

Hayat, a Muslim feminist is a writer, poet, past director of the Boston Women's Foundation in Boston, Massachusetts, and coordinator for Isis International-Manila Beijing activities. Hayat shares her insights on the issue of feminism and Islam with Isis interviewer Luz Maria Martinez.

L: Tell me a bit about your background. Were you raised Muslim?

H: Yes. I was born a Muslim and grew up in a family that was Muslim. I watched my parents being Muslims and learned the principles of Islam from them but there was no training to be a Muslim. It just happened to be how my family worked. So when I was 12 or 13, I found something was missing from me and I started to learn about Islam by myself. I appreciate my parents for letting me discover the religious experience for myself. I studied Islam and made it a part of me but I also went through the usual, typical cycles, get to college and decide religion isn't for me. Give it all up. Then, you know how it is, you come back to it in a better way.

I'm a practicing Muslim. And I'm a practicing feminist. And I don't see a contradiction.

L: Tell me more why you don't see that contradiction.

H: Maybe it's because of the way I define feminism. I define feminism as an effort by all of us, particularly women, to create a world that is honorable and just. I feel that is exactly what Islam is trying to do as well. The spirit of the revelations in the Koran, is also about how to create a world that is honorable and just. So to me it's the same issue and the same struggle. So I find that it is not a contradiction at all.

L: Many fundamentalists see feminists as a threat to the Muslim way of life. Why is that?

H: Well, I don't know if they even know what feminism is. I think what they are mostly reacting to, the fundamentalists, is what they perceive to be western values being imposed on women. But.. I don't want to



ISLAM AS A SOURCE OF POWER

with Hayat Iman

be sitting here being an apologist for so-called fundamentalists. Let me talk, rather, about the western view of Islam because that is really more to the point. I've lived in the West long enough to be aware that there's a gut reaction as soon as they hear the name Islam.

For instance, when the West looks at the women's struggle within Islam, they tend to focus on the countries or the areas where they feel that women's conditions are really not up to par. However, why are they looking only at countries that they feel are doing negative things? Why not look at the spectrum of Muslim countries? If they did, there wouldn't be a way to stereotype. It's a very complex world with many cultures, many divisions, many other factors, particularly patriarchy, playing a role.

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L: There seems to be a lot of attacking of the feminist. Whether they be western feminist, or feminist of Muslim countries. I heard from feminist in Indonesia that they are having to struggle with the term feminist, because they are seen as children and men haters, family destroyers. What is the fear?

H: I think it's quite simple. I lived in the U.S. and no one is happy with the term feminism. Even liberated women are having a problem calling themselves feminist. I have never had that problem because I have been very clear from the very beginning what I believe feminism to be. There used to be a definition we all had about creating a world where oppression does not exist. But we are all victims of the tremendous exploitation of the word feminism by the media. You ask anybody what feminism means in the U.S. and they will have a shudder reaction as well, and that is because we have been co-opted. It's been taken away from us and turned to whatever extreme might have been in the women's movement. If you read *Backlash* by Susan Faludi, she talks of this defining description of all feminists burning their bras. But it never happened! This is one example of distortion. Its a way of trivializing women's serious demands for economic opportunity and equity.

I don't think there is a clear understanding of what it is (feminism) but if you take away that label and begin to talk about what women need, what women's rights are, the respect due to women, and the things that make us feel bad-if you talk about it in those terms, I can guarantee you in any discussion all over the world-women would say the same things.

L: Do you think we would be able to agree on the strategies to address those problems?

H: Most probably not. As it should be. For instance, in talking to the feminists here they also were talking about the fact that equal pay for equal work maybe the rallying cry in one society, it may not necessarily be where we are in another society. I think one of the key issues that keeps arising is where women should focus their work. Should it be within the family sphere? or outside the family sphere? I have a very clear opinion on that. First of all I disagree that women's role has lessened in families. All over the world, sometimes in the most difficult circumstances, it is women who are keeping families together. Secondly, I think women's input is desperately needed outside the family, in society itself.

What we need to do really is to create a construct that has our impact on it. That has the female perspective on it, the woman dimension. Participating in that society is not enough, we need to impact it enough to change the conditions.

L: Bringing it back to Muslim teachings, the teachings of the Koran, how would it be different if people followed the teachings?

H: I'd like to point out that the principles behind Islamic inheritance laws underlines equity and women's rights to own property. Islamic teachings encourage literacy for women and support economic activities by women. Now whether men allow them to pursue these activities is another matter.

The Koran is a written revelations that does two very important things: on one hand it gives you spiritual guidance, on the other hand, it gives you ways to conduct a society, That's where the problem comes in. Because in the formulas on how to conduct a society you can end up being very rigid about it. You must read the Koran as elucidating principles. It doesn't tell you exactly what you must do. I think one of the main lacks of the Muslim society is that we have never had the opportunity for women to interpret the Koran. We have never had a women's interpretation of how it should be understood.

L: So you think if woman had the opportunity to look at the teachings and interpret them through a women's perspective things would change profoundly-the way society would carry out?

H: If a woman had a chance to interpret the Koran it means already that things have changed. It means that the control is not only focused in one sphere. It is a more egalitarian society where a woman's view point is appreciated and welcomed.

In the Koran, you know, it says you shouldn't pray because you are menstruating. This has been interpreted as thinking of menstruation as something dirty, negative and unclean. Like in most societies men think of it that way. But I think of it in a totally different way. I think women are not supposed to be praying when they are menstruating because they are already doing God's work. They are already busy looking after themselves. It's like 'okay, you don't have to bother about it right now' because you are already involved in something that is holy.

L: Tell me more of how you see how the west is misinterpreting women's choices within Islam?

H: I am a Muslim woman and I have had so many western women tell me to my face 'yes you are oppressed', and they are sure of it and no matter how much I resist and say, well no I don't think I am, they just can't believe it.

L: Why do you think they say that?

H: Well that's a question they will have to interpret. But, I think it's flowing out of a general negative feeling of Islam. I have done a lot of reading and talking about it in the west. For instance if you read about a Muslim who may have shot a few people, the headline is bound to talk about his Muslim background. But you have murders everyday in all kind of religious settings, but you don't talk about the Hindus who are killing Buddhist or the Christians who are going around shooting people in McDonalds. You don't usually associate every negative action with a religion and blame the religion for it. But there is an unthinking way of doing that when it comes to Islam. I think people find Islam very threatening. In fact what is happening is that the capitalist society needs an enemy.

You have to keep up a hyped up sense of danger and enemy out there so you can sell your arms. The arms industry is very hidden but probably the largest business going in the world right now. This was satisfied during the Cold War. I now find that they are trying to do that by creating a new enemy. They are very consciously creating Islam as the enemy. I think any typical knee-jerk reactions women feel are somewhat broader than just the woman issue. Women must be careful that they are not getting sucked into this larger manipulation that is happening.

L: I guess in a way it does not behove us to get into arguments like you are a feminist of the West or you are a feminist of the south. Engaging in these conflicts among feminists regardless of religious background seem useless when it's an overall problem of men saying how the world is run and we (women) don't have much say on how it works and is developed.

H: I think women need to find comradeship with each other because what we want is a just and honorable society. If we can find enough allies in men who can support that process then we will be able to do it. Part of that is allowing women the opportunity to participate on this dialogue of justice. This is not a problem of a Muslim woman or a Christian women neither of a western feminist nor an eastern feminist. It is a world wide phenomena between men and women.

But having said that, how we deal with it in each society is going to have to be on our own terms. I don't think it's very useful for western feminists to undercut the source of strength for us Muslims women. They shouldn't do that because if that's our source of power ...that's where we get our strength to make changes. It's not from being extracted from that process. Women are not stupid, women in Islam will know what's just and not just. I don't want to give up Islam as a framework. I believe Islam has justice, has potential for me and for all people if they would only look at it. Why should I give that up? I want to struggle within that construct.▲