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MUSLIM WOMEN AND CHANGE

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Mostly people think Muslim women are oppressed and forced to wear veil and confined to the four walls of their houses. This is mainly because we read every day in papers that Taliban force women into veil, burn down girls schools and always portray them wrapped completely in black cloth from head to foot. This image of Muslim women was further reinforced by the burqa controversy which erupted in France.

This image would be justified if all Muslim women followed the strict dress code propounded by Muslim theologians which was evolved in medieval ages and which they keep on justifying even today. But there is big difference in what is theologically projected and ground reality. It may not be wrong, if I venture to say, Muslim women have been defying theological code for more than a century now.

And now a century later, Muslim women have gone even further in their public achievements. It is true even today some Muslim theologians debate whether women are *naqisul aql* (defective reasoning power) or not but many Muslim women have superseded even Muslim men in several fields. In Saudi Arabia where women are not even permitted to drive cars, a woman became a licensed pilot and has been flying aircrafts.

Now we got news from Malaysia that Farah al-Habshi, an engineer by profession, has been appointed deputy of weapons and electrical officer in spanking new Malaysian warship KD Perak. Today she is donned in white and blue Royal Malaysian Navy uniform. What is interesting is that she also wears hijab to cover her head though not her face. She feels her hijab in no way comes in the way of performing her duties.

Malaysia is an Islamic country and orthodox ulama exercise great deal of control over people's lives. Recently even the Government of Malaysia chickened out when Ulama took stand that Christians in Malaysia cannot use the word Allah in their religious literature or in their newspaper. Muslim women face several problems in that country at the hands of conservative ulama in respect of family laws.

It is in the same country that a woman has been appointed naval officer on combat duty. Even in India women have not won the right to be on combat duty in navy or are not permitted to fly fighter planes or serve in combat arms. They are also not allowed seafaring in warships. Ms. Farah al-Habshi, on the other hand, recently participated in Milan naval exercise along with some other women.

Ms. Farah is also highly articulate and answered all the questions put to her by the journalists. And it is not only one example out of many. There are several other examples. Many Muslim women have excelled even in theological fields and quite independently of the traditional theologians. They have shown courage to challenge orthodox ulama. Here I can give example of Amina Wudud of USA who teaches Islamic Studies in Washington.

She believed women can lead mixed congregation in prayer and she led around 100 persons, men and women in prayer a few year ago and that too on Friday and delivered Friday *khutba* (sermon), quite unthinkable in traditional Muslim world. It raised storm of controversy and even Yusuf Qardawi, otherwise a moderate theologian from Qatar, wrote an article, opposing a woman leading mixed congregational prayer.

Some Kuwaiti women, elected to Kuwaiti parliament after great deal of struggle, refused to wear hijab and fought for their right to go to parliament sessions without wearing one and fought their case up to Supreme Court of Kuwait and won. Many more examples can be cited of Muslim women daring authorities for their rights.

But media, which is interested in sensationalizing issues, refuses to highlight Muslim women's achievements and continues to portray them as submissive to traditional authorities and meekly accepting their situation. This image of Muslim women has to change and reality, which is much more complex, has to be understood.

This is not to deny that in many countries Muslim women are facing difficult problems and their liberation is not a foregone conclusion. However, it is also true that many of them are fighting and refusing to submit meekly. What gives us hope is their continued struggle and defiance of traditional authorities.

It should also be mentioned here that many 'uulam and jurists also have realized that medieval shari'ah formulations about women cannot be enforced easily any more and some of them like Muhammad Abduh of Egypt, Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan of India and Maulana Umar Ahmed Usmani of Pakistan have expressed their serious reservations about traditional theological formulations on women. The determined struggle on the part of Muslim women will force many more theologians to revise their position and take Qur'an, and not medieval theology, more seriously on women issues.

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