

KARAMAH: MUSLIM WOMEN LAWYERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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The last two decades have witnessed an unusual level of interest by western feminists in the rights of Muslim women. This interest has taken many forms, ranging from writing articles and holding conferences, to funding local groups in Muslim countries and supporting critics of the status quo. These activities have no doubt been at least partly motivated by an emerging global sisterhood that was steadily reinforced by the earlier world conferences on women.

For these reasons, we find it remarkable that despite their efforts some outspoken western feminists have created a deep sense of malaise in the global women's movement. In particular, many Muslim women have felt silenced by the very western movement that claims to stand up for their rights. The insistence of some western feminists at uncovering and attacking every aspect of Muslim societies *they* consider oppressive is reminiscent of the orientalist/colonialist insistence at liberating Muslim women by tearing their veils. As history shows, such approaches do not work.

Worse yet, many of these feminists who hold themselves out as experts on Islam and Islamic cultures are hopelessly confused about both. Their statements and works attest to this fact. Similarly, the women they select and support as Muslim spokeswomen tend to have no Islamic grass root support and tend also to have a larger audience in the West than in their own homeland. These facts, combined with various practices surrounding earlier world and regional conferences, have given the clear signal that at least with respect to certain western women, their activities on behalf of women of color and Muslim women are suspect. More importantly, these activities tend to reflect a patriarchal mode of relations.

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This is not a new critique of the western women's movement, but this critique has now acquired global legitimacy. Many years ago, women of color in the United States argued that western feminist theories tended to be unworkable for their communities because they reflected white middle class concerns and values. For this reason, Alice Walker and other women of color have chosen to refer to themselves not as "feminists" but rather as "womanists." The difference is that a "womanist" is "committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female. Not a separatist.... traditionally universalist."

This too is the point of view of Muslim women, and these women have begun to speak out in their own voice. From Copenhagen to Cairo, they have taken issue with platforms that predominantly reflected the interests of the industrial North. Today in Beijing, their voices will again be heard. These are many voices, different voices, voices that might represent substantially different views. But regardless of their differences, they all espouse the Qur'an as their fundamental document, and are committed as a result to the "survival and wholeness of [the] entire [humanity], male and female". They also are fully aware that the Qur'an contains all the elements on which Muslims can found both their liberation and their humanitarian commitment.

By participating in this Fourth World Conference on Women, **KARAMAH** hopes to contribute to the global efforts of our Muslim sisters who are seeking a better understanding of women's rights in Islam. **KARAMAH** also wishes to remind some of our western non-Muslim sisters that Islam is not an ancient Eastern religion, but a vibrant western religion too. There are today no less than five million Muslims in the United States alone. Many observant, often veiled, American Muslim women are doctors, lawyers and professors. This should not come as a surprise to anyone, because *Islam does not oppress women, patriarchy does.*

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T. C. Williams School of Law
University of Richmond
Richmond, Virginia 23173