

**The Targeting of Muslim Women in the  
Wake of 9/11  
Fareena Alam**



© IHRC, Fareena Alam, 2001

## The Targeting of Muslim Women in the Wake of 9/11

Fareena Alam

Transcript of presentation given at the seminar, 'Human Rights, Justice and Muslims in the Wake of September 11, 2001' organised by Islamic Human Rights Commission.

I would just like to share some very personal thoughts about the attacks on Muslim women since 9/11. I wish to say at the very beginning that I don't wish to speak for all Muslim women, my experiences are individual and unique and these are just my own thoughts.

We've heard the tales of harassment against women of the Islamic faith and even women who resemble Muslim women they range from swearing and dirty looks to physical assaults. I have not experienced any of these but my appearance on Question Time<sup>1</sup> two days after the 9/11 and the fuss that followed has been an illustration to many of how easily a Muslim woman is vilified.

As a citizen of this democratic country I was challenging, as is my right the choices our leaders were making at a time when war was imminent. I was conveniently made the face of anti-Americanism. It was convenient because I am brown and I wear this piece of cloth around my head. But I don't want to go into what we have experienced since 9/11 or even indeed before 9/11 as Muslim women. What I want to go into is what can be done about all this.

My firm belief is that these attacks are symptoms of deeper ignorance and its this we need to tackle if we are going to remotely prevent horrific acts of aggression against Muslim women happening again. As a woman, as a Muslim and as a member of an ethnic minority in this country there are many levels upon which I and many other Muslim women struggle to find a place in this society. We are subject to forces outside the Muslim community such as the media and the general public and government legislation - they all work together. Then there are the often overlooked forces within our community e.g. the forces which impose a warped patriarchal system in the name of Islam and retaining the value of the *sahaba*<sup>2</sup>. Often these internal as well as external forces, I feel, are to blame for the status of Muslim women today. We are stuck in between these forces: Muslim zealots who seek to perpetuate the unnatural repression of women, and the media which finds this consequent image of Muslim women as deliciously newsworthy.

As a Muslim woman I am therefore being defined by forces from outside myself. This is problematic because most Muslims are ignorant of how strong and straight a Muslim woman can stand. Powerful forces within the media, not necessarily independent journalists but top producers are ignorant of what I as a Muslim woman stand for and am capable of, and often they choose to ignore that aspect of Muslim woman. Very importantly it is the Muslim woman herself who does not understand how much she is capable of. The reason I am stating all this is because a Muslim woman who does not know what she is capable of or believes she is always one step behind her male counterparts is something very unnatural to Islamic tradition and she immediately becomes much more vulnerable to harassment and bullying in the public because her body language and the message it sends is that I have a very deep rooted lack of confidence in who I am - I am a Muslim woman I am brown and so on. So I feel that

---

<sup>1</sup> The BBC's current affairs panel discussion show broadcast every week during its season.

<sup>2</sup> The companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

we have to go back to helping Muslim women feel proud of who they are and what Islam gives to them. I want to quote this beautiful description of the relationship between men and women in Islam. It is taken from Islamic tradition but it has a modern equivalent in the saying that behind every great man there is a great woman.

Abdullah Azami a translator and interpreter of Islamic texts says in his lecture on gender relations that the word *ash-shams* (sun) is feminine and *al-qamar* (moon) is masculine. The sun burns itself to give light and life to all around it and the moon is *munir* meaning that within itself it has no light it radiates the brilliance of the sun. So the implication for Muslim men is that we are reflecting the glorious light of our women.

This should be an inspiration to Muslim women. The reason I feel this is important is illustrated by a very small example. When a woman signs up for self-defence classes as many have done since 9/11 the first lesson she is taught is to have confidence in herself if she is going to drive away potential attackers. Confidence and belief in oneself that is the most important lesson. You can know karate but you can't practice it unless you believe that you can ward this attacker off. So the qualities of confidence have been worn away as everyone else defines the role of the Muslim woman except the Muslim woman herself who should be thinking about who she is and what she wants to do with her life.

Many Muslim women are tired of this and also of letting irresponsible representatives be her voice to the masses. We as Muslims need to rout out this victim mentality because when we act as the victim we are reacting rather than pro-acting. For Muslim women to shape the way the Muslim woman sees her is to do what comes naturally to many of us which is to contribute actively to the community. You may know *An-Nisa*, a woman's group in Brent. They do amazing work for the community not just for Muslims but for non-Muslims themselves, they are not defined by their *hijab* or the fact that they are Muslims or the colour of their skin but by the work that they do for the community, and this was clearly shown post 9/11 because of the support they got from their non-Muslim members of their county. It just went to show they knew and said, 'We know you we know that you are not like the terrorists because you helped my child at nursery school or you counselled my daughter when she was on drugs.' This is what these women are remembered for.

So this goes to show how powerful deeds are. A person whose school teacher is a Muslim woman helping him grow into a good citizen is going to think twice before attacking a Muslim woman for 9/11. A person whose doctor is a Muslim woman helping him to get better when he is ill will think before attacking a Muslim woman for 9/11. A person whose neighbour is a fulltime mother raising children as future good citizen of the country will think twice before attacking a Muslim woman for 9/11. These are some of the countless roles Muslim women are fulfilling and I truly believe that if we move towards this direction that we will be sending out a more powerful and long term message to those that misunderstand us, instead of paying lip-service to how Islam empowers women.

I believe the leaders of the Muslim community from the head of the family: father husband brother to the imams and to those who lead Muslim organisations have a very important role to play in making it possible for Muslim women to shine. The alternative has clearly proven ineffective. You clearly cannot speak for us and protect us 24 / 7 - this is not the society we live in.

In conclusion I am very, very hopeful for the future. I believe that Allah is indeed the best planner and maybe why this tragedy that has befallen us is Allah's wake up call to us to look within ourselves and acknowledge that you cannot undo wrong outside ourselves until you acknowledge what is within ourselves.

*Fareena Alam is News Editor at Q-News, Europe's leading Muslim magazine. For more information on Q-News see [www.qnews.com](http://www.qnews.com).*

*This presentation was given at 'Human Rights, Justice & Muslims in the Wake of September 11' organised by the Islamic Human Rights Commission at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental & African Studies, London, UK in October 2001. For a copy of the seminar video or more information, please contact IHRC on (+44) 20 8902 0888, fax (+44) 20 8902 0889, email: [info@ihrc.org](mailto:info@ihrc.org), web: [www.ihrc.org](http://www.ihrc.org).*