

Muslim Women's Identities and Human Rights

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Abstract

After the atrocity's committed during the Second World War, the citizens of the world cried out for a universal code of ethics. On December 10th 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a universal declaration of human rights, thus setting a new standard for all nations to follow. According to Article 18 of that declaration "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance". People, and women in particular, who are born in different parts of the world have different cultural, as well as religious identities. It is time for education on, and a universal understanding of, the identity differences of Muslim women to be made universally accessible, and understood.

Keywords: Islam; Muslim Women; Identity; Human Rights.

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In 1933 Adolph Hitler became chancellor of Germany and his Nazi party officially took control. What followed is often referred to as the holocaust and was one of the worst occurrences of human rights violations that the world has seen to date. By May 7th 1945 when Germany surrendered and World War two was officially over, an estimated 13 million people had been tortured and murdered either because of their race, or their religion.

Although the ultimate result was the near obliteration of an entire race, and a worldwide war, the groundwork was laid in a much quieter manner. The Nazi party slowly began working their ideals into society. First espousing the sovereignty of the German race and then planting the seeds for the loathing and contempt that would follow for all other races. Near the end of the Second World War Adolph Hitler described Jewish people as “something aggressive” the same words that French president Jacques Chirac recently used when petitioning Parliament to pass a law banning the wearing of hijab in France?

After the atrocity’s committed during the Second World War, the citizens of the world cried out for a universal code of ethics. A code of fundamental human rights that would be observed and followed by all member countries. Ensuring that the world would never again stand witness to such barbarous acts without having a platform to judge them by.

On December 10th 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations answered that cry by adopting and proclaiming a universal declaration of human rights,(hereafter referred to as UDHR) thus setting a new standard for all nations to follow. Article 18 of that declaration states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance”.

Every human being in the world is a part of what we refer to on a grander scale as humanity, and is thus entitled to certain basic human dignities. For most practicing Muslim women a vital part of their identity rests in the observance of their religion. A fundamental part of which is the wearing of hijab, the Islamic head cover. For a Muslim woman dressing modestly and observing hijab is as crucial as the wearing of a shirt would be to most western women. It would be as unthinkable, and emotionally damaging for a Muslim woman to be forced to go without hijab, as for a non-Muslim woman to be forced to go out in public nude. People, and women in particular, who are born

in different parts of the world have different cultural, as well as religious identities. A fact both recognized and protected in article 22 of the UDHR. I quote "Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality".

As a human race, dedicated to learning and the expansion of our minds and spirits, it is crushing to witness the blatant human rights violations enforced against Muslim women today. In Turkey, Muslim women have been arrested and jailed for wearing hijab, in December 2003 two Belgian senators, presented a draft law to the Senate to ban hijab in all state schools. In certain towns in Italy Muslim women wearing a nikab (face veil) are being given penalty tickets by the police every time they are seen in public wearing their nikab, the penalty has recently been increased from approx US 30\$ to Approx US 50\$ and up to six months in jail. In Spain a state funded school in the town of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, said hijab was "a symbol of submission of women" which "violates citizens' civil rights." The Education Minister, Pilar del Castillo, supported the ban and argued that the hijab is not a "religious symbol but a sign of discrimination against women". The most intriguing fact is that this school is run by Catholic nuns who wear traditional habits which not only cover the heads of the nuns, but extend past their ankles. But the case which has gotten the most publicity may be the hijab ban in France, where Muslim women who observe Islamic hijab are now denied the right to attend school, be wed in a civil ceremony, serve on a jury, participate in sports, and even receive medical attention. All of which are rights expressly protected by the UDHR.

In most Western, and European countries a nun is looked upon with respect, and treated in a manner akin to how one would treat ones own mother. However the same morals and principals that guide all practicing Muslim women to observe hijab, as mandated us by Allah in the Holy Quran, are somehow seen as a dangerous infiltration of "radical Islam" into Western society. The hijab which is both a protection to us and a means of lifting us up from a mere sexual object to a human being who can be judged on their mental, spiritual, and intellectual substance, is looked upon as barbarism. In most western societies women have been reduced to mere objects, they are frequently paid less for equal job performance; and are subject to the highest known levels of rape, incest, and spousal abuse. But yet in an Islamic republic,

like Iran, where a woman is allowed her religious right of modesty, where women's enrollment in university is at or more than half, where incest is unheard of, and the rape percentages are astonishingly low, where women are given equal pay for equal work, we are forced to defend ourselves time and time again. We are looked down on, on an international scale, as stunting the growth and development of our women.

It is time for education on, and a universal understanding of, the identity differences of Muslim women to be made universally accessible, and understood. As Muslim women we demand the rights given us by Allah upon our birth into this world. The rights universally understood and accepted by the 191 member states of the United Nations. It is simply unthinkable, and unacceptable to deny Muslim women their fundamental human rights, in this day and age of tolerance, and enlightenment. Muslim women are strong, integral parts of their respective societies. So many people lack understanding of Islam, or how a Muslim woman functions in her family or in our society. The level of respect and admiration shown women, by Islam, as outlined in the Holy Quran, and by the Prophet of Islam (SAW), is simply not understood. Seeds of hate are sown slowly, day by day such a way that they are assimilated into our society with the stealth of a burglar at night. In much the same manner Hitler sowed seeds of hate for non-Aryan races in his day. Let us not see history repeat itself.

Let us learn from the horrendous atrocities in our past, and move on and up in understanding as a human race. That more importantly than even bread and water, is the basic human right of submission to Allah. That right more so than any other freedom, must never be broken or questioned if we are to remain a progressive society, and not slip back towards the dark times that we have struggled so hard to overcome. As human beings let us stand together, united in the principals called out in the UDHR, the principals that so many life's have been sacrificed for. To see even one woman denied her human rights, is to make a mockery of the Universal Declaration. It is more just in our best interest to put an immediate stop to this, it is our duty as human beings and citizens of the world.

In the same spirit as Islam instructs "to kill one innocent is to murder all of humanity" so to deny one Woman her right to hijab, is to enslave all women. Today Muslim women are at the core of this injustice, but to deny one woman her rights is to deny woman kind their freedom. We must not believe that intolerance, hatred and discrimination will stay focused on one group forever. As history has shown time and time

again, what starts small grows big, affecting us all. Let us stop these crimes against women today, united, as citizens of the world. Let us say: no more! Let us stand together and protect the dignity of the women of the world. Together, we can achieve the true spirit of the words of the preamble...

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge”