



Gender Discrimination & Islamophobia

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ISLAMAPHOBIA, GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND THE MEDIA

By Nurah Tape

Knowledge is power. But what about the ability to control knowledge. Is that not an even greater power?

Since we live in an age of information - constant feeding of images, voices, ideas, the so-called "official line" on issues, what is the responsibility of those who feed knowledge?

Of course, the feeders of knowledge I am referring to - are the media.

In preparing for this paper, I searched for material on the role of the journalist. One particular description of a journalist's role read as follows:

"A journalist's role is to respect, cultivate and defend the right of information of all people; for these reasons, he researches and diffuses every piece of information that he considers of public interest in observance of truth and with a wide accuracy of it."

Now when applied to certain scenarios, the afore-mentioned does not ring true. For when it comes to particular issues related to Islam, and ultimately, women in Islam, we perpetually find a distortion coming true.

Twenty-first century women in general still find themselves facing battles within the home, school and workplace largely due to their gender. To attest to this, we only need to look at the various gender commissions, women's lobbies and feminist movements around the world.

But just what is Islam's concept of gender equality?

"And for women are rights over men - similar to those of men over women".
Quran, Chapter 2, verse 226

Put simply; there is no superiority of either sex over the other. How is that for gender equity!

Interestingly, a local newspaper, *The Saturday Argus* (August 25, 2001), ran an article wherein was written that "in the 80s, women believed they had to be twice as tough as men to succeed. The power suits, spiky heels and hard-ball executive style signalled they meant business. That, has all changed now, since a management consultant in California has founded a course for what is termed "bully broads" - women who found their promotion chances limited by being too aggressive. The article went on to say that office culture is changing, and women's caring and nurturing skills are becoming more valued.

Finally, women's caring and nurturing skills are being recognised, something Islam has always engendered.

From this article, one could gather that women in the West are realizing that success in a male-dominated world, is not becoming more like a man - behaving like him or dressing like him.

"The men or husbands are the protectors and guardians of their wives".

Qur'an, Chapter 4, verse 34

It becomes clear that men and women are equal, but as functionaries in society, their roles are distinct - their responsibilities mutual. It is incumbent upon the husband to fend and provide for the family, undergoing the hardships of life.

As women, we do not need to go out and work.

That does not mean, however, that women cannot go out and work. In today's trying times, we find Muslim women are considerably more visible in the workplace.

Yet, in allowing women to reach their full potential, be it in the workplace or elsewhere in society, the rights afforded to her by Islam have seen Muslim women not having to resort to the "power suits and spiked heels" image.

Unfortunately, the public is still fed with misled portrayals of Muslim women, i.e. that we are suppressed, dejected and practically, uneducated. One example that comes to mind is the work of a Swedish journalist, Gunilla Von Hall, who worked for one of the Scandinavian country's largest morning dailies. At a conference, organised in part, by Media Action International, in Cape Town in 1999, Von Hall related how she went on an assignment, to Iran, with a prejudiced view in mind that women there were unfortunately suppressed by their menfolk, etc. etc. She however attested to the fact that upon gaining an insight into the situation of Iranian women, the antithesis rang true. So, she wrote a story depicting just that, i.e. that Iranian women were actually well-educated, attaining more power politically and not as unhappy and suffering under the veil and chador as she thought. But in sending her story back to the editor, his response was... "but of course women in Iran are suffering, they are suppressed. We have to write it that way."

She eventually came to a compromise with her editor and wrote a story depicting women's increasingly powerful situation in Iran. The photographer that accompanied her on the assignment though, used a picture of Iranian women in the chador, looking unhappy and giving a suppressed impression. So, the text was saying one thing and the picture was saying quite another.

In this case, for example, what happens to the journalist's or particularly, the editor's role "to research, and diffuse every piece of information that he considers of public interest in observance of truth and with a wide accuracy of it"?

The responsibility does not only rest on the shoulders of the journalist, but more importantly; the editor - who ultimately decides what is fed to the public.

Another example, closer to home - is that of the numerous bombings in the Western Cape, when the media in particular, tried to link what has become termed as "urban terror bombings" in the province, to the movement, PAGAD. This group has been labelled as a Muslim vigilante group. Now, to my knowledge, official spokespersons for that group, have never publicly called themselves that. As a journalist, I am fully aware that one cannot ascribe labels to a movement,

group or individual or country for that matter, unless the subject can be quoted as describing itself, him or herself as that. Yet, this type of labelling persists.

The outcome of that stereotyping was that at the height of the bombings, Muslim women bore the brunt of it all. At the radio station I work for, we constantly received reports of women saying they were harassed as a direct result of these misrepresentations. They either had remarks rudely thrown at them in the workplace or just while walking down the street for that matter. Walking into a department store, Muslim women would suddenly find the security officials stopping them and asking to search their bags. I can personally attest to that. Certainly, when a numerous number of women attest to such experiences, you cannot put it down to paranoia.

Why is it that the media persists in subjecting Muslims to this prejudice, wanting to link them to acts of terror? It not only happens in South Africa, but elsewhere too. The Oklahoma City bombing of the American government building is a case in point.

A British newspaper, *Today*, reportedly ran its headline for the story as *In the Name of Islam*, accompanied by a picture of a fireman carrying the charred remains of a dead baby. This time - a picture possibly complementing a text? As we all know, the bombing was the work of an American white supremacist.

An excuse of ignorance can no longer be accepted for the media's misrepresentation of Muslims, since authentic sources are so readily available in this day and age. The converse of the misrepresentation is so glaringly obvious.

As the Swedish journalist, I earlier referred to, came to learn; Muslim women might be covered, but their minds are not. So why the concerted effort to continually portray Muslim women, for example, as different to what they really are, to what Islam actually guarantees them?

On the issue of guarantees, Muslim women when they do go out to work, are afforded economic independence because she is not compelled to use what she earns, for providing for her family, since her husband has that responsibility.

What is it about a woman's visible difference in appearance or dress that causes such an outcry in the Western world, when it does not hamper her fulfilling her roles in society? We have the right to be judged by our minds and personalities, not how we look! That - is female empowerment!

It is indeed quite unfortunate that in the United States and other Western countries, it seems women make more money taking off their clothes than they do teaching children to become tomorrow's leaders. In the United States alone, it has been reported that adult films have become a 2.5 billion dollar a year industry. And female prostitutes, who haven't died from beating and drug abuse, still face an increased risk of diseases such as AIDS, Herpes and Gonorrhea.

Even if there are claims to this immoral industry being controlled, as is happening nowadays, why subject women to that? Why allow ourselves to live in a society that objectifies women? Women have a greater purpose in life.

A 17-year old Toronto High school pupil in Canada, on the issue of women and hijab, in an article published in the *Toronto Star: Young People Press*, wrote: “Because of the superficiality of the world we live in, external appearances are so stressed that the value of the individual counts for almost nothing. It is a myth that women in today’s society are liberated. What kind of freedom can there be when a woman cannot walk down the street without every aspect of her physical being ‘checked out’.”

Now keep that view in mind and apply it to how women in hijab are ‘checked out’. Generally, it is wrongly assumed that based on their dress, they are suppressed and dejected by dressing that way.

The Toronto student further wrote: “Look at any advertisement. Is a woman being used to sell a product? How old is she? How attractive is she? What is she wearing more often than not? That woman will be no older than in her 20s, taller, slimmer and more attractive than average, dressed in skimpy clothing. Why do we allow ourselves to be manipulated like this? Whether the 90s woman wishes to believe it or not, she is being forced into a mould.”

Is it because Muslim women are defying this position, that they are being portrayed negatively?

In Turkey, hijab-clad women have even faced the death penalty for standing up for their rights to dress this way. Journalist Huda Kaya as well as her three daughters, had such harsh measures meted out to them because they participated in a peaceful demonstration against the headscarf ban in Turkish universities. After extensive international campaigning on their behalf, the four women and others facing the death penalty were sentenced to short prison terms, and paroled. How absurd that women in today’s society face the death penalty for standing up for their right to cover their body!

All this in a country that claims to be a democracy, adopting secular values, yet denying a woman her basic right to protect herself.

One outstanding woman who has attained political stature is Merve Safa Kavakci. She caused an uproar, by walking into the Turkish parliament, wearing the headscarf. A then senior Virtue Party member of Parliament, she was subsequently stripped of her Turkish citizenship. Where were the human rights campaigners and feminist movements then? Do such issues make it to the front pages and news headlines?

But don’t think that such discrimination has deterred Muslim women from attaining their rightful position in society.

There are numerous examples of Muslim women who are making their mark in various fields, including the arts, politics, education and closer to home for me, journalism.

I work for a radio station based in Cape Town, South Africa, where I hold the position of News Editor. An article published in the local newspaper, the *Good News Reporter*, epitomised the role women have taken at the radio station. An excerpt of that article reads as follows:

“You’ve heard of women’s liberation, right? Well, ever heard of *women’s lip*? Because at a local community radio station, which you would find on 100.4FM, women are using their *lip* to voice their rights and status and take charge of the community they serve. From the News Editor, Programmers, to Marketing Manager and technical team, women excel in their pivotal roles at Radio 786. They’ve been doing so, since its inception just over five years ago.”

Education has been made incumbent upon every Muslim, male or female, to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.

Of course, the Taliban in Afghanistan defies this by denying Muslim women education. However, this group is not alone in violating the woman’s rights.

In certain Western countries, Muslim women have been denied access to educational institutions simply because they have decided to cover up.

The young student I earlier referred to, quite interestingly further stated in her article:
“I have made choices about what my priorities are..... So next time you see me, don’t look at me sympathetically. I am not under duress or a male-worshipping female captive from thoseArab deserts. I’ve been liberated.”

The challenge to the media, in their power as **providers** of knowledge, is to exercise their responsibility of an even greater power to **control** that knowledge!

Nurah Tape is News Editor at Radio 786, Cape Town, South Africa. She prepared this paper for presentation at the IHRC seminar on ‘Islamophobia and Gender Discrimination,’ at the NGO Forum at the World Conference Against Racism held in Durban South Africa in August 2001.

COMBATING STEREOTYPES: MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

by Iman Rappetti

My name is Iman Rappetti, and I am a journalist at the SABC's website, sabcnews.com. I have worked in Iran as well as in the print and radio media.

Being a journalist, and being Muslim in a secular society is challenging and frustrating all at the same time. While there are benefits to being able to inform as to how 'another' half lives, the constant barrage of slanted reporting from the wires (AFP, AP, Reuters and others) leaves one incredulous as to just how biased or uninformed some media outlets and journalists are in their reporting, especially on issues relating to Muslims or the Muslim world.

While it is true that one does not need special means and methods to report on Islam and its adherents in all parts of the world, it is important that we remain vigilant about reporting in a way that reflects reality. This means that we have to be very informed about what is happening in the world, and have to constantly maintain and update our research and knowledge of global politics and history.

I work at South Africa's main broadcaster and I have found that being there to explain or to give background to current world events makes it easier for my colleagues to gain a greater perspective on Muslims and Islamic issues in the news. When the Abu Sayyaf went on its hostage spree, it was important to explain why one man's guerilla fighter, was another's freedom fighter. When the Taliban took over Afghanistan, it was important to explain that they did not represent Islam, and that what was happening was a type of madness, with most of the world's Muslims in strong condemnation of their human rights record.

As a woman also, I am at the forefront of having to clear up the misconceptions that prevail about Muslim women in general, and being in a society where too often women are apathetic and uninformed about the world beyond their walls, it becomes especially hard.

South Africa is a multicultural society, and post apartheid we have been exposed to a more integrated lifestyle, our psyches suffering from the deprivation of inter-racial contact. This has made us at times cynical about how the other 'halves' live. Even with the encouragement in Islam to treat people equally and on the basis of their characters, some among our ranks have been left with this 'other' baggage, left with fear and suspicion, still preferring to mingle with those of their own type.

It has become a known fact that Muslims in South Africa have become synonymous with the image of oppression, no matter how much we like, or dislike that. That our mistreatment of people is skin-based. That we keep the special implements and cups for our black servants separate and distinct from our own. This might seem like a tired scenario, but one we need to confront and re-evaluate speedily.

The blame for how we are perceived is placed squarely on the shoulders of the 'west'. A term that I find is over-used, abused and simply tired. We need to take the responsibility for putting our news in the news, for keeping the memory of Islamic struggles in our headlines, not just in

Islamic publications where the people who see it may already be aware of it, but in the mainstream, where all this Islamophobia has a breeding ground.

We need to stop looking at our world selfishly, and doing what is always in our own best interest, but looking at ways to repair our poor collective image. Where are our journalists, where are our filmmakers, our producers, writers and artists? We need them to help us keep the voice of the Palestinian struggle, and others like it, heard and echoed in the places where this oppression originates. We need to hold the US responsible for its dubious and double-edged foreign policy up in full view of the American public, so they won't turn around and ask, "Where is this Islamic anger coming from?"

A favourite practice amongst journalists is to report in the now, while a story is fresh. Good journalistic practice, no doubt, but depth and analysis are too often sacrificed on the altar of immediacy. If the world saw the history of injustice against Islamic communities all over the world, they would sit up and pay more attention. It is important for us to project a calm and dignified image when we are out in public. That means our grooming, our ethics, our interaction with people should be prepared so that when the enquiries or questions come, we know how to deal with them responsibly and effectively.

I have found during my work, that journalists always love a good story, that they are waiting for the perfect 'hook' for their stories, what will sell and generate the most interest. Good journalism is not only about information and good entertainment, but about good business too. Be very careful when you march, what banners will you carry that will be flashed across screens all over the world. When vociferously chanting against globalisation, don't be caught with your Nikes, Levi's or Polo's on!

When marching in support of Palestine remember that many Jews support us in opposing Zionism. Be aware of who is marching on your side, many a loose cannon has been known to derail the focus of the issues we are trying to highlight, and transform peaceful marches into chaos.

Now, more than ever we need to be vigilant and to root out those among us who derail the good we attempt to do. Be responsible, articulate and dignified and don't be tempted to anger or baiting. Choose candidates who will appear on radio, television, webcasts or in the newspaper very carefully. There are many who are waiting for you to give them a stick to beat them with, in this case, my fraternity, the media.

We fortunately live in a very connected world, it is easy to make contact with the secular media and constantly lobby issues pertinent to us, but beware not to become straight-jacketted, and narrow minded, concerned only with our own universe. As we have in the past, like in apartheid South Africa, come out to protest oppression against all people irrespective of colour, we should be available to bring attention to the suffering of others in our societies. The media is quick to pick up on this, and we need to be seen doing other things rather than just being fixated primarily on Islam.

Lastly, I would like to encourage my sisters, who are considering a career path, to consider

politics and journalism, and to help repaint the sad picture that prevails about us out there. I have found in my own work environment, that people are generally ignorant but are so willing to learn and be informed. Many of the questions that I have answered on issues relating to Islam, while fraught with debate and cynicism, finally resulted in a new understanding or at least have left the door open to re-evaluation.

The world is a wonderful place, and the tools we have to re-educate and help rebuild relationships with people who were once alienated are so many, that there is hope for reconciliation and understanding.

I leave you in the hope that you will spread love and light wherever you are.

Iman Rappeti is a journalist currently working for South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). She prepared this paper for presentation at the IHRC seminar on 'Islamophobia and the International Media' at the NGO Forum at the World Conference Against Racism held in Durban South Africa in August 2001.



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