

The Veil, Women's Rights and Political Islam Maryam Namazie

There are innumerable women and girls in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa to right here in the heart of Europe who know from personal experience what it means to be female under Islam – hidden from view, bound, gagged, mutilated, murdered, without rights, and threatened and intimidated day in and day out for transgressing Islamic mores.

The veil, more than anything else, symbolises this bleak reality.

In my opinion, it is therefore impossible to address the status of women under Islamic laws and defend women's rights without addressing and denouncing the veil.

And this is why the veil is the first thing that Islamists impose when they have any access to power.

And also why improper veiling, its removal and its burning at demonstrations and gatherings - as often seen in Iran for example - or its removal when one leaves the home - in places where it is not the law of the land but that of self-appointed imams and family members - has become a symbol of resistance.

I know our opponents often argue that there are many more pressing matters with regards to women's status. Why all the fuss they ask?

To me, it is like asking what all the fuss was about racial apartheid – or segregation of the races – in apartheid South Africa. After all there were so many pressing issues faced by Blacks in that country. I suppose that is why the then South African government kept asserting that separate does not mean unequal (which incidentally is an argument Islamists make all the time). We know otherwise.

And we know – at least in hindsight - why the physical act of segregation was crucial and symbolic of what it meant to be Black under apartheid.

Similarly, the veil is a symbol of sexual apartheid and the segregation of the sexes. In countries where Islam rules, like in Iran, the separate entrances for women in certain government offices; separate areas for women's seating on buses for example; the banning of women from certain public arenas like sport stadiums; a curtain dividing the Caspian sea for segregated swimming and so on is what it means in practice to be a female under Islam. That people transgress these rules daily is a testimony to their humanity and not the laws or state that imposes it by force.

When we talk about the situation in Iran, some of these apologists will concede that compulsory veiling must be opposed (though I have yet to hear them oppose it other than in their argument's in defence of the veil) but if it is a choice freely made than one must defend the 'right' to veil.

I wholeheartedly disagree. Adult women may have the 'right' to veil though that right is in no way absolute as many rights aren't and a completely different matter for children – which I will come to later. But having the right to do something is very different from defending the 'freely chosen' veil or the 'right to veil'. There may be women who 'freely choose' to genitally mutilate their daughters or immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre but that does not mean that we must then defend the right of women to do so or defend the practice of Suttee or FGM. The defence of rights is not about making everyone agree as you will always find people who will defend and commit the indefensible – and that is what religion is in my opinion. It is about protecting human beings sometimes even from themselves.

The usage of the term choice in this context is extremely deceptive. First off in many places like Iran it is the law of the land. You are fined, arrested, beaten, imprisoned and even killed for transgressing the veil and Islamic mores.

In others where it is not the law, it is effectively so because of pressure and intimidation from the parasitical self-appointed so-called community and Islamic leaders, and family members.

One example of this is the joint statement about the veil from 'Muslim groups, scholars and leaders' in Britain which has stated that the veil 'is not open to debate'. The statement goes so far as to 'advise all Muslims to exercise extreme caution in this issue since denying any part of Islam may lead to disbelief' and to urge them to 'keep this debate within the realm of scholarly discussion amongst the people of knowledge and authority in the Muslim community.'

A recent Channel 4 Dispatches programme recorded a mullah in Green Lane mosque in Birmingham saying 'Allah has created the woman deficient' and a satellite broadcast from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, beamed into the mosque suggesting that children should be hit if they don't pray and if they don't wear the hijab.

You've also all heard Australia's senior Islamic cleric, Sheik Taj Aldin al-Hilali comparing unveiled women to 'uncovered meat' implying that they invite rape and sexual assault. 'If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside ... without cover, and the cats come to eat it ... whose fault is it, the cats' or the uncovered meat's? The uncovered meat is the problem. If she was in her room, in her home, in her hijab, no problem would have occurred.'

Whilst misogynist sermons are the norm in mosques across the world, and across religions, these are a few examples of how a climate of intimidation and fear makes many a woman 'choose' the veil even in places where veiling is not compulsory.

Remove these, and I would even go so far as to say, that there will be few who will 'choose' to live in a mobile prison – other than those who want to show their allegiance to the rising political Islamic movement.

Also, a 'woman's right to choose' must be preceded at the very least by legal and social sexual equality. This is not the case for most. So if you consider the veil on a social scale, it represents neither a right nor a choice and it is a lie to say otherwise.

Of course, women wearing mini-skirts and Jimmy Choos may be under pressure from the fashion industry's impossible ideals – as we often hear argued in defence of the veil - but it is as ridiculous to compare mini-skirts with the veil, as it is to compare Jimmy Choos with foot binding, which aims at preventing women from 'wandering'.

The veil is not a piece of cloth or clothing, though it is often compared to miniskirts or other 'lewd' forms of clothing the rest of us unveiled women seem to wear. Just as the straight jacket or body bag are not pieces of clothing. Just as the chastity belt was not a piece of clothing. Just as the Star of David pinned on Jews during the holocaust was not just a bit of cloth.

This of course does not mean that only women under Islam or veiled women are oppressed. But it is important to oppose the veil in its own right.

And this has nothing to do with being hate-filled or promoting an attack on Muslims or veiled women though Islamists portray it as such. Interesting coming from a reactionary right wing movement that has turned murder and mayhem into an art form, but as I have said before, opposing FGM does not mean you are attacking those who are mutilated; opposing foot binding or Suttee likewise. In fact, it is an essential to a principled defence of women's rights.

And this is why the chador, burqa and neqab must be banned – to defend women's rights. Not because they affects interaction, communication and so on. These are side effects. And certainly not because they may make people like Jack Straw uncomfortable. It has to be banned because sexual apartheid is as unacceptable as racial apartheid. Because it is unacceptable for women to be segregated in the 21 century; and for women to walk around in a mobile prison or body bag because religion deems that they be kept invisible.

Any mention of a ban, though, quickly raises cries of authoritarianism. As an aside, it is interesting how much religion can get away with and that its decree for example that women be veiled is not considered authoritarian. But more importantly, a ban is not necessarily bad. Society bans many things in order to safeguard and protect the people living in it, often due to left and progressive social movements demanding it. For example, child labour is banned, so is FGM, child pornography, rape and so on. A ban in such situations is a good thing; it helps to stop abuses from taking place. The

argument that banning will only increase the burqa or neqab is ridiculous when used in other examples pertaining to defending people's rights but is somehow considered proper discourse when it comes to the veil.

Also calling for a ban does not necessarily mean you want to or will criminalise a segment of the population. For example, there is a rule to wear a helmet when driving a motorbike but I don't think there are hundreds of Sikhs languishing in British jails for not doing so. Or for that matter people who smoke in non-smoking areas, and size zero models...

Islamists and their apologists demand that we respect people's religious expressions and beliefs. As I have said many a time, we are duty bound to respect human beings but not every belief or religious expression. Having the right to a belief and religion is not the same as it being a no go area to do as it pleases free of any criticism or condemnation.

Also they say that it is racist to criticise Islam, the veil and political Islam. What rubbish. You cannot be racist against an idea or belief or ideology or its expression. Racism is distinctions, exclusions, restrictions or preferences based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin (albeit constructed) of individuals - of human beings - not their beliefs. Saying it is so is just another attempt at silencing all opposition and criticism.

A ban on the burqa, chador, neqab and its likes is important but it is no where enough. The hijab or any conspicuous religious symbol must be banned from the state and education and relegated to the private sphere. This helps to ensure that government offices and officials from judges, to clerks, to doctors and nurses are not promoting their religious beliefs and are instead doing their jobs. In the same way that a teacher can't teach creationism instead of evolution and science in the classroom; a pharmacist can't refuse contraceptive pills to a woman because of her beliefs; a male doctor can't refuse to treat a woman patient or vice versa.

Finally, child veiling must be banned full stop. This is a children's rights issue. While adults may 'choose' veiling or a religion, children by their very nature cannot make such choices; what they do is really what their parents tell them to do. Again the use of the term choice here is deceptive. Children must be protected even if they 'choose' to stay with abusive parents, to work to support poor families or to stop attending school.

Children have the absolute right to be children – nothing must be allowed to segregate them or restrict them from accessing information, advances in society and rights, playing, swimming and in general doing things children must do. Whatever their beliefs, parents do not have the right to impose their beliefs, including veiling on children just because they are their own children, just as they can't deny their children medical assistance or beat and neglect them or marry them off at 9 because it's part of their beliefs or religion. Child veiling is a form of child abuse and has to be stopped.

Throughout history, progress and change have come about not by appeasing, apologizing or excusing reaction, but by standing up to it firmly and unequivocally. This is what has to be against Islam, political Islam and the veil.

We have to state loud and clear that sexual apartheid has no place in the 21st century; enough is enough.