

## Pluralism and Gender Equality

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We have seen it all over the world, time and time again; and yet the message doesn't seem to come across loud enough. Cultural pluralism is a double-edged sword when women are expected to remain as the bearers of cultural, ethnic and racial identity above all else.

We live in an age of bad multiculturalism that has gone off the rails. One does not and should not use this as a stick to beat multiculturalism and deconstruction with, but the fact remains that for too long the appeal of pluralism has been mostly cosmetic.

The age of the Benetton ad means that we value cultural difference when it is most apparent and laid out on display before us as a tableau of difference and diversity, but we forget that cultural differences are not merely contingent or accidental and that underlying these differences are very real power differentials as well.

It is for this reason that we should not fall into the trap of cultural relativism too fast or easily. At the recent regional conference on Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Rights in Muslim Societies organised by the International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (ICIP) in Jakarta, representatives from all over the Muslim world re-stated the vital and sometimes neglected fact that from an Islamic point of view, men and women are equal in terms of their ontological origins and eschatologically equal in their final destiny and responsibilities.

Yet how often have we been told that men and women are not really equal in Islam, due to physical differences? And how many times have we been told that such differences - instituted in structures of power - are tradition-bound and culturally-specific to Muslims?

Here is where the challenge for the Muslim world today lies. Faced with the unprecedented and often traumatic effects of globalisation, Muslim communities today - like many other communities in the developing world - have turned to tradition and cultural particularism as the last means of safeguarding their fragile and contested identities.

Fearful of being overwhelmed by the tide of mass consumerist culture and drowned by the equalising tide of homogeneous consumerism, they cling on to cultural difference as the last bastion of their identities.

But this steadfast refusal to accept that cultural identities are also manufactured, historical and thus contingent has become the suffocating double-bind that has stunted the growth and evolution of Muslims as well.

Worst still, cultural pluralism has become the convenient excuse for all kinds of casual abuse of women and their rights, ranging from dowry killings to the mutilation of women with acid. Apparently for the conservatives among us, the denial of equal rights to women is and can be seen as a means of 'protecting' their identity and by extension the identity of Islam as well.

This paradox opens up a Pandora's box of unanswered questions: Why is it that whenever pluralism is called for in the defence of identity it is the women who have to take up the role of being the custodians and depositories of tradition?

Why is it that men are allowed to enter the cosmopolitan space of public engagement, while women have to be relegated to the traditional roles that define them? Why is it that we fail to recognise that Muslim culture and identity have evolved and adapted over the past 1400 years and that being Muslim is not something that can be so easily essentialised?

Related to this are the manifold handicaps that affect non-Muslim commentators as well. As soon as cultural pluralism and the protection of cultural identity became the card that was used to defend misogynistic and patriarchal practices among Muslims (and other developing communities), Western liberals by and large found themselves paralysed and unable to comment any further, their tongues stilled by the cry of political correctness.

Thus practices like honour killings could no longer be condemned, for they were seen as 'traditional cultural practices' among Muslims - who were then relegated to the register of the strange and exotic.

How odd that the Western liberal conscience was unable to respond to these atrocities in the name of political correctness, for no liberal worth his or her salt would have tolerated such abuses done in the name of tradition if the victim was a Western woman! (And remember, they used to burn witches in Europe too, and those were mostly women.)

So while we all celebrate the wonderfully diverse and colourful plural world we live in today, let us not fall too much for the special effects: Cultural diversity and pluralism are sociological realities but they are also backed up by very real power differentials that can spell negative consequences for women and minorities in particular.

A celebration of pluralism does not necessarily mean the tacit acceptance of the injustices that accompany such differences too. If anything, one can only claim to truly support pluralism if one looks at it through a critical eye, and emphasises the universal equality that binds us all, nonetheless.

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