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# Islamic feminism: Unbinding the ties



By Grace Segrán

## **Can you be liberal, feminist and Muslim at the same time? Malaysian activist Marina Mahathir says “Yes.”**

“Islamic feminism”? The phrase sounds contradictory at first: Islam is often viewed as intrinsically patriarchal and opposed to “feminism”. Marina Mahathir – Malaysian activist and writer – understands why Islam is perceived this way but claims that while individual Muslim believers may have a patriarchal outlook, this does not mean that Islam itself is patriarchal. “Like other religions, most interpreters of Islam are men and therefore they will bring their patriarchal interpretations into society. And because they hold power, few would challenge it,” she says.

But Marina is involved with Sisters in Islam (SIS) and its Musawah (Equality) movement which believes that many passages of the Qur'an promote equality between men and women: “Our belief is that the main message of the Qur'an is justice and equality for humankind, therefore it cannot possibly support any sort of discrimination.”

She asserts, “Women are now better educated and are participating in society, so surely Islam must make itself relevant to today, rather than just the time of the Prophet.” Islamic feminists believe that they can find support for feminist values and principles from the Qur'an.

Marina is one of “Women Deliver 100”, a list of the 100 most inspiring people who have improved the lives of girls and women worldwide by Women Deliver, a New York-based advocacy group in celebration of the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day in 2011.

She spoke to INSEAD Knowledge recently in Singapore to deliver the Shirin Fozdar lecture at the Singapore Management University.

## **Women in the Arab Spring**

The past two decades have been a struggle for SIS, as the organisation tries to spread its message and confront attacks from various fronts. It has survived, Marina believes, “because the Muslim world may be opening up to the ideas behind Islamic feminism”.

As protest after explosive protest took place throughout the Arab Spring in 2011, the world watched as Middle Eastern youth demanded change in their countries. Women played an important and vocal role in the revolution. In countries that have been known for their patriarchal values, women took to the streets, demanding political representation and equal rights. For the first time in history, feminism and Islamism appeared to be colluding.

The events of the Arab Spring have sent the message that people in the Middle East are ready for change. Marina believes that two things became clear through the protests. “First, that young people in the Middle East are just as hungry for freedom and democracy as anyone else in the rest of the world,” she says. “Secondly, young women were as much at the forefront of these revolutions as the young men.”

Islamic feminists have reason to be optimistic about the future: in some cases, the Arab Spring protests have resulted in real change. Several governments have responded to the revolution by creating constitutional change that includes putting more women in top positions. For instance, Tunisia’s new government has crafted a system that ensures that women are

represented in new constituent assemblies. In Turkey, the Justice and Development Party has sought to give women equality in the marketplace, which has in turn led to impressive rates of economic growth.

Morocco drafted a new constitution that guarantees gender equality. However, in November 2011, the Islamist party swept into power. It is now unclear what this means for these constitutional changes. Not all countries have made as much progress: Egypt did not elect any women at all and has made little attempt to include women in decision-making positions.

Still, Marina believes that people in the Middle East are now conscious of participatory leadership. This will certainly affect women. “In a globalised world where people are so exposed to information, it is no longer possible for governments to keep people out of the discourse on laws and politics. In doing so, attitudes towards women have to change,” she says.

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