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*Respect must be accorded to the dignity of women for the roles they themselves define and the challenges they undertake, writes Sayed-Iqbal Mohamed*

## Men are not the 'chosen' ones

Muslims generally are often afraid of criticising inequalities and inequities that exist within their community. It is taboo to talk about incidents of rape, incest, sodomy, drugs, abuse of women, HIV-issues that reflect the prevailing social conditions in South Africa. This fear or reluctance to talk about abuse, to deal with situations frankly, the need for intervention and remedy may be due to several reasons.

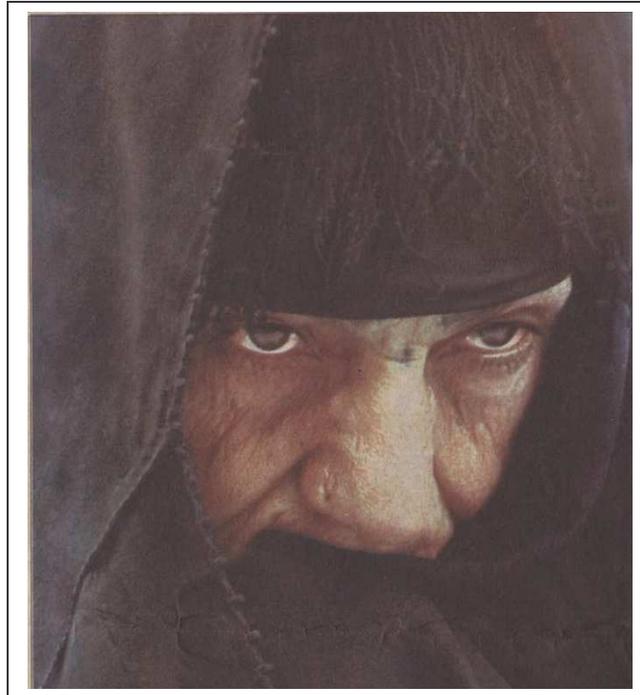
There is the fear that the image of Islam will be tarnished and it would be therefore "prudent" not to discuss matters of such nature even within families. Some "leaders" or "scholars" explain the need for patience and forgiveness with paradise being the reward for abused women. They are not aware or not trained in their "patient-forgiveness-paradise" approach to deal

with women who are traumatised, demonised victims. Their interest is to protect and perpetuate the patriarchal system at any cost.

### Abusers

Social stigma that is often linked to victims (women) and the exoneration of male abusers is another reason Muslim women prefer to remain silent. The economic power wielded by men is perhaps another crucial factor in silencing abused women. The point of departure for me is the fact that the Qur'an and the teachings of all Prophets, including Prophet Muhammad (God's peace and blessings be upon them), taught human values based on justice and equity.

They emphasised the rights of men and women to be equal before the Shari'ah (Divine law that governs every aspect of



life). The Qur'an states that one must stand firmly against any wrong or violation even if it were to expose one's family, friends, rich or poor, those in authority and even one's self. Muslim women who are forced to endure hardships and agony by abusive men must exercise their Islamic rights of civil and criminal action and social isolation by publicly exposing abusers.

There are different categories of abuse and polygamy is one serious instance of growing abuse in South Africa. Some men "legalise" their relationships with their mistresses through the mistaken notion that a polygamous marriage is sanctioned in Islam. Their reasoning is that their "high" libidinal drive justifies taking more than one wife.

Islam is based on sound logic and reason, as the Prophet said, and this begs the obvious question of women in similar circumstances. Monogamy is the rule in Islam, and the exceptions to the rule have stringent conditions, one of which is the consent of the first wife. In South Africa, the drive to maintain wealth within the family and arranging marriages to achieve this is contrary to the principles of Islam. Wealth is supposed to be circulated so that through this economic mechanism, society as a whole can benefit.

As for arranged marriages, a young woman approached the Prophet, aggrieved at the fact that she was married to someone without her consent. The Prophet said she could terminate the

marriage because her consent was fundamental. She had the right to contract her own marriage, just as she had the right to enter into an economic contract in her own right as a dignified person to the extent of using her maiden name.

Muslim women also have the right to sue for divorce when marriages break down irretrievably. Some South African "scholars" advise women to be patient and forgiving. The arbitration and reconciliation process clearly laid down in the Qur'an is glossed over or ignored totally.

Women are almost always the "culprits" even in the case of husbands being abusers or drug addicts. The Qur'anic principle of consultation that governs marriage and family life, the same principle that directs the socio-political domain, is often disregarded by certain male "scholars." In the field of education, there are instances of young women being denied the right to education supposedly based on Islamic doctrines. This is a blatant contradiction of the Prophet's dictum that knowledge should be sought from the cradle to the grave and that it was obligatory for men and women to seek education.

Muslim women need to be informed of their rights, which is only possible by going back to the Shari'ah (Islamic law)-the two fundamental sources being the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the teachings and practice of the Prophet). There is no

“priesthood” in Islam and “scholars” have no right to dictate terms and conditions based on their male-dominated interpretation.

### **Mandate**

There are outstanding Muslim male “scholars” in the world and in South Africa who are critical of the subjugation and abuse of women by men. These are but a few. Muslim women in South Africa share common ground with women of other faiths, creed and cultures to stop the growing abuse by men who have no mandate from God Almighty to be the privileged or “chosen” ones. Muslim men and all South African men, as husbands, sons and fathers, need to make a paradigm shift. They could start with what might appear to be trivial matters, liking sharing domestic responsibilities rather than “assisting” women.

The Qur’an mentions that women and men are co-partners originating from a single cell. It stresses the right to respect women- to respect the wombs that bore children with pain, labour and love. There is a need to re-establish family values base on consultation, mutual trust and respect. Families are social units that shape the course of society and women are the anchors.

Women must be respected for who they are in their own rights, not in the subservient image men have of them. Respect must be accorded to the dignity of women for the roles they themselves

define and the challenges they undertake. Women as the Prophet repeatedly emphasised are the mothers of society and civilisation.

Rape them, abuse them-society will tear apart and disintegrate into total anarchy. There are more women than men globally, and more women earn a meagre income for longer working hours, working under more difficult conditions than men, and society is certainly men-driven as we cross the threshold into the next millennium.

Women and men conscious of the God-given dignity to all His creations can make the difference for a better and just society.

*Sayed-Iqbal Mohamed is the head of the Organisation of Civic Rights and an ANC councillor.*