

Evolution of Feminism in Relation to Islam

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Feminism has become a widely circulated term in today's media; it is a word loaded with meaning, yet difficult to define due to the emergence of several different branches of its kind. However, central to this movement is its purpose to advocate "equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex"⁽¹⁾. Feminism has seen its evolution from roughly the 19th century to the present day, from its first-wave to its third. The question I raise is - how many more "waves" will be needed before women can truly be reassured that they have achieved equality? This further leads me to question what "equality" truly means. It would be far too naïve to assume that equality means "sameness", because where men and women have equally multifaceted talents, they are by no means the same in their nature or their physicality. As an Ahmadi Muslim woman, I believe that for me this is where Islam comes in, because its principles work to consolidate these differences in the most dignified manner.

The rights of women outlined more than 1,400 years ago in the Holy Qur'an seem to me far more conducive to the feminist struggle for equality, than a model that continues to evolve to unsatisfactory effect. In actuality, it is with the advent of Islam that the issue of women's rights was first raised, at a time when women were likened to slaves and in no position to campaign for themselves. If being a feminist simply

means to support other women, then there can be no greater service to womankind than what the Prophet of Islam (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) carried out. He has said, "It is the duty of every Muslim man and every Muslim woman to acquire knowledge"⁽²⁾, which shows that education is a fundamental right regardless of one's gender. Regarding the economic security of women, in the Holy Qur'an it says "...Men shall have a share of that which they have earned, and women a share of that which they have earned..." (4:33)⁽³⁾, and so it is very clear that women are free to regulate their own wealth and earnings. In Britain, it was not until the 19th century that women could be awarded degrees, vote equally to men or inherit property, yet all these rights and many more were part of Islam's core teachings hundreds of years before.

With the politicising of the feminist movement, the question of women's rights has also brought the hijab and Muslim women's dress into this sphere. Instead of choosing to embrace immodesty to feel liberated as is often seen on social media, I make a different choice. I embrace modesty because Islam removes the pressure on women to adhere to impossible standards of outward beauty and focuses on a woman's intellect as her biggest asset in society. In the Holy Qur'an it says: "...whoso does good works, whether male or female, and is a believer, such shall enter heaven, and shall not be wronged..." (4:125). I feel empowered knowing that my spirituality and morality being most important to me, is equally weighted to that of any man in the eyes of God.

Whether we tentatively support feminism

or champion it enthusiastically, it is safe to assume that regardless of one's gender, beliefs or other affiliations, we would all like to live in a world in which women, as integral members of our society, consider themselves to be respected. In one Friday Sermon, His Holiness Khalifatul Masih V (may Allah be his Helper) emphasised that "Muslims are those who are taking their countries to real higher levels of developments"⁽⁴⁾ and in acknowledging women's rights as Islam has done, a

valuable contribution is made to that development. I argue that the rights of women presented in the Holy Qur'an 1,400 years ago require no amendment or evolution. This model is not regressive but rather quite the opposite; it is so far ahead of its time that our society has not yet caught up, and for those societies who claim to be based on Islamic principles and still oppress women, they must be called to urgently re-evaluate themselves.

REFERENCES

- (1) Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com>
- (2) 'Chapter 2: Women's Issues', in *Pathway to Paradise A Guidebook to Islam*
- (3) *The Holy Qur'an*, English translation by Maulawi Sher Ali^(ra)
- (4) Friday Sermon, *Striving for Moral Excellence: The Islamic Teachings* (13th January 2017)