

Re-establish the role of Shari'a in our lives

Dima Tahboub

I reject the CEDAW convention¹ because it is a foreign cloak which they want us to wear. The problem that plagues our society is not polygamy, which isn't actually a social phenomenon, but the fact that young people can't get married at all, even for the first time. The way in which these issues specifically are emphasised and blown out of proportion comes within the context in which Islam is being targeted.

Interview

Dima Tahboub is an assistant lecturer at the Arab Open University and a member of the Shura Council of the Islamic Action Front. She is the daughter of a former Chief Medical Officer and the widow of Tareq Ayyoub, an Al Jazeera correspondent in Iraq who was martyred in a notorious incident.

What does reform mean to you as a Jordanian citizen and as a woman? What are the elements of the reform project?

I wouldn't put "woman" in the same category as "citizen", and reform applies to citizens, both men and women. In my opinion, any reform project that doesn't include the dimension of Islam cannot be regarded as reform. Islamic *Shari'a* law is a crucial part of the reform of our lives, which, by the way, does not mean that the Other should be excluded or denied participation. What we are speaking about is *Shari'a* law with some revisions.

For me, the elements of reform are primarily based on restoring the role of the *Shari'a* in our lives. Reform should begin at the lowest level of the pyramid and not the reverse, and its basis is the citizen. There is a major problem at the top of the pyramid. For many reasons I think that reform should be conducted by peaceful means, and therefore I believe in social reform. At the top of the pyramid there is a need for other means that I am opposed to, and the stereotype that they try to project onto Islam results from attempts to reform the top of the pyramid directly.

What are your priorities for reform? Where should we start?

The priority is social reform, not only in relation to women, but comprehensive reform. Women are not in conflict with men, as some try to portray it. The causes of the oppression of Arab women, and Jordanian women in particular, are poverty and

¹ UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women

ignorance, and tribalism to some extent. But, whatever happens to society also happens to women, since women don't have a separate existence apart from society. Oppression against women may increase, but that is a result of the bad situation in general and the misapplication of the *Shari'a*.

The greatest injustice that women face comes from society. When we talk about reform, we can't only talk about the cities. In the cities things are fairly good. There are greater chances for reform in the cities. On the other hand, women in rural and desert areas don't complete higher education and have fewer opportunities, although there has been some improvement.

And there is also the phenomenon of early marriages. I am not a critic of all early marriages because there are cases where it is necessary, but sometimes it prevents girls from continuing their education. Women need educational reform. There is a need for reform of certain social concepts and for some negative customs to be eliminated. Women suffer from poverty, as do all sections of society; poverty, the lack of an education, the dominance of social customs and the tribal system. And there is, of course, a difference between urban and rural areas.

What do you think is the status of women in Jordan, in terms of their participation in the workplace, in politics, in the economy, in society, and in the family? Would you make any specific demands for women?

The status of women is improving in the workplace. However, employers try to exploit women in terms of their salaries. I am for positive discrimination in favour of women with respect to their working hours and conditions, which is incidentally discrimination that is provided for in international law. The status of women is improving in several different fields, mainly as a result of education. Women are fulfilling what can be termed as their role (despite my reservations about the term "role") in various areas, and we don't have a sense of any conflict between men and women. But, again, there is a difference between urban and rural areas.

What is your opinion of women's rights organisations in Jordan? To what extent have they had an impact on your community? What is your experience with them?

To be frank, I have a problem with most feminist organisations because of their foreign funding. I don't have a problem with them in principle, and I believe in openness as long as it doesn't come with a hidden agenda. As a society we have our own religious, social and cultural attributes. Our problem with these feminist organisations is the partnerships they have with foreign organisations. Obviously any funding is conditional, and no funding is completely clean. I don't have a problem with them in principle, but rather with their agendas. Of course, I don't want to belittle them, because there are feminist organisations that have served local communities in rural areas and served Jordanian women. I have attended many meetings between ourselves – women from the Islamic movement – and these organisations. But honestly speaking, we view them with mistrust and suspicion because of their Western dress and their attempts to clothe Arab women in it, despite the differences in circumstance, culture and background.

Do you think that these organisations have an influence on Jordanian society?

Of course they have influence and impact, but within a specific agenda. When they approved international covenants, these organisations blanketed the country, organising workshops and meeting large numbers of women.

Again, I don't want to disparage them. They do have an impact, they have activities and they benefit the local community, which is undeniable. We only want for them not to receive funding from abroad and not to be given the official stamp of approval unless they benefit women.

What do you think of the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)?

It is worth recalling that the women's liberation movement emerged in different historical and social circumstances than ours. Western women are different from Arab women. Women's liberation movements first surfaced as a workers' movement to demand rights for working women, and later called for civil rights for women, including the right to vote, for example, as women weren't considered to be citizens. Later on more dangerous movements emerged, such as the communist movement, with the various demands it made for women, and the radical movement, which is most clearly embodied in the CEDAW, a convention that is based on the concept of hostility between men and women. I myself studied in Britain and lived there for a long time. I saw with my own eyes that the situation had reached the point that associations to defend the rights of men were being established!

These theories are based on the concept of quotas for men and women and on physical and sexual freedom, but have no regard for the family. I truly believe that CEDAW targets the entity of the family. In the Islamic movement we have studied the details of the CEDAW convention, article by article. We didn't just adopt an arbitrary or prejudiced stance towards it. For example, one of the first definitions in the CEDAW convention states that any distinction made between men and women constitutes discrimination. Take the case of the Islamic veil: according to this concept the veil is discriminatory. And then there are overly-broad articles, including an article that speaks about granting rights to women regardless of their marital status, which could cover various situations, including a woman living with a man under the same roof without any civil or legal association between them, as is common in the West.

And this demonstrates that CEDAW has no connection whatsoever to our society, that it didn't originate with us and isn't compatible with our circumstances. We support the new Jordanian Personal Status Law, as it is enlightened, based on the *Shari'a*, and because it emanated from our environment it is appropriate for our society.

Let us take another example from CEDAW. CEDAW is critical of unpaid work done by women within the family. But, for example, women here work on family farms. Our situation is different, and does it make sense for us to demand that women should be paid for working on their family farms?

CEDAW also speaks of different kinds of families. It comes within a specific context, in which it was preceded and followed by certain events. It was preceded by the

Population Conference in Cairo, the Conference on Human Development in Turkey, and the Beijing Declarations. Thus there are problems not present in the convention itself that derive from the context that preceded it. There is, for instance, a candid discussion of abortion and alternative forms of family arrangement, and talk of the “traditional family” replete with all the implicit, negative connotations of the word traditional. Alternative forms of family arrangement include a woman living with another woman and a “partnership” family, neither of which of course suits us or our communities. There is also a discussion of sex education: we are for confronting the challenges we may face and have moved beyond the traditional view that any talk of sex education is shameful. However, including sex education in our curricula in the way they describe is a real problem. The disagreement is over how to do it.

Let us also consider the issue of early marriage. We are in favour of early marriage in certain cases where it is necessary. CEDAW is critical of polygamy, but Islamic law determines cases where it is lawful. They reproach us for early marriage and inheritance, arguing that men receive a greater share than women.

When we discuss these issues with the feminist organisations we speak about the interests of society and not those of the individual, and we speak about preserving society, its morals and religion, particularly given all the social and moral problems in Western society. What is more important, polygamy or adultery?

In reality the problem that plagues our society is not polygamy, which isn't actually a social phenomenon, but the fact that young people can't get married at all, even for the first time.

What I would like to argue is that the way in which these issues specifically are emphasised and blown out of proportion comes within the context in which Islam is being targeted.

Returning to the concepts that accompany with the CEDAW convention, we find the concept of gender among them. Gender is interpreted as one's social identity regardless of one's biological sex. It therefore opens the door to sexual deviation and sex changes, and the concept gender is being promoted in our society as part and parcel of the defence of the rights of women by means of deception. The term is being presented in such a way that its true dimensions remain concealed.

What do you dream of as a Jordanian citizen, even if it is difficult or impossible to achieve at the present time?

My dream for society is the implementation of Islamic *Shari'a* law. When the *Shari'a* is applied across the board then oppression will disappear, hence our slogan “Islam is the solution.” I want to say here that those who offend Islam most are Muslims when they misapply *Shari'a* law. And conversely, the absence of the *Shari'a* has disastrous results. In Morocco, for example, there is what is referred to as the Moroccan Code as well as positive laws, and the negative consequences for Moroccan women are plain to see. And so what I dream of for my society is the implementation of *Shari'a* law.