labeled as feminist.

It should be understood that men and women together constitute one entity, a single whole. They are complementary to each other. None is complete without the other. Unilateral decision by either runs the risk of committing wrong and reach conclusion not helpful for the welfare and onward march and progress of humankind.

The perception and vision of women are sometimes different than men will be clear from the following two incidents I shall narrate here. In 1997 I had been to Chittagong Hill Tracts, a hilly area, and found that people are using gas propelled

automobiles, which can move faster, popularly known in Bangladesh as CNG and there is no *rikshaw*, a locally produced cart pulled by man, which cannot move faster. I told my wife that the salary of the government officials posted in Chittagong Hill Tracts is same as that of the government officials in capital Dhaka and therefore we can use automobile in Dhaka like the government officials posted in Chittagong Hill Tracts with or within our salary. My wife however immediately pointed out that an automobile driver can lift a young girl as it has speed, can move faster and can change location in no time to hide whereas a *rikshaw* puller cannot as it has no speed, cannot move faster and cannot change location in a short time to hide. How would our young daughter use gas propelled automobile unless law and order situation improves and there is no possibility of her lifting, she asked?

In 2003 I myself and my wife, for admission of my daughter, went to visit a private university in Dhaka, whose environment I thought is congenial for girl students. I assumed that my daughter can study four years honors course in Computer Science in this university. But then my wife, who is now a retired Professor of Economics, asked a faculty member of the Department of Computer Science of that university as to how many girl students it has on the second year in Computer Science and when the reply came that it has only five girl students, she changed her mind and decided not to admit our daughter on the ground that during the four years honors course all the girl students will get married and discontinue studies. How can our daughter alone study with the boys in the class, she wanted to know? She mentioned that while she studied Economics at the Dhaka University there were so many girl students at the honors level and most of them got married and during the masters there were only a few left.

What lesson we can draw from the two incidents. The lesson is: It is important that we involve women in the decision making process otherwise we run the risk of reaching inappropriate decision. Women perception and angle are at times different than men and therefore while formulating and evaluating policies women must be associated at all levels. There is nothing wrong on the part of our womenfolk demanding that they be associated with every institutions that decide issues affecting the future of the members of the family, society and state and their demand must not be sidetracked labeling them as feminist. Women empowerment is not a matter of feminism but related to the overall development of the community. If women are educated, a nation is educated, that means educated women will change the face of a nation. If women changes', a society changes. Of all the benefits of promoting girls' education, possibly the most important factor is that it improves the country's long-term economic growth that ultimately lifts a nation out of poverty. Indeed the status of women is inseparably linked with the status of a nation.

But it needs to be addressed as to who is responsible for the rise of feminism in the Muslim World, even if we look into it from an unjustified negative perspective. In most of the conferences held in Bangladesh by the Islamists, women are sidelined. Sitting arrangements in the conferences are such that women have to sit in back

chairs and rear rows. The prayer area marked for the women in the Bangladesh national mosque Baitul Mukarram is not as lighted as the area used by men. In most of the mosques and graveyards in Bangladesh women are not allowed to enter using the alibi of preserving the pristine environment which has nothing to do with the teachings of Islam. The condition of women in Bangladesh is so bad that recently the eyes of a Dhaka University teacher were gouged out by her engineer husband and she has become totally blind. According to a recent study conducted by Care-Bangladesh violence against women costs Bangladesh Taka 144,110 million a year, which is equivalent to 2.13 percent of Bangladesh GDP. Taka 140,845.60 million is spent at individual and family levels on addressing violence against women, while Taka 1372.40 million at the state level and Taka 1500 million at the non-state level at a time when one U.S. Dollar is equivalent to approximately BDT 77.15. Another problem in Bangladesh is increasing demand of dower-gift by the bridegroom from the family of the bride with the consequential rise of physical abuse of women and breakdown of family. Only a few days before, an educated young working girl divorced her schoolteacher husband before bridal function was over when the bridegroom supported the demand of dower-gift by his family. This incident socked the nerve of the whole nation.

In some areas of Yemen women, in the name of using *nikab*, are even forced use leather mask to wrap up their face. Women in the Masjid an Nawawi, Prophet's Mosque at the time of Prophet Muhammad prayed together using the same hall room and now women have been segregated in the Prophet's Mosque at Madina.

In March 11 2002 a fire broke out at girls' high school at Makkah. *Mutawa*, religious police, tried to stop men from reaching to the girls'. *Mutawa* forced some of the girls, who escaped the burning building, to return because, what they said, girls were not appropriately covered. In the process fifteen schoolgirls had suffocated or burned to death and more than forty were injured. The ordeal of the *mutawa*'s role in the girls' school fire surprised and shocked the whole world, not only smack the Saudi national nerve. When the firemen arrived, they were obstructed by the *mutawa* in performing their duties particularly at a time when all the female students were locked up in a corridor upstairs. Eventually the police arrived and forcibly overruled the orders of *mutawa* and firemen started the rescue operation. It is not understood why the Saudi *mutawa* behaved like that when during the time of Prophet Muhammad women participated in rescuing the injured men from the battle field.

In Saudi Arabia there is nothing in the law preventing women from obtaining driver's licenses. There is no tenet in the Quran for denying women this right. Women to assert their rights drove around downtown Riyadh. In that, women had not broken any law – there is no official ban on driving, just the weight of customs. There is nothing in the Quran or authentic Traditions of the Prophet that prohibit women from driving a car. Saudi decision has nothing to do with Islam. It is only an administrative decision of the ruler.

In another incident the husband of an Afghan wife, who went to perform hajj, objected, when Jeddah Immigration Official asked the lady to uncover her face for the purpose of identification of the passport holder, saying if any official in Afghanistan would have asked his wife to uncover her face such official would have to cross a sword, meaning a declaration of war, before demanding such compliance. Such attitudes have nothing to do with Islam but peculiar practices of Afghan tribal culture. Honor killing in the tribal areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan and parts of Jordan is the outcome of ignorance and is against the teachings of Islam. This is also true about forced marriage or more precisely marriage without willing consent.

Women circumcision or female genital mutilation in Egypt and other countries is also a local custom and nothing to do with Islam. We must not dub women, when they raise their voice against such practices as honor killing, female circumcision or even car driving as feminist for that is not going to solve the problem.

In fact injustice meted out to women in various Muslim countries are of different kinds, these reflect the peculiar culture of those counties, these cannot be generalized and the examples mentioned in this article are in no way exhaustive.

In fact corrupting tribal customs and traditions in other words local culture, in many parts of the Muslim World, are subverting Islamic teachings. Indeed in tribal societies cultural traditions work against change and some tribal customs and traditions have sustained in the name of Islam. Each Muslim country has its own unique cultural peculiarities and while dealing with each community, we have to be careful and respectful to the mentality and emotions of that people. While working to change culture, we must follow different prescriptions for different people. The question is how to work with culture rather than against it. In fact cultural change happens often slowly - a long drawn process and it takes time to make a way. But when women try to raise voice against malpractices, they are being identified and stereotyped as feminist. The women's empowerment is not something new to the Muslim states; nor is it contradictory to the tenets of Islamic faith, rather outmoded attitudes towards women prevalent in societies across the Muslim World are rooted in customs and traditions not required by religion. Either we change ourselves or change will come against our will, against our culture and traditions. We need to disentangle cultural traditions from religious tenets and must separate religion from oppressive cultural practices. Nowhere the advancement of women's rights has been easy because it collides with the culture. Culture is immutable and even sometimes is a barrier for Islamic change.

Many problems existing in the Muslim countries are the result of misogynistic approach towards the problem for women are not taken into confidence while discussing these issues. There are ample rights for women within Islam, if only patriarchal practices and interpretation can be stripped away and this can be done only if women are allowed a space in public life.

*Ijtihad*, the process of arriving at new interpretations of Islamic law through critical reasoning, rather than blindly following the views of the past scholars, by a qualified legal scholar using independent reasoning to come up with a solution that believed to be consistent with the spirit of Islam and *maqasid al shariah*, objective of the *shariah*, would be profoundly helpful in answering contemporary questions. It calls for a more enlightened interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence through the process of independent reasoning.

Islamic reform requires a return to fundamental faith and a more contextual analysis of Texts and giving up literal interpretation. We must make difference between the universal values and the context that was specific to seventh-century Arabia. We have to make necessary interpretation of *shariah* keeping in view the changing environment and eternal elasticity of the Text, which God kept open.

We need a more egalitarian interpretation of women rights and this requires an organization solely devoted to this cause. We have to give up our closed view and open up our mind. Also we have to distinguish religion from tradition and this needs in-depth study. Misogynist interpretation of Islam is rooted in patriarchal tradition, not religion. We have to make distinction between Islam and patriarchal traditions and question the authenticity of various rulings used to oppress women. Indeed Islam has been used to repress women in many societies at different periods of history. Injustice is due to the old traditions and wrong ideas that wear the garb of Islam. Unfortunately traditional Islamic scholars sometimes used flawed logic to justify their point. Correct understanding of the Quran would never allow such practices as polygamy, wife beating, and child marriage which modern scholars of Islam have rightly pointed out.

It needs to be understood that the Texts of the Quran and incontestable Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad only constitute the Divine Law, rest are human, man made. We therefore see huge diversity in the Muslim laws in various parts of the Muslim World and these are not necessarily part of the body of Divine Law, the *shariah*. Indeed Islam has many faces. *Ijtihad* does not presuppose a single view as these are human judgments and none of these have any bearing like the incontestable Texts. Diversity among Islamic intellectual thought is proof of Islamic system of being dynamic and everlasting and its capacity and elasticity to adjust to space and time.

The question is why I am using such words as patriarchal practices or patriarchal traditions and misogynist interpretation of Islam or misogynistic approach. As I said earlier that if women are not involved in the decision making process, the conclusions are bound to be one sided. As women by nature, every so often, have different angles to look at things. If they are not involved in studying and evaluating wide-ranging issues and problems, we are likely to miss various points which deserve considerations and we may commit mistakes. Indeed there is no woman member in the OIC Fiqh Council. Now if we look at the legal opinions of the past scholars, we find that while deciding different issues they did not consult women to

ascertain their views. In my humble opinion it would not be wrong and I shall not commit excesses if I suggest that the past scholars might have committed mistakes while formulating legal opinions, although it was not their intentions, because they did not consult women experts while formulating legal opinions affecting the future of Muslim community. This has further been proved by the various research works been done by the women Islamic scholars of our time, who are now and again unjustly stereotyped as modern Islamic feminist. There is no argument of labeling all their works as grossly wrong rather these research works deserve serious consideration by us. There is no point of denying validity of some of their works although these might contradict with the opinions and rulings of the past scholars. I would ask my audience to particularly study such notable works as 'Women and Gender in Islam' by renowned Egyptian scholar Leila Ahmed, 'In Search of Islamic Feminism' by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, 'Feminism & Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives' by well-known Saudi scholar Mai Yamini, 'Veil: Modesty Privacy and Resistance' by Fadwa El Guindi, 'Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical & Modern Stereotypes' by distinguished scholar Katherine Bullock, 'Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran' by reputed Pakistani scholar Asma Barlas, and even the 'Quran and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective' by celebrated scholar Amina Wadud to name a few. Reading of these and such other works will open up our mind, will help to change our attitude, widen our vision and help us to understand the perception of women. It is important that we study the only available annotation and interpretation of Quran in English by a woman - 'The Holy Quran: Translation with Commentary' by eminent Iranian woman scholar Tahereh Saffarzadeh. This will help us to understand the women psyche, insight and vision. It should be understood that the rise of Islamic feminism and the notion that women's rights and Islam can be compatible has thrown critical challenge against the traditional orthodoxy, prevailing and accepted view, and their religious legitimacy. However we need not to carry western cultural baggage. Muslims can pursue women rights from within and they must engage critically and constructively with their heritage in its own terms and must not adopt alien culture altogether. Indeed women across the Muslim World for the first time are deeply engaged in studying the Text through Quran study circles, television and radio discussions and even through the Internet. It would therefore be appropriate if we identify and recognize the Islamic female awakening as Islamic female activism rather than as Islamic feminism or name it as Islamic call for women's advancement. However it needs to be realized that there is nothing wrong in the term Islamic feminism per se. Muslim women working for their advancement within the acknowledged limits of *shariah*, the Divine Law as against human interpretation and Muslim heritage are indeed doing laudable works.

While concluding, it needs to be noted here that during the last several decades woman has largely progressed in many parts of the Muslim World in such areas as education, employment, politics etc. which has not been talked about here as that is not the subject matter of discussion. #

\* The article is the summary of a speech delivered at a seminar on 'Issues Related to Feminism' organized by Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought (BIIT) on Tuesday 23 August 2011. .