The Predicament of Muslim Women in Tanzania

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East Africa
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Muslims take considerable pride in Islam's eloquence on the rights and obligations of women. Scholars and laypersons do not hesitate to point out how Islam emancipated women over 1400 years ago – something the global community only began working towards in the last three decades. But despite religious and legal assurances, very few Muslim women can claim personal autonomy; guarantees in marital, personal or political matters; or recognition of their reproductive role. In view of this gap many Muslim women are becoming disillusioned with the popular rhetoric on rights few of them enjoy.

Faced with numerous challenges – oppressive social, political, economic and philosophical systems, a hostile political climate and world economic imbalance – Muslim women are exploring diverse means and forms of exerting themselves. In Tanzania the struggle is about governance, at an individual and institutional level, a struggle touching the heart of fundamental rights and freedoms. Unfortunately religious and political undercurrents blur the real issues at stake. Where does this leave the Muslim women's movement in Tanzania?

As is the case elsewhere, the development of Muslim women has largely been a concern not of Muslim women, but of other people: of Muslim men who claim divine authority over their womenfolk; of Western feminists who (patronizingly) see themselves as trailblazers of gender equality; of the Western media which thrives on ridiculing the image of the cloaked and suppressed non-attractive woman. Even so, Muslim women are responding to these challenges while appreciating that they are both internal and external.

Globalization is bringing new perspectives and challenges to the population. Amidst a dominant global culture, individual identity is now more pronounced with increased symbolism around the image of the Muslim woman. By and large her image signifies Muslims' aspirations to build an Islamic model of governance. Inevitably, the discussion revolves around placing greater restrictions on women.

Muslim women's movements and Muslim activists paint an image of Muslim women far divorced from local realities. While earnestly trying to distance what is Arab from what is Islam, in effect they engage in the Arabization of local customs. In Tanzania some Muslim factions promote the black chador or ᶜabaya, common in parts of the Middle East, over the local *khanga* and *kitenge*, a multi-purpose cotton print. Gender activists on the other hand advocate ideals of women's liberation using models that are alien to the local situation. Failing to appreciate that the basis for human interactions and relations should inform the content and context of their paradigms, the two groups remain at loggerheads, confusing the less enlightened populace.

In defiance of external assault, the local situation rigidifies its system to preserve its essence singling out those who fail to conform. Communities miss the opportunity to reflect on lessons and instead are left reacting to external factors/challenges. In such a scenario, how do we not only recognize but also value the individual state of being?

The struggle for Muslim women in Tanzania is at two main fronts: internal and external. Internally, Muslim women try to exert themselves against unresponsive structures and systems. Women have little access to major Islamic institutions, hardly any of which have women in decision-making bodies. Where space is provided to women, it is symbolic and leaves them with little autonomy to organize or make decisions. Ex-

ternally, they struggle against a global system that increasingly is intolerant of non-Western philosophies or ideologies. The spillover of these dynamics can be appreciated in the treatment Muslim women have attracted in Tanzania, a reality that reflects the gap which civil society organizations are yet to bridge in promoting good governance, equality and justice.

The issue of religion

From 1992–1993 Tanzania witnessed its first openly religious conflict over pork butchers. Enraged by an incident where a 'faithful' had purposefully sold pork, Muslims set about destroying pork butchers in Dar es Salaam. In justifying their actions they asserted that the operations of pork butchers violated city regulations. The incident was trigged by perceived oppression of Muslims by the state. In particular they interpreted the opening of pork butcheries in residential areas as a deliberate affront to Islamic values and freedoms. Muslim women suffered most from the ensuing communal tension. As female Muslim students at the University of Dar es Salaam (the Hill) at this time, we became easy targets for those who wanted to put Muslims in their right place. We were threatened verbally and physically. A few had their headscarves ripped off from their heads. The famous 'Hill' grapevine[1] purported that should the situation get out of hand Muslim women would be raped to assert secular/Christian authority over the Muslim population.

During this period, the Hill was just recovering from the Levina[2] scandal that for the first time exposed the issue of sexual harassment of female students. In response, university authorities formed a gender task force to investigate cases of harassment and to support the harassed. While the media was instrumental in exposing Levina's fate, the harassment of Muslim students went unnoticed by the media and the gender task force. Male students escorted us from classes to our dormitories and vice versa.

Again in 1998 Dar es Salaam witnessed the Mwembechai uprising instigated by a leadership dispute at the local mosque.[3] This was the first time police openly fired live bullets at protestors. Caught in the mêlée and some in their homes, Muslim women were arrested, strip-searched and penetrated with objects in the vaginal and anal areas. Perhaps because it concerned a group detached from social and gender movements, few human rights or gender organizations spoke up against these atrocities. Some felt Muslims deserved this treatment, as they were *wakorofi*, or troublemakers.

During the 2000 elections the military and police violated Muslim women. In Muslim majority areas like Pemba, media reports surfaced of rampant raping of women by the military to quell fierce political opposition. This time, key human rights organizations spoke about the human rights violations on principle. Most comments were, however, directed at the suppression of political rights and not at the violation of women's bodily integrity.

So is there room to apply human rights norms/principles to Muslim women?

The human rights perspective

The Tanzanian Constitution is founded upon democratic principles and social justice and guarantees various rights and freedoms. Article 29 provides for equal treatment before the law. State organs are the constitutional custodians, guided by international human rights conventions and principles of non-discrimination on the basis of sex, colour, ethnicity, religion or personal status.

Yet, judging from the experiences of Muslim women this has not always been the case. The state and activists single-handedly blame religion and customs for women's predicament. Such assertions trivialize the real issues at hand and thus fail to offer sustainable options in realizing gender equality/equity. As a class Muslim women are denied the right to free association, to participation, to an education, freedom of expression and exercise of their religion, enjoyment of personal security and proprietary rights. The *hijab*, for instance, has systematically been used to deny Muslim women education and work opportunities. Following intense activism, a ministerial circular was issued in August 1995 to allow female students to wear the *hijab*. However, this protection is revocable and does not extend to women in employment.

Excessive state interference in Muslim organizations also impacts women's ability to advance. The Tanzania Muslim Council (BAKWATA) is heavily regulated by the state. Muslim women's efforts to organize are officially not recognized if not sanctioned by this body. Likewise it dictates their attempts to exert their autonomy and directs their fate in personal matters. For instance, under the Law of Marriage Act, before dissolving a marriage, the matter has to go before a marriage conciliation board. In the case of Muslims, such matters are directed to BAKWATA, which has a proven record of inaction and insensitivity to women's concerns and interests. Yet, the government refuses to see beyond the political and resists entertaining any challenges to BAKWATA's existence and powers.

Inheritance is another sore issue with women in Tanzania. However, there are two fundamental departures in approaching the issue of property with others in the women's movement. The first rests with the reality that Muslim women are guaranteed property rights as mothers, wives daughters or sisters. Secondly it concerns the concept of inheritance in Islamic jurisprudence as opposed to Western views, a contrast between distributive justice and self-interest. This in no way undermines the real hurdle Muslim women like other women face in asserting their property rights in inheritance matters. However, the solution is not just about giving women those rights but guaranteeing them access and enjoyment of those rights by putting appropriate and responsive mechanisms in place to that effect.

Inspiration from within

Usman Bugaje notes, 'the prevailing intellectual decadence of the Muslim community has over several decades forged a timid mind, which conformed and feared creativity […] lost its analytical capacity and became mechanical in its thinking […] [I]t is easier to evade questions/issues rather than face them, particularly when they relate to women or the private sphere.'[4] This assertion is a true description of the predicament in which we find ourselves. This struggle is about reclaiming what is ours and defining our development.

Sound activism demands a people-centred approach compatible with prevailing concepts of social justice. We can revisit what is empowering in our traditions. For instance, while gender activists clamour for the recognition of women's reproductive role, Islam bestowed this unique status to women. Alternatively, we can draw parallels from indigenous people's movements to assert their rights to land, representation, survival and dignity. Invoking the powers within becomes a means of facilitating transformation supported, not dictated, by the state.

It is evident that if not empowered and not allowed to assert their voice, assume their position, exert their authority and obligations in the family and society, the development of Muslim women in Tanzania will remain a hypothetical, desired state of being rather than a genuine sense of being. In essence, our struggle has been about the dignity of womanhood. For us in the Sahiba *Sisters Foundation, this is a struggle at the heart of our very being.

Notes
1. Known as Punch, initially set up as a form of social commentary by students but later became notorious for ridiculing women and politicians.
2. Levina was a 1ˢᵗ year student who rejected the advances of some male students. They in turn harassed her. She sought help but the authorities were unresponsive, resulting in her committing suicide.
3. See Hamza Njozi, *The Mwembechai Uprising*, available at www.islamorg.tz.
4. Usman Bugaje, 'Do Muslim Women Need Empowerment' (paper presented at a conference on 'Islam and Contemporary Issues' organized by the Movement for Islamic Culture and Awareness, 26 October 1997).

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