

ISLAM AND WOMEN'S (SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE) RIGHTS

Interview with Dr. Riffat Hassan, Professor Emerita, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Dr. Riffat Hassan is a Professor Emerita of Humanities at the University of Louisville and a leading Islamic feminist scholar of the Qur'an. Before coming to Louisville she taught at prestigious universities including Harvard University, Oklahoma State



University, the University of Pennsylvania, Villanova University, and the Iliff School of Theology.

Dr. Hassan's publications include eight books, 58 book chapters, 52 journal articles, and 85 articles in newspapers, on the topics such

as Muhammad Iqbal, Women in Islam, Islam and Interreligious Dialogue, and Human Rights in Islam. She has made presentations in settings ranging from local churches to UN conferences on Population and Development at Cairo (1994) and the 4th World Conference on Women at Beijing (1995) where she was a major speaker.

Internationally acknowledged as a pioneer of

Islamic feminist theology, Dr. Hassan is also recognized as an activist who has done much to promote women's rights in Muslim societies and to combat "honour crimes" against women in Pakistan. In 1999, she founded the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan (INRFVVP), a non-profit organisation with a worldwide membership, which has played a noteworthy role in highlighting the issue of violence against girls and women, particularly with reference to "honour crimes".

*Throughout her career, Dr. Hassan has participated in inter-religious dialogue at every level – local, regional, national, international. She has been particularly involved in interreligious dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims. In 2003, she was awarded the **Distinguished International Service Award** by the College of Arts and Sciences, the University of Louisville. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Dr. Hassan won two major grants awarded by the U.S. Department of State, for developing and implementing peace-building programmes (2002-2009) involving eight exchange visits between South Asian Muslim religious scholars, preachers and community activists and their American counterparts. In February 2015, Dr. Hassan wrote an **Open letter to Muslims Jews and Christians** for the Uppsala University Theology Conference. The letter addressed a number of issues relating to human sexuality.*

Riffat Hassan graduated with double honours in English and Philosophy from the University of Durham in England, and obtained a Ph.D. from the same university. Her thesis focused on the philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal.

Some people are of the opinion that the universality of human rights (including sexual and reproductive health and rights) requires a secular presentation. Do human rights, as enshrined in the international agreements such as the ICPD Programme of Action, have their equivalent in Islam?

Muslims regard the Qur'an as the highest source of authority and they believe it is the literal word of God transmitted through the agency of Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad. Qur'anic verses strongly affirm fundamental human rights and put emphasis on the right

to life, right to respect, right to freedom, right to justice, right to choice, right to protection from ridicule, right to privacy, right to acquire knowledge and so on and so forth. There is no specific statement in the Qur'an about family planning. However, its teachings provide guidance on how this issue, and other contemporary issues, may be resolved within the ethical framework of normative Islam. Considering the socio-cultural, economic and political conditions of much of the present-day Muslim world where fertility rates are amongst the highest, the need for family planning may be regarded as self-evident. The right to use contraception, especially by vulnerable and disadvantaged groups whose lives are characterised by striking poverty and illiteracy, should be seen in the light of the Qur'anic vision of what an Islamic society should be like. Therefore it should be considered as a fundamental human right.

In this regard, rights within the framework of normative Islam are compatible with contemporary human rights discourses. However, the issue remains where these rights come from and what authority is behind them. From the Islamic point of view the source of rights is God. The Qur'an tells us that God created human beings in the best and most perfect form and that human beings are supposed to be God's deputies on earth, they are supposed to be doing God's work on earth. In order for human beings to fulfil their mandate, they need to enjoy fundamental human rights that are necessary for them if they are to exercise their full humanity.

It does not mean that the rights which are enshrined, for instance, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are rejected by Muslims. However, according to the Qur'an, these rights came into existence when God created human beings in order for them to realise their human potential. Therefore they have a different source of authority. If a government gives you rights, this government can also take your rights away because the supremacy rests with a group of people or an agency. However if the authority is vested in God, rights cannot be taken away. They can be violated but cannot be abolished. This is

the position of Islam in general regarding human rights.

In your view Islam upholds the principle of equality between men and women. However, the way Islam has been practiced by some Muslim societies might give the opposite impression.

In my writings I have differentiated between the Islamic principles as you find them in the Qur'an, and Muslim culture which is very different. Many rights given in the Qur'an are not actually practised, especially in the context of women. No religion, be it Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism, develops in a vacuum. When it is revealed, the religious principles are filtered through the cultural lens that is already in existence. In the context of Islam, the youngest of the world's major religions, the teachings of the Qur'an are filtered through the existing cultural beliefs of the Jewish, Christian, Hellenistic, and pre-Islamic Bedouin Arab traditions.

All the major five religions of the world developed in patriarchal cultures which were male-centred and did not regard women as equal to men. This has led to a clash between the affirmation of equality that you find in the religious teachings and the practice. For example Jesus was a very strong feminist and he defended the rights of women. However, if you look at the developments of Christianity, both in terms of the Catholic tradition and the Protestant tradition, you will find it is very heavily laden with anti-women elements from the beginning to the 20th century. Similarly in Muslim societies you will find the discrepancy between - on the one hand - the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, who was a very staunch defender of the rights of women, and - on the other - the patriarchal cultural values prevailing in these societies.

There is a profound relationship between religion and culture and when you start looking at religion through the lens of culture, which most people do, everything can be misinterpreted, including scriptures and holy texts.

Besides culture, there seem to be inconsistencies and contradictions between various sources of Islamic tradition which might undermine the image of Islam as a female-friendly religion.

The Qur'an has absolute authority as God's word and is therefore the primary source of Islam. In addition there is also the Prophetic Tradition, which consists of two parts, the Sunnah and the Hadith. The first is the practice of the Prophet Muhammad, what he did in his life. The latter is the oral traditions that are attributed to him. The Hadith literature has been the lens through which the Qur'an has been interpreted through the years. Important as it is to the Islamic tradition, every aspect of the Hadith literature has been surrounded by controversy, especially in regards to its authenticity.

In the 7th century which marks the beginning of Islam and the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Arabs started expanding out of the Arabian Peninsula and, within a hundred years, they created a huge empire from Spain to India. At that time the Arabs were a nomadic society and did not have any experience of governance. Thus in the conquered territories, they encountered a lot of daily challenges. This has led them to ask the question: *"What would the Prophet have done if he had been here?"* In response to this question, they started collecting all his sayings, from whichever source they could find, and within a hundred years there were millions of sayings collected.

Imam Bukhari, who is regarded as the greatest of Hadith scholars, examined over 60 000 "ahadith" (plural of "hadith") in detail and authenticated less than 3,000. It has been the consensus of Muslim scholars from his time till today that the vast majority of the Hadith literature are not the words of the Prophet. Professor Fazlur Rahman wrote in one of his books that the most of ahadith were actually fabricated by the classical scholars themselves who thought that they knew the mind of the Prophet very well.

The issue arises why these anti-women ahadith have been emphasised and the reason is because the culture was anti-women. People always tend

to adopt the views and sayings that support their cultural attitude and cultural beliefs. Therefore from the scholarly point of view the ahadith that are used against women can be very easily disputed and rejected. Though, as far as common Muslims are concerned, they are going to accept them because this is in accordance with their cultural practices.

I have researched and written that there is a conflict between a number of ahadith and the Qur'an, especially in reference to the creation of woman. Some of them say that woman was created from the "crooked" rib of Adam, though there is no support for this in the Qur'an. The Qur'an has 33 passages about human creation and in all of them it talks about the creation of all humanity, it does not refer specifically to the creation of man and woman. It talks about the creation of *an-nas, al-insan and bashar*, all meaning generic terms for humanity. There is definitely inconsistency between some of these very popular ahadith and the Qur'an.

The Sunnah does not really enter into this discussion because throughout his life, the Prophet was highly respectful of women. We do not find in his own conduct any discrimination against women, if anything he was very protective of women.

Reportedly, the Prophet Muhammad married Aisha when she was six or seven-year-old which is used to justify child marriage.

According to one of the very famous hadith of Islam, which is generally accepted, the Prophet said: *"Learn half of faith (Deen) from me and half of it from Aisha."* Aisha is known in the Islamic tradition as a great scholar. Thousands of ahadith are narrated by her. She is regarded as a renowned authority on the Hadith. If the Prophet had married Aisha when she was six or seven, by the time he had died she would have been fifteen or sixteen-year-old and there is no way at this age Aisha could have become a great scholar. Moreover, Aisha was a daughter of Abu Bakr who was the oldest and closest friend of the Prophet.

There is a lot of historical evidence that Aisha was not a child at the time of her marriage to the Prophet. We do not know the exact age but she was closer to the age of twenty rather than six or seven. The allegation that Muhammad married Aisha when she was a young child has been used to justify child marriage. However, it is just a myth that has been created and used against women.

Similarly, other practices that occur in Muslim countries have been used to reinforce gender inequalities and violate women's rights. One of them is honour killings.

In the pre-Islamic Arabia, the Arabs used to live on the desert which had its own culture. In Arabic two words are used to refer to honour, one is called *sharaf* and the other *'ird*. *Sharaf*, similarly to the English word *honour*, stands for a quality of a noble person. *'Ird* is a special kind of honour that belongs only to men, though it can be compromised or affected by the conduct of women, if a woman or a girl from your own tribe engages in behaviour regarded as socially inappropriate, especially in the sexual context. Given the desert conditions, different tribes engaged in frequent battles over resources. If a girl was abducted by an enemy and she was raped, this would bring dishonour to the tribe.

In this pre-Islamic Bedouin Arab society female infanticide was practiced and they would frequently kill their daughters upon birth. There is a direct reference to it in the Qur'an itself which mentions that an Arab man became very angry and depressed when he learnt that a daughter was born to him. He feared that if anything bad happened to his daughter, it would be a source of deep shame for him and his family. Therefore, to protect his honour he decided to kill his girl-child.

Equally, there was the economic reason. The desert environment was very harsh and the Arabs had to survive on very little. Therefore supporting many children was a source of great economic hardship. Since sons were seen as assets and daughters as liabilities, female infanticide became a common practice.

The Qur'an abolished female infanticide. However, the notion that honour belongs to men and that women could put it in jeopardy still exists in every Muslim country in the world. Pakistan, where I come from, is the country with the greatest number of honour crimes. What happens there is that thousands of girls and women are either killed or very brutally mutilated in the name of the so-called honour. The research I have done has demonstrated that a lot of these acts which are committed in the name of the so-called honour have nothing to do with honour. If a man wants to kill his wife, he can just kill her and say that he saw her with another man and this is literally the end of the story. He probably will not be punished at all and even if he gets some punishment, it will be a light one because the culture approves of this kind of behaviour.

Some years ago in the province of Balochistan in Pakistan which is a tribal society, several women were literally buried alive. This issue came up in the Pakistani Parliament where a Member of Parliament from that region was asked to comment on the case. He said that nobody had the right to question him since it was his tribal culture. His attitude indicated that violence against women can be justified on cultural grounds. This is just one of the examples but there are, of course, others as well. If a girl gets married to a man without the consent of her father, there are many cases when the two are killed and it is being labelled as an honour crime. A great number of such cultural practices which were abolished by the Qur'an still continue to exist.

Would female genital mutilation be one of such practices?

The issue of honour crimes emerged from Arab tribal culture and then spread throughout the Muslim world. In the case of female genital mutilation, most of these practices were initially found in the valley of the river Nile and the neighbouring regions and of course it has spread as well. Female genital mutilation, which is practised by people of various religions in the Nile valley and elsewhere, has no connection with Islam. However, female sexuality has been regarded by men in many cultures as a great threat. Therefore men

introduced many rules to control female sexuality and one brutal way was to reduce a woman's sexual desire through female genital mutilation. The source of this practice is not religion but the need to control female sexuality. Though, where it is practiced by Muslims, religion is frequently invoked in support.

What do you regard as the most burning issue that should be addressed when it comes to sexual and reproductive health and well-being of Muslim women?

Nowadays all major governments of the world, international donor agencies and NGOs are very concerned with the empowerment of women. Especially the empowerment of Muslim women is very high on their agenda. What they mainly consider is seen in terms of education, health, economic independence and political participation.

I distinguish between two aspects of empowerment, one is external empowerment and the other is internal empowerment. External empowerment has to do with statistics; how many women are educated, what is their health status, economic position and so on and so forth. If you look at the issue of women's empowerment in the external sense, you can certainly say there has been an improvement since the ICPD and Beijing.

If you look at the internal empowerment, the self-image of women, their self-esteem and self-confidence that derives from cultural and religious attitudes and practices, the picture is very different. In every Muslim community and Muslim society I am familiar with - with no exception - it is regarded as self-evident that men are superior to women. Of course there are variations between societies - some are harsher while some are more liberal, than others.

Keep in mind that a large proportion of Muslim women worldwide have three characteristics; they are poor, illiterate and live in the village. These women have very low self-esteem and if you approach one of them and start discussing human rights, she will not understand because she does not know what it means to be human. She does not have this level of consciousness to

be aware of her human rights. From my point of view as an educator, the most serious issue is this internal empowerment of Muslim women who do not realise they have the right to life, dignity and choice.

My mission in life has been to educate Muslim women and for this reason I have travelled the world. In my view Muslim women need to realise that God created them equal and they have the same rights and the same responsibilities as men. They have the duty to develop themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually. If they can be made to believe this, they will begin to fight for their rights. Imagine, these girls are married at the age of eleven or twelve with no healthcare and endless pregnancies. The cycle of oppression is unending because they are not brought up as human beings and therefore they do not have a sense of the dignity of the human person.

One thing that keeps these women going is that they have very strong faith in Islam, they believe in God and his mercy and compassion. At the same time they are conditioned to believe that Islam has mandated that they cannot talk to a man and that they do not have the right to disobey male authority. Islam is used to constrain and limit them. A part of my mission as an educator has been to show Muslim women that Islam can be a source of liberation if they understand Islam correctly. If they do not understand the religion correctly and confuse it with cultural practices of Muslims, they are going to be oppressed. I know many Muslim women who are educated and work as lawyers, doctors, et cetera, but they have very low self-esteem because they are not free from the cultural biases. Therefore they are always feeling afraid, insecure, guilty and ashamed.

I attach a lot of significance to this internal state of Muslim women because if women become strong internally, they can survive and attain dignity. But if they are destroyed from within, as this is the case for the majority of Muslim women, then it is very difficult to change the status quo.

Many development projects on women's empowerment, family planning, et cetera, fail to succeed in the Muslim communities, especially in the more conservative settings. In your view, what factors should be taken into account in order to design community responsive programmes?

If you look at the origin of the United Nations, it developed against the backdrop of great human conflicts. Therefore the framers of the UN Charter understandably wanted to distance themselves from religion, which historically contributed to divisiveness and unrest in the world. There was a certain bias in the UN itself against religion, in fact not only religion but also ethics and culture and if you look at the early UN documents, they do not make any reference to these issues.

As contrary as it might seem, nowadays, the most serious violations of human rights take place in the countries considered to be the most religious, for example, in Latin America and the Muslim world. However, the anti-religious attitudes of the United Nations put into question the "universality" of the human rights notion. Let me give you an example. Imagine I travel to a village in Indonesia and I am telling a Muslim woman who is living there, "My Sister, I am bringing you liberation in the name of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and I read out the Declaration, do you think it is going to make any sense to her? There is nothing wrong with the Declaration but it is just not relevant to her life and experience. However, if I tell her that "God is merciful, God created you, God wants you to be healthy and educated and wants you to contribute to the society" and I quote the Qur'an, it is going to be meaningful to her because this is the world in which she lives. I strongly believe that we need to liberate and empower people within the universe in which they live. This has been a source of argument between me and many secular leaders in Pakistan who do not want to talk about religion at all.

Following the Iranian Revolution a lot of Western donor agencies wanted to stop the spread of the Islamic Revolution by creating NGOs in the Muslim world. I am particularly aware of what happened in Pakistan, where a lot of money was given to

women's NGOs which were then encouraged to take an anti-religious position. They were told to promote women's liberation but not on religious grounds. They were encouraged to empower women through the use of social and scientific categories that are part of Western feminist theory.

The issue again is that this is not relevant to Muslim women's life. You can adopt these secular approaches and be successful to some degree for example by giving women resources for education. However, in terms of making a personal and cultural transformation in these women's lives which are very deeply rooted in religion, this is not going to work if religion is excluded from the discourse. This is a very serious issue in terms of donor and development programmes. If they exclude Islam and want to proceed simply in terms of secular categories of analysis, they cannot really reach the great bulk of Muslim women, especially, given that a large number of them do not come to classes, seminars and conferences because they are illiterate and live in a village.

Approaching Muslim women in the villages is a challenging task, especially given the cultural constraints of patriarchal societies in which they live. How do you practically go about reaching these women?

I am an academic and an activist but I do not live in a village and I am unable to access all of these millions of women who live in the rural areas. Therefore I have developed training of trainers programmes.

A few of them were implemented in Pakistan. In 2009, I selected around 25 to 35 social workers from a government department in Pakistan and I ran an intensive course on women's rights in the Qur'an to prepare them. These trainers would then go to the villages and talk to the women. I trained both men and women. If you train women alone, they cannot go by themselves into that environment unless they are supported by men. In our trainings we discussed all the issues that are of relevance to women's well-being such as; the right to life, family planning, marriage and divorce and so on and so forth.

In 2010, I conducted another training programme for Afghanistan, when I trained a delegation of ten men and five women, of whom six were religious scholars ('Ulema) and the others were gender specialists and women's right activists. For this programme I developed a training manual which is based on forty years of my feminist theology research and analyses all women's issues in the Qur'anic texts. It was translated into Farsi and published twice in Afghanistan and I was happy to see that there was so much interest in this work.

If we could train such groups of trainers in all countries, we would have much greater success in empowering Muslim women. However, this involves locating sufficient financial support. My hope is that at least some of this support would come from Western aid agencies since it is difficult to find support for women's empowerment programmes within many Muslim countries where this is not regarded as a priority.

Speaking of Islamic feminist theology, you are widely regarded as an authority in the field. How would you describe this approach in brief?

In my view Islam is the matrix, the foundation, in which everything else is rooted. In my opinion it is incorrect to say there are many factors that influence the issue of women's empowerment and one of these factors is religion. I would not call religion a factor but the foundation in which everything else is rooted such as social, cultural, political and economic aspects. Take any Muslim society, for example Pakistan. If you start discussing women's education, you are going to be asked, "What does the Qur'an say about it, what does Islam say about it?" No matter what issues you bring up, you will be asked the same questions to which secular approaches are unable to provide an answer.

Religion is the ground because many people consider themselves deeply religious, especially when it comes to the issues of women. I am by all means in favour of supporting women, be it through secular or other approaches. However, in terms of practicality, real transformation and long term impact will not be actualised unless you take

into account the basic belief systems of Muslim women. Whenever you enter into any realm of activities, you need to find what you call "an entry point" and the best entry point with reference to Muslims is religion because it is central to their lives.

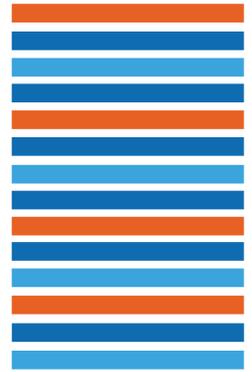
There are many ways of interpreting religion. I consider myself liberal and interpret Islam in a very universal way, though there are also very conservative Muslims that interpret Islam rigidly. In this sense, my situation has been rather difficult because my theology gets challenged from both sides. On the one hand, it is challenged by the secular people, who believe that all religions are negative, restrictive, imprisoning women and this, in my view, is not the case. It depends how you interpret religion. On the other hand, conservative Muslims do not want to accept and acknowledge that women have any problems. If you point out to them the issues of concern such as family planning, segregation, veiling, they do not agree with you. By and large, discussing religion is inevitable in many societies, not only in the Muslim world. If you leave religion out of discussions, you will be unable to reach a lot of people.

The Faith to Action Network's interview series aims to provide a multiplicity of perspectives on family health and wellbeing¹, presented in a non-partisan manner that invites open and thorough exploration. It intends to promote knowledge exchange and conceptual debate on diverse faith approaches to family health and wellbeing, recognizing diversity of opinions and promoting productive engagement across the differences. The opinions expressed in the interviews might not necessarily reflect the views of the Faith to Action Network, its Members or its Secretariat.

Credits

This interview was conducted by Dominika Jajkovicz

1. Our operational definition of family health and wellbeing includes: birth spacing, fertility awareness, safe motherhood, prevention of mother to child transmission, maternal and child health, age appropriate sexuality education, gender equity and prevention of female genital cutting, early marriage and all forms of gender based violence.



Faith to Action Network
Hatheru Court (Lavington)
Hatheru Road, Off Gitanga Road,
P.O Box 2438-00202 Nairobi-Kenya
Tel: +254 736 616 491/ 20 35723002
www.faithtoactionnetwork.org

