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Silence v. Justice: The Case of the Abused Muslim Women in Elgin

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Social media is abuzz with the story of the well-respected scholar at the Islamic institute in Elgin, Illinois, who is accused of abusing his female students. When I read the story, I got flashbacks to that painful moment in my childhood when one of my religious teachers tried to violate his boundaries with me. As soon as my family heard about the incident, the teacher was fired and disappeared from my life completely.

Significantly, although I come from a long line of religious scholars, no one in my family ever asked me to be silent about this incident or blamed me for it. Abused women from Elgin are entitled to no less. Nevertheless, decisive action was not taken immediately, and some members of the community urged the women to remain silent. Others blamed them.

This attitude is preposterous and fundamentally unfair, especially since justice is a core principle in Islam. Muslim jurists have always declared that the Heavens and Earth were created on the basis of Justice. Moreover, Islam has no clergy. Scholars and imams have no special access to heaven. The Prophet himself stated that Muslims are equal like the teeth of a comb. This means that no one gets a free pass because he is an imam, a religious scholar, or a rich or influential person.

Scholars have repeatedly cited Qur'anic verses that require us to pursue justice even if the guilty one was a close relative of ours. Indeed, this is what the Qur'anic injunction of "promoting virtue and prohibiting vice" is about. It is not about terrorizing peaceful women in public about their attire. Why are the Qur'anic verses being interpreted to protect male offenders and oppress female victims? It is such imbalance of justice in our Muslim World that has led to unrestrained criminal and autocratic behavior in the name of Islam.

With the rise of a new generation of American Muslims, born and raised in these United States, we are ushering in an age of renaissance for Islam. Our new generation is refusing to abide by unjust cultural customs imported from other countries, such as a code of silence to suppress an internal scandal. This new generation believes in its full human and constitutional rights. Furthermore, members of this generation are not conflicted like some of their parents. They sincerely believe that Islam upholds these same rights.

Nowhere is this renaissance more visible than in the case of these young outspoken women from Elgin. KARAMAH has been in discussion with HEART Women & Girls, their advocate, offering our continual support as they navigate this process. But as this course of action became known in the community, the women were blamed, shamed and shunned for breaking their silence. With the exception of minimal acknowledgement, the overwhelming response was

silence. This fact in itself is as shameful as the alleged acts of the accused scholar.

These American Muslim women were born free in these United States. They are full of dignity and self-assertiveness. They understand that Islam is not protected through silence, and that Muslim communities need to undergo an active process of reformation. These American women believe that Muslims are equal like the teeth of a comb. They believe that they are entitled to protect themselves, and to clean the community from predators. So they are doing just that.

I recognize that those who blame them for going public are also partly driven by fear for their community in the face of rising Islamophobia. To protect against that, they seek refuge in a corrupt custom of the past; a past from which the Muslim world today continues to suffer. American born Muslims, however, understand that in this country, the only real solution to scandal is justice and transparency. We cannot address a wrong by committing another. As for correcting the image of Muslims in this country, this will be a time consuming task. We have to embark upon it thoughtfully and honestly. Our shining stars would be this new generation of American Muslim achievers and bridge builders.