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 around 1400 years ago. It is important to recognize that for the global community only began working towards the realization of gender equality in the last three decades. Despite religious and cultural assumptions, very few Muslim women can assert secular/Christian authority over the private sphere. This in no way undermines the real hurdle between distributive justice and self-interest.

Gender activists paint an image of Muslim women that for 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 woman. By and large, their 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 argue that the image of Muslim women is 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 ‘ubaya, common in parts of the Middle East, over the local khanga and kitenge, a multi-purpose cotton print. Gentrifier 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 paradigm, some groups remain at loggerheads, confusing the less enlightened populace.

In the context of 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 understand the dual 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. Externally, they struggle against a global system that increasingly is intolerant of non-Western philosophies or identity. Spillover of these dynamics can be appreciated in the treatment Muslim women have attracted in Tanzania, a reality that reflects the gap Muslim women’s organizations are yet to bridge in promoting good governing, 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 the city of es Saliam. In justifying the attack, they alleged that the operations of pork butchers violated city regulations. The incident was triggered by perceived oppression of Muslims by the state. In particular they interpreted the opening of pork butcheries in residential areas as a deliberate attempt to intrude into Islam’s values and freedoms. Muslim women suffered most from the ensuing communal tension. As female Muslim students at the University of Dar es Salaam (UNZA) 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 purported that should the situation get out of hand Muslims and Muslim women would be sent to an asset-secure Christian/authority over the Muslim population.

During this period, the Hill Hill was just recovering from the Levine’s scandal that for the first time exposed the issue of sexual harassment of female students. Perhaps felt Muslims thought that if First time exposed the issue of sexual harassment, the harassment of female Muslim students was unnoticed by the media and the gen touching the heart of fundamental rights and freedoms. Women are becoming disillusioned with the popular productive role. In view of this gap many Muslim women are exploring diverse means and avenues in which we find ourselves. This struggle is about democracy and not what is ours and defining our development.

Sound activism demands a people-centred approach compatible with prevailing ideas and traditions of social justice. We can revisit what is empowering in our traditions. For instance, while gender activists clamour for the dignity of womanhood. For us in the Sahaba *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 in Dar es Salaam. The newsletter is notorious for ridiculing women and political leaders.
2. Levine was a 1-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.

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