

Islam versus Sharia Law- Which Is Inherently Sexist?

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Western images of Muslim women in the Middle East usually include veiled women closely guarded by men or hidden away from public view, and Islam, as a religion that oppresses women, is thought to be the cause. In reality, however, only a small portion of Islamic fundamentalists treat women in these extreme ways and similar comparisons can be made to the treatment of women by fundamentalists in other religions like Christianity or Judaism. Thus it is important to determine if Islam itself or Sharia law plays a bigger role in the oppression of women.

There are parts of the Quran that actually promote gender equality. For example, the Quran tells a story where Eve didn't come straight from Adam's rib: both of them were created independently and deliberately. Also, in the Quran, there is no mention of Eve tempting Adam to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree. Rather, Allah told them both to stay away from a certain tree in the garden, and both disobeyed and decided to approach it. The Quran, therefore, holds Adam and Eve equally accountable for their choices. In contrast, the Hebrew Bible says that woman (Eve) was created from man (Adam) and that she alone was responsible for the human fall from grace.. There are other stories and verses in the Quran that support the idea that gender equality should be an intrinsic part of Islam. For instance, the Quran 3:195 says, "I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other." In fact, the vast majority of moderate Muslims agree that men and women are seen as equals in the eyes of Allah.

This is not to say that there aren't contradictions in other parts of the Quran.. It is a text that has been changed and interpreted differently over centuries, and inherently sexist *people* are going to bring those attitudes to Islam when interpreting the Quran for themselves. However, it seems that being a good Muslim means seeing everyone, male or female, as equal.

In the Middle East, many of the practices that oppress women seem to be espoused by fundamentalist sects that follow some form of Sharia Law, a legal system used since the beginnings of Islam, which has been interpreted and changed as time has passed. The law derives from the Hadith, which is a series of books that have recorded actions and statements from the prophet Mohammed. This is the text that Sharia law comes from. Most people assume it's the Quran, and do not even know that the Hadith exists. There are plenty of sexist laws that are part of Sharia, most of them relating to marriage and family. For example, there's the use of the dowry, and husbands being able to have multiple wives while women can only have one husband. There's also parts of the Hadith that dictate what women are allowed to wear (modesty is important) and where women are allowed to go without the supervision of a man. A country that is famous for heavily enforcing these rules is Saudi Arabia, where the women hardly have any independence and require the company and permission of a man to do almost anything in public. This is because of Sharia Law and the things it says about women. Sharia Law is based on extreme interpretations of the Hadith, and in many countries, Sharia Law is applied to the actual legal system. While it's not necessarily the overall law of the land, it's an option that's available for the Muslim community to use. This means that church and state are not kept separate. This makes it hard to separate the views of the moderate Muslims from the views of the truly fundamentalist Muslims who actually agree with the teachings and practices of Sharia Law.

In order to have the views of the majority of moderate Muslims be reflected to the public, Sharia Law needs to be separated from the secular governmental system. A religious code of law should not be intertwined with a legal system. If Sharia Law were eliminated, the moderate Muslim majority would be free to practice Islam in a more egalitarian way without legal repercussions. In some countries like India, Egypt, and quite a few other North African countries, sharia law is used to adjudicate family issues, which are the issues with the most problematic laws that affect women. Eliminating it entirely as the basis for a legal system would be extremely good for the Muslim women who do not have a say otherwise because their husbands or fathers adhere to Sharia law.

I think the best way to see a future where Sharia Law is not the ultimate rule of law is to raise new, young generations of Muslims who see the benefit of moderate Islam and gender equality. The younger generation will be the new legacy and they have the power to bring actual change to a system that advocates for the oppression of women amongst other terrible things. The power structures that allow Sharia Law to be a legal option need to change. These are all changes that will not come quickly, because changing a system that has been in place for centuries will not happen overnight. However, there are certain parts of Sharia law that *have* changed over the years. Hardly anyone practices the brutal physical punishments associated with theft anymore. Over the years, it has been deemed as extreme and unnecessary in today's modern time. I think that feminism and the notion of treating women equally to men is becoming much more widespread today, so it is a real possibility that Sharia law can change and hopefully separate itself from the legal system.

Hayley Huff is currently an undergraduate student at East Carolina University pursuing a BA in Psychology with a minor in Women's Studies. She is a junior who plans to graduate in May 2017. She hopes to pursue a MA in School Psychology and one day work in a high school setting. Hayley hopes to be a warm, helpful presence to high school students dealing with a wide array of problems they may not be comfortable sharing with their peers or family