

# Women in Muslim-Majority Societies



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When we say we are working together in the “struggle for women’s rights in Muslim majority countries,” we presume that women DO have rights in these countries, and that we are talking about a level playing field. I would say that as girls were buried alive before the advent of Islam more than 1,400 years ago, they are being systematically and metaphorically buried alive again.

That women’s rights have been usurped and that women have been dehumanized is the sad reality today, as I hear from testimonies from young women I mentor, in the news from my native land of Pakistan, and from my visits to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Just a short while ago, Egypt’s ultraconservative Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya slammed the recently ratified United Nations “End

Violence Against Women” document because it contains articles “violating Islamic Shari’a and general morality.” I attended this particular meeting and gave a statement in which I spoke out against child marriages, which are common in the Arab world. At the same gathering, the government of one of the largest Muslim states declared that early marriages are good for morality. Furthermore, today in Egypt they say women are flighty and cannot make decisions, so they should not be lawyers.

Yet it was Tawakkol Karman, Yemeni journalist, activist, and first Arab woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize last year, who said “My dear women! You have revolted from all over the country of Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria in order to construct a dignified life and a better future.” Tawakkol also pointed out: “One of the necessities of partnership is for women to obtain their full rights. No dignity and no liberty for a nation which oppresses women and takes away their rights.”

During the revolutions and uprisings across the Arab world, there have been numerous reports of violence targeting women committed by militia, soldiers, and police. There have also been reports of violence against women committed by demonstrators. In [Syria](#), women have been abducted by pro-regime forces to spread fear within the population, and there are many reports of rape, arbitrary detentions, torture, forced disappearances, and summary executions. The situation has deteriorated to such an extent that the United Nations ordered an international special commission of inquiry and continues to monitor the situation very closely. In [Libya](#), rape has been used as a weapon of war and the stigmatization of victims is such that they are condemned to silence. In [Egypt](#), women participating in the demonstrations have been sexually assaulted by protesters and several women protesters were forced by the army to undergo “virginity tests.”

Hanaa Edwar, head of the charity Al-Amal (Hope in Arabic) said

“Iraqi women suffer marginalization and all kinds of violence, including forced marriages, divorces and harassment, as well as restrictions on their liberty, their education, their choice of clothing, and their social life.”

A discussion of the challenges that women face would not be complete without mention of my favorite champion of women’s rights – Saudi Arabia. In the words of Saudi journalist Dr. Khalid Alnowaiser, “Saudi women urgently need equal rights” but “there are always men who want to control women’s rights in the name of religion or otherwise.”

Especially in countries in transition, women are being marginalized or even excluded entirely from political bodies. While not being able to exercise one’s fundamental right to participate in the democratic process in one’s own country is a form of violence in itself, it’s unfortunately not the only one to which numerous women are subject. However, being deprived of the right to vote also denies women’s participation in the making of laws that could protect them from the other forms of violence and discrimination they experience or may experience.

In [Libya](#), the electoral law adopted by the National Transitional Council contains no quota for the representation of women in elected bodies. In [Morocco](#), there is only one female minister in the 30 member cabinet (compared to seven in the previous government). In [Tunisia](#), the 41-member government contains only three women. In Saudi Arabia women just obtained the right to vote but often cannot drive to voting stations as it is illegal for women to drive in the Kingdom. In Pakistan, my country of birth, women are subject to Blasphemy and Apostasy laws if they resist the status quo. Many of these women are lobbying for nothing more than the right to have a say in the politics of their country, to be emotionally and intellectually liberated, and to participate in public life free from the fetters of oppression.

Some of the issues faced by them are not new. The UN Development Programme has done intensive research into the status of Middle Eastern women, and their findings showed that the level of education among Arab women is the lowest in the Muslim world – all this in a tradition where we believe that educating one woman is like educating the entire nation. However, in the Muslim and Arab world today, when a Muslim woman speaks out or is qualified to take a leadership role, she is called militant. If she speaks in ways expected of women, she is seen as an inadequate leader. If she speaks in ways expected of leaders, she is seen as an inadequate woman.

You may ask: Why is there so much resistance to women lobbying for rights? Because self-appointed caretakers of Muslim traditionalism feel threatened by the phenomenon that a significant number of women are now seen in public space, that is, a space normally thought of as for men only. They see emancipated Muslim women as negative symbols of Westernization. I call these men fundamentalists.

One of the warning signs of fundamentalism has been identified by the International Organization of Women Living Under Muslim Laws as anti-women policies. To elaborate: attacks on freedom of movement, the rights to education and work under authoritarian and theocratic regimes, or imposition of unjust laws represent the persistent and legally-sanctioned obstacles to women achieving equal status and pursuing justice.

Today, there is a push in many parts of the Muslim world to implement Islamic law, which according to the political Islamist parties means divine law, but is actually man-made law with little or no regard for human rights and specifically women's rights.

Some key examples of my claims are as follows: UNIFEM estimates that more than 130 million girls and women alive today have undergone Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), mainly in Africa and some Middle Eastern countries, and 2 million

girls a year are at risk of mutilation. If you think that FGM is happening somewhere far away, think again. FGM is being practiced among immigrant communities in Europe, Canada, and Australia and many governments are turning a blind eye to this epidemic because they believe it is based in faith. Let me assure you, it is not.

Rape has become a weapon of war in many parts of the world. While most of the civilized world condemns rape and works to eradicate this trauma against women, there are those who make the sentencing of the perpetrator very hard. In Pakistan, according to the 1979 Hudood Ordinance, women who reported rape had to provide four adult male Muslim witnesses and very often were jailed themselves because they had "confessed" to sex outside marriage. As a result of this misogynist law, most women would not report rape and those who did are still languishing in jails.

Another serious trend in violence against women is honor based. In a study of honor killings in Egypt, 47 percent of the victims were killed by a relative after the woman had been raped. In Jordan and Lebanon, 70 to 75 percent of the perpetrators of these so-called "honor killings" are the women's brothers. Here is the shocker: part of Article 340 of the Jordan Penal Code states that "he who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery and kills, wounds, or injures one of them, is exempted from any penalty."

In the early days of Islam we had role models like Khadija, women jurists, calligraphers and poets, and even judges. Today, we have women like Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian lawyer, exile, and human rights defender whom I met in Geneva. Women like her and I are thorns in the side of the Islamist establishment, which is doing all they can to promote man-made laws directly against Quranic injunctions.

Shirin Ebadi encourages Muslim women to "Keep on struggling. Do not believe that you are condemned to inferior status. Look

carefully in the Koran so that the oppressors will not succeed in misleading you with their commentary and their selective quotes. Do not let people masquerading as clerics claim that they have monopoly on understanding Islam. Teach yourself and invest your best efforts in competing in all areas of life. Allah created us equal, and when we struggle for equality, we are doing what Allah wanted us to do.”

Indeed, there are rays of light in the darkness and I have great hope that the struggles of my sisters will bear fruit, since women themselves are bringing about change. I call this the silent revolution. Recently, in Tunis several thousand women demonstrated outside parliament to warn against any attempt by the new Islamist-dominated government to curtail their rights. Women in Morocco brought about landmark changes to the divorce law and also succeeded in having polygamy banned. Malala Yousuzai and many others are doing important and brave grassroots work in spite of death threats and heinous acts of violence used to intimidate these women from pursuing their noble goals.

But, the most important and elemental aspect of our struggle is to be able to speak out, create awareness, and, eventually, with the support of mainstream communities, bring about change from within. Despite continuing abuses of women’s rights in the Muslim world, there is much reason to hope that things might be changing for women. As long as we recognize these abuses and refuse to remain silent about them, we will continue to make vital changes in the treatment and status of women in communities around the world.