

Women and Islam Hadhari

Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi speaks exclusively to Inspire on the subject of women's empowerment, particularly in the context of civilisational Islam or Islam Hadhari.



It cannot be denied that Islam has become an increasingly powerful imperative for Muslims to act today.

This compulsion to act because of religion can be directed towards good, towards progress, towards development. This is something that Malaysia has demonstrated, and intends to continue proving, through Islam Hadhari or an approach towards a progressive Islamic civilisation. It is an approach that values substance and not form, and an approach that is compatible with

modernity, yet firmly rooted in the noble values and injunctions of Islam.

Islam Hadhari is an approach that emphasises development consistent with the tenets of Islam, and focuses on enhancing the quality of life. It aims to achieve this via the mastery of knowledge; the development of the individual and the nation; the implementation of a dynamic economic, trading and financial system; and the pursuit of integrated and balanced development to develop pious and capable people, with care

for the environment and protection of the weak and disadvantaged.

Islam Hadhari is not a new religion. It is not a new teaching nor is it a new *mazhab* or denomination. Islam Hadhari is an effort to bring the *ummah* back to basics, to return to the primacy of values and principles, as prescribed in the Quran and the *Hadith* that form the foundation of Islamic civilisation. The ten fundamental principles of this approach are:

a) faith and piety in Allah

- b) just and worthy government
- c) free and independent people
- d) vigorous pursuit and mastery of knowledge
- e) balanced and comprehensive economic development
- f) a good quality of life for the people
- g) protection of the rights of minority groups and women
- h) cultural and moral integrity
- i) safeguarding natural resources and the environment
- j) strong defence capabilities

It is in line with these principles that

Women receive a specific mention in the ten principles, because my administration recognises that despite living in an age when the emancipation of women has become the norm in many parts of the world, the rights of all women, both Muslim and those of other faiths – a whole half of humankind, continue to be ignored in many areas. It is most lamentable, that although women are certainly no minority in terms of numbers, they cannot be said to have gained the status that they are entitled to in terms of rights and equality.

shape their own destinies and endowed them with a sense of self-esteem. Malaysia is one of those countries where women have undergone a quiet revolution in the last four decades or so. The numbers of boys and girls are, in effect, equal in our secondary schools. In professions like accountancy and law, figures for 2004 show that women now make up more than 40% in those respective fields, and in disciplines like dentistry, women are now the majority with over 54%.

In Malaysia, as elsewhere, the single most important factor in the emancipation of women has been education. Every other achievement of women is due directly or indirectly to education. It is an oft-cited fact, and one to be proud of in many ways, that today there are more females than males in our institutions of higher learning. This is true of a number of other countries too.

There is no reason to fear the emancipation and empowerment of women. The better educated the women are, the greater the potential for the development of the family as a spiritually stable, ethically sound and intellectually vibrant unit of society. When women are economically productive, society as a whole becomes economically stronger and more resilient. When women participate in politics and society, the practice of democracy becomes more vigorous and the principles of good governance acquire greater social acceptance.

Because the emancipation and empowerment of women is beneficial to humankind, many religious philosophies recognise the contribution that women can make to the well-being of society – even though in practice these religions may have deviated from their own teachings. This is true even from the perspective of my own religion – which is frequently linked to injustices, real and perceived, to women.

The Quran acknowledges that while there are nonetheless physiological and



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our laws and policies in Malaysia have been and continue to be formulated and reviewed. In Islam Hadhari, these are laws and policies that represent the best interests of society or 'maslaha' – all members of society, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, religion or culture.

In many societies today, women are educated, work outside their homes, earn their own incomes, enjoy social mobility, participate in politics and perform various public roles. This has provided women with greater control over their own lives, enhanced their ability to

psychological differences between men and women, they are both equal in the eyes of God. In the Quran, for instance, the woman – like the man – is elevated to the status of vicegerent or *khalifah*. In their exercise of rights and responsibilities as *khalifah*, the Quran makes no distinction between male and female.

Surah Al-Ahzab, Ayat 35 states:

“For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who engage much in Allah’s praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward.”

Since the Quran liberated women from their subservient status in pre-Islamic Arab society and bestowed dignity upon them, it not surprising that women in the days of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and in the early decades of Islam, played a major role in shaping the nascent

Muslim *ummah*. It is significant that out of the four most perfect women in the eyes of Islam – Maryam (the mother of Jesus), Khadijah (the Prophet’s first wife), Asiya (wife of the Pharaoh in Moses’s time) and Fatimah (the

Muslim history. It is worth remembering that it was a woman, Zubaidiyah, the wife of the great Abbassid caliph, Harun Al-Rashid, who improved the water supply system in Mecca. It was she who increased the depth of the well

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Prophet’s daughter and wife of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Talib), the last three were all actively involved in economic, political or social affairs. This tradition of women serving the public good has continued right through

Zamzam and dug a well on the plain of ‘Ararat’. An aqueduct was planned to bring water into the city from springs 12 miles away.

In spite of all this, and in spite of being adherents of a faith that we believe



to be just and fair, a faith that promotes the equality of women, we are forced to confront a reality where base prejudice has been veiled by religion, allowing gender discrimination to be regarded as a norm in most societies. While patriarchy exists in many places throughout the globe, Islam in particular has been used by many as apparent justification for relegating women to a lesser role. As such, given the importance accorded to women in Islam and in Muslim history, it is befitting that a Muslim country like Malaysia should regard protection of the rights of women as one of the principles of Islam Hadhari.

In addition, given that Islam Hadhari views Islam from a civilisational perspective, the protection of the rights of women in Islam Hadhari is an acknowledgement of the important role that women have played in the shaping of Islamic civilisation, and indeed, of human civilisation as a whole. To appreciate the principle of the rights of women in Islam Hadhari, one has to read the principle in conjunction with all the other nine principles in Islam Hadhari, particularly the principles about justice and the pursuit of knowledge.

Acknowledging the rights of women in Islam Hadhari is no guarantee that their position would improve or that the grievances that they have will be resolved. All women in Malaysia face several challenges, none of which would be easy to overcome. There appear to be elements within our society that are uncomfortable with the advancement of women. They try to obstruct the progress of women through barriers and strictures legitimised in the name of religion or culture. It is not the religious principle or cultural value they cite which is the problem. It is the way in which it is interpreted and misapplied that causes problems for women, and by extension, for society.

Most of the time it is men, certain religious theologians from different faiths, who are commonly responsible for this misinterpretation and misapplication of religious principles. But some women too, cannot entirely absolve themselves of responsibility for their lot. Shallow contentment and complacency prevent us all from achieving our full potential let alone scaling the greater heights that we often declare as an objective. This is why Islam Hadhari recognises that re-education and religious reform, including education and reform in the areas of gender sensitisation across the board and increased awareness of the legitimate rights and aspirations of women, are objectives that we must set out to achieve.

I believe the biggest stumbling block to women's progress and development in the area of rights and equality relates to mindsets and attitudes towards women. Such mindsets and attitudes are in fact common across many cultures and faiths here in Asia, and also in the so-called developed world in the West. A multi-ethnic and multi-religious country like Malaysia must recognise and protect the rights of all its people, women included, and most certainly women of other faiths, be they a minor-

ity. There is no tolerance in my administration for discrimination and prejudice against any religious group. I am ever mindful that while I am a Muslim, I am also a leader of all Malaysians – whatever their faith.

It is nevertheless important in Malaysia's context to address the specific issue of Islam and women. Ensuring the rights of women will require reform and renewal in Islamic thought. I have always believed that by opening up the discursive place in the Muslim world, we enrich our intellectual tradition and directly challenge the extremist doctrines that Islam has become synonymous with over the last few years. While we recognise that rituals are important and that the written word of the Quran is sacred, we also believe that as Muslims we must understand the spirit and ultimate objectives of our religion.

In the past and most regrettably in some instances in the present day, *Shariah* for example has been subjected to socio-political influences resulting in laws bearing the name of Islam that in fact run wholly against the spirit and principles of the faith. I have stated on many occasions that the renewal of Islamic thought must be an ongoing process – ensuring the universality of the message, its pluralism and diversity, and not be ossified and fossilised by blind imitation of traditional thought and opinion.

In this regard, I have repeatedly called for the relevance of contemporary *ijti-*

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had, which is the effort a Muslim jurist or scholar makes in order to deduce a law or opinion that is not self-evident from the sources of the *shariah*. The problems that contemporary Muslim societies are confronted with today are



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not the problems of the 6th century, and the solutions we need today do not lie with the notion of a *shariah* purportedly final and complete fourteen hundred years ago – particularly in the case of women. The notion that the Islamic concept of law is absolute and hence immutable has resulted in intellectual inertia among some scholars – noticeably on the subject of women and sadly, in a continued injustice towards them.

In short, Islam Hadhari seeks to have an understanding of Islam that is authentic and rooted within the tradition, yet humane, just and compassionate without exception. Under Islam Hadhari, God willing, women will not feel that statements describing Islam as a religion of justice and mercy in reality only speak to women with many exceptions – inadvertently or otherwise. Women, empowered through Islam

Hadhari, it is hoped, will be the trailblazers of this new approach to the religion.

In our continued efforts to ensure that Malaysia will be a platform for a thriving Islam and remain an ongoing testament to the truth that Islam embraces progress and modernity, women's rights cannot be ignored. In our goal to build a knowledgeable society, a people capable of facing the challenges of globalisation and competition, women's rights cannot be ignored. In our stated objectives of becoming a progressive, industrialised nation by the year 2020, women's rights cannot be ignored. And in our quest for excellence, glory and distinction for Malaysia, women's rights certainly cannot be ignored.

My administration understands that while women in Malaysia have come a long way, many issues and injustices

remain. Numbers of women in decision-making positions both in government and the private sector remain relatively low. Of all women, only 47% are in the workforce and many sectors see almost negligible numbers as compared to men. Violence against women is still a problem and more needs to be done in terms of preventive measures in addition to punitive action.

We are taking tangible steps towards the progress and development of women in a broad spectrum of areas. We are working to address some long-standing concerns of women, especially with regards to equality in the workplace and within the court systems. The first Cabinet Committee on Gender Equality has been convened, chaired by me, and has made good progress.

Nevertheless, empowering women through education and encouraging the change of bigoted and dogmatic mindsets are tasks that cannot be borne by the government alone. We all have a role as a promoter of partnerships between men and women for the development of the community.

When the history of the 21st century is recorded, let Malaysia be mentioned in the context of not only progress and achievement for the country, but also the advancement, empowerment and emancipation of women. I believe this to be a goal that we can all aspire to and achieve. Let us therefore not shirk the trust and responsibility placed upon us. Let us always be ready to take the bold and brave steps necessary to build a just and equal world for all women and men. ■