

MUSLIM WOMEN – DEVALUED DIAMONDS

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As I was speaking on talk back radio in Melbourne a young lady phoned in from Adelaide. She told me she had recently become a Muslim. She advised me that her primary and secondary education had been in a denominational "Christian" school but she had never read a Bible. She had recently become a Muslim without reading the Quran. She and some of her friends had taken this step because they thought it was a "cool" thing to do. In 2014 it was reported that The Australian New Muslim Association estimated that of all those becoming Muslims in Australia, two thirds were female. Sixty percent did so to align with their new husbands' Islamic religion. One such was 18 year old Julia Maukhallalti. She belonged to an Orthodox congregation till she met Raed in a restaurant. Within three months she "reverted" to Islam and married Raed. [Muslims believe everyone is born a Muslim. For various reasons some stray from the True Path of Islam. Thus, when one responds to the call to become a Muslim, it is a matter of reversion not conversion].

Ms Maukhallalti did receive some introductory teaching about her adopted new religion which led her to believe that in Islam, rather than women being oppressed, they are put on a pedestal. "They are treated like a real diamond," she is quoted as saying.ⁱ In that diamonds are formed as a result of tremendous geological pressure and heat and when unearthed are mostly kept locked away for safety reasons, she may have been inadvertently speaking more accurately than she intended. Practices within Islam vary from country to country. They may also vary within a single country from urban to rural settings. Time and place see many variations. Outwardly at least Islam appears quite different in a Muslim majority country compared with one in which Muslims may still represent only a numerical minority status. In general terms one thing is constant. Females compared to males have an inferior status.

In recent years the Government of Egypt has been doing its best to try to locate and explode mines buried beneath surface sands in the Sinai Peninsula. This was military ordinance left behind from previous armed conflicts. To affect the mine clearance large armoured bulldozers fitted with revolving drums were driven through the mine fields. Chains attached to the drums, thrashed the ground in front of the slowly moving bulldozers. The mines harmlessly exploded when struck. Bedouin tribesmen developed a less costly but equally effective method to clear the Sinai mines from lands they traversed. When crossing unfamiliar territory "their women were dispatched out front to be followed by the camels and then the men." ⁱⁱ

Given the difficulties of existence in harsh terrain it might be concluded that Muslim Bedouin men considered camels were of more importance than women. However the disparity of value accorded to the sexes is not confined to the precariousness of desert life. Leyla Zana was married at 14 to 34 year old Mehdi. When she was 30 she was elected to the Turkish Parliament. As a citizen of Muslim Turkey she summed up her life experience thus, "If you are a man, you have value; if you are a woman, you don't." ⁱⁱⁱ

Tehran, the capital city of Iran, is located within an earthquake zone. Seismologists have predicted that a major earthquake will devastate the city in the near future. Senior Iranian cleric, Hajatoleslam Kazem Sedighi reportedly levelled an accusation the essence of which is relatively common within Muslim societies. He announced that women who do not dress appropriately "lead young men astray, corrupt their chastity and spread adultery in society." Immorality is the woman's fault. He then went further by reportedly declaring that "women who wear revealing clothing and behave immorally are responsible for earthquakes." ^{iv}

In Iran women endure severe legal and cultural restrictions. Recently 195 members of the 230 member Iranian parliament reportedly voted to oblige the government to enforce fully Sharia (Islamic) dress code for women.^v Subsequently it was reported that government enforcement agencies closed down more than 800 clothing shops for selling inappropriate women's wear. An additional 3600 received warning notices that some of their goods on sale did not conform to Islamic dress codes. A member of the Women's Basij, one of the Government's enforcement agencies, commenting on non-conforming coats which were on sale, reportedly said, "The spread of these kinds of products are against public morality." vi

Not just Iranian women are subject to Iran's dress codes for women. In April 2016 Air France resumed flights to Tehran after an eight-year hiatus. The company announced that all female flight attendants would be required to wear headscarves if disembarking in Tehran. Morality police, the Basij Militia, patrol the streets to ensure Islamic dress codes and relevant Sharia provisions are obeyed. Unmarried young women may be detained for "fraternising with males to whom they are unrelated". Iran's civil code Article 1105 states: "In relations between husband and wife, the position of the head of the family exclusively belongs to the husband." The assertion of male authority which is common to all Islamic jurisdictions, can have unfortunate outcomes.

Lama al-Gamdi reportedly suffered multiple injuries including a broken back, crushed skull, broken ribs and left arm. Additionally her body showed evidence of burns and repeated rape. A reason for such violence was that her virginity was suspect. The perpetrator was Fayan al-Ghamdi, a prominent Islamist preacher in Saudi Arabia. He was the victim's father. His daughter was just 5 years of age. vii

According to Islamic law (Sharia) implemented in Saudi Arabia, Iran and many other Muslim societies, as noted earlier, a father or husband exercises total authority over the members of his family. In this case the five year old girl's virginity was questioned. This calls into question the family's honour of which women are considered guardians. A perceived loss of honour under these circumstances could result in the death of the alleged culprit and little may be done to prevent such an outcome.

In the event of murder, instead of the death penalty, "blood money" may be paid by the guilty party to the victim's family as a ransom to spare the convicted person's life. If the convicted person murdered a member of his own family to preserve family honour another family member may extend forgiveness, which is more probable if the murdered person was a female. This was the reported outcome in the above case. In Muslim societies, which stress the superiority of males over females, the latter remain devalued and vulnerable throughout their lives. A Palestinian West Bank woman summed up her experience as follows: Where I come from, being born a girl is a curse: a wife must first produce a son, at least one and if she gives birth to only girls, she is mocked. At most two or three girls are needed to help with the housework, to work on the land and to tend the animals. If more girls are born it is a great misfortune and they should be got rid of as soon as possible. I lived like this until I was eighteen, knowing nothing except that I was worth less than an animal because I was a girl. viii

In South Asia a commonly held belief in Muslim communities is that Allah writes on the forehead of the woman how many children she will bear and what their sexes will be. Should she fail to deliver boys it is alleged that this is because of sin hidden within. That biological science clearly explains that it is the male's chromosomal contribution and not the female's, which determines the sex of any foetus, is regarded as irrelevant. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and some other Middle Eastern states are generally regarded as the guardians of conservative Sunni Islam. Iran leads the Shiite form of Islam. Both forms adopt identical attitudes and practices toward women. This is often violently reinforced by the numerous Islamist groups now metastasising around the world.

Badriyya Al-Bishr published a succinct profile of a woman's role and position in Muslim societies. When her article "Imagine You're a Woman" was published in a London daily newspaper, she was a social science lecturer at King Saud University. In summary she said: Imagine you're a woman:

- The birth of a boy is welcome, but for the birth of girls, if there are more than two, something undesirable may happen to the mother.
- You always need your guardian's approval for each and every matter.

- Your guardian may be a 15-year-old son or brother who sometimes asks for a bribe to obtain his permission.
- If you are subject to assault, beatings or murder, the primary question is, was the victim's face properly veiled and if the husband broke his wife's ribs there must have been a good reason for it.
- If you go to the magistrate to lodge a complaint because your husband beat you up and broke your bones, the court officer may reply, "That's all?" Beating exists among all couples. As the saying goes, "Beating the beloved is like eating raisins."
- You are not permitted to drive. You must always be accompanied by an approved male.
- Anytime women raise their concerns they are dismissed as mere "women's talk." ix

There have been attempts by some Muslim women to redress the inequalities and abuse they suffer through male domination. But the authorities frequently suppress these efforts. Dr Homa Hoofar is a well-known anthropology professor of Canadian-Iranian citizenship. She was active in WLUM (Women Living Under Muslim Laws). On June 6, 2016 she was arrested and imprisoned in Tehran's infamous Ervin Prison. The Prosecutor General of Tehran reportedly alleged "Hoofar was engaged in criminal activity including entry into fields concerning feminism and national security offenses." Another security agency, the Revolutionary Guards, claimed that "Hoofar was the Iran agent of a feminist network building operation, aimed at disrupting public order, and seeking the overthrow of the Islamic Republic system." x

These statements would probably find sympathy in Turkey. That nation's leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was recently quoted as saying, "You cannot put women and men on an equal footing. It is against nature."xi Expressions of feminism inadequately addresses only symptoms. The origins of Muslim attitudes and behaviours are embedded in Islam's unchangeable sacred texts, the Quran, the Traditions and Biographies of Prophet Mohammad. All Muslims are bound to obey the teaching and follow the examples within these texts. To affect real change every person needs to be changed at the deepest core of human existence. Only one person has proven to be able to do that, Jesus Christ.

To discover the extent of injustice frequently visited upon women through Islam and remarkably how some are finding ultimate liberation, get a copy of a penetrating and insightful new book just released on this subject, by award winning and bestselling Australian author, Dr Stuart Robinson, called "The Hidden Half - Women and Islam."

"The Hidden Half - Women and Islam." Available from: Koorong stores or online at koorong.com - bookdepository.co.uk - Amazon.com - eBook available from koorong.com Amazon Kindle, Apple iBooks.

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