The Rights of Women in Islam given by Zakir Naik in a debate

PART1

PART2
The Status of Women in Islam

By Jamal A. Badawi

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PREFACE

Family, society and ultimately the whole of mankind is treated by Islam on an ethical basis. Differentiation in sex is neither a credit nor a drawback for the sexes. Therefore, when we talk about status of woman in Islam it should not lead us to think that Islam has no specific guidelines, limitations, responsibilities and obligations for women. What makes one valuable and respectable in the eyes of Allah, the Creator of mankind and the universe, is neither one's prosperity, position, intelligence, physical strength nor beauty, but only one's Allah-consciousness and awareness (taqwa). However, since in the Western culture and in cultures influenced by it, there exists a disparity between men and women there is more need for stating Islam's position in this important issue in a clear way.

I. INTRODUCTION

The status of women in society is neither a new issue nor is it a fully settled one.

The position of Islam on this issue has been among the subjects presented to the Western reader with the least objectivity.

This paper is intended to provide a brief and authentic exposition of what Islam stands for in this regard. The teachings of Islam are based essentially on the Qur'an (God's revelation) and Hadeeth (elaboration by Prophet Muhammad).

The Qur'an and the Hadeeth, properly and unbiasedly understood, provide the basic source of authentication for any position or view attributed to Islam.

The paper starts with a brief survey of the status of women in the pre-Islamic era. It then focuses on these major questions: What is the position of Islam regarding the status of woman in society? How different is that position from "the spirit of the time," which was dominant when Islam was revealed? How would this compare with the "rights" which were finally gained by women in recent decades?

II. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

One major objective of this paper is to provide a fair evaluation of what Islam contributed (or failed to contribute) toward the restoration of woman's dignity and rights. In order to achieve this objective, it is useful to review briefly how women were treated in general in pre-Islamic civilizations and religions, especially those which preceded Islam (610 C.E.). Part of the information provided here, however, describes the status of woman as late as the nineteenth century, more than two centuries after Islam.

Women in Ancient Civilization

Describing the status of the Indian woman, Encyclopedia Britannica states:
night must women be held by their protectors in a state of dependence says Manu. The rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is descent traced through males to the exclusion of females.

In Hindu scriptures, the description of a good wife is as follows: "a woman whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection, acquires high renown in this world, and, in the next, the same abodes with her husband." In Athens, women were not better off than either the Indian or the Roman women.

"Athenian women were always minors, subject to some male – to their father, to their brother, or to some of their male kin. Her consent in marriage was not generally thought to be necessary. "she was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents and receive them her husband and her lord, even though he were a stranger to her." A Roman wife was described by an historian as: "a babe, a minor, a ward, a person incapable of doing or acting anything according to her own individual taste, a person continually under the tutelage and guardianship of her husband."

In the Encyclopedia Britannica, we find a summary of the legal status of women in the Roman civilization:

In Roman Law a woman was even in historic times completely dependent. If married she and her property passed into the power of her husband . . . the wife was the purchased property of her husband, and like a slave acquired only for his benefit. A woman could not exercise any civil or public office . could not be a witness, surety, tutor, or curator; she could not adopt or be adopted, or make will or contract. Among the Scandinavian races women were: under perpetual tutelage, whether married or unmarried. As late as the Code of Christian V, at the end of the 17th Century, it was enacted that if a woman married without the consent of her tutor he might have, if he wished, administration and usufruct of her goods during her life.

According to the English Common Law:

...all real property which a wife held at the time of a marriage became a possession of her husband. He was entitled to the rent from the land and to any profit which might be made from operating the estate during the joint life of the spouses. As time passed, the English courts devised means to forbid a husband’s transferring real property without the consent of his wife, but he still retained the right to manage it and to receive the money which it produced. As to a wife’s personal property, the husband’s power was complete. He had the right to spend it as he saw fit.

Only by the late nineteenth Century did the situation start to improve. “By a series of acts starting with the Married women's Property Act in 1870, amended in 1882 and 1887, married women achieved the right to property and to enter contracts on a par with spinsters, widows, and divorcees.” As late as the Nineteenth Century an authority in ancient law, Sir Henry Maine, wrote: “No society which preserves any tincture of Christian institutions is likely to restore to married women the personal liberty conferred on them by the Middle Roman Law.” In his essay The Subjection of Women, John Stuart Mill wrote:

We are continually told that civilization and Christianity have restored to the woman her just rights. Meanwhile the wife is the actual bondservant of her husband; no less so, as far as the legal obligation goes, than slaves commonly so called.

Before moving on to the Qur’anic decrees concerning the status of women, a few Biblical decrees may shed more light on the subject providing a better basis for an impartial evaluation. In the Mosaic Law, the wife was betrothed. Explaining this concept, the Encyclopedia Biblica states: “To betroth a wife to oneself meant simply to acquire possession of her by payment of the purchase money; the betrothed is a girl to whom the purchase money has been paid.” From the legal point of view, the consent of the girl was not necessary for the validation of her marriage. “The girl’s consent is unnecessary and the need for it
nowhere suggested in the Law." As to the right of divorce, we read in the
Encyclopedia Biblica: "The woman being man's property, his right to
(divorce her follows as a matter of course." The right to divorce was
only by man. "In the Mosaic Law divorce was a privilege of the husband
only ...."

The position of the Christian Church until recent centuries seems
to have been influenced by both the Mosaic Law and by the streams of
thought that were dominant in its contemporary cultures. In their book,
Marriage East and West, David and Vera Mace wrote:

Let no one suppose, either, that our Christian heritage is
free of such slighting judgments. It would be hard to find
anywhere a collection of more degrading references to
the female sex than the early Church Fathers provide.
Lecky, the famous historian, speaks of (these fierce
incentives which form so conspicuous and so grotesque
a portion of the writing of the Fathers . . . woman was
represented as the door of hell, as the mother of all
human ills. She should be ashamed at the very thought
that she is a woman. She should live in continual
penance on account of the curses she has brought upon
the world. She should be ashamed of her dress, for it is
the memorial of her fall. She should be especially
ashamed of her beauty, for it is the most potent
instrument of the devil). One of the most scathing of
these attacks on woman is that of Tertullian: Do you
know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God
on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of
necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are
the unsealer of that forbidden tree; you are the first
deserters of the divine law: you are she who persuades
him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.
You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account
of your desert – that is death – even the Son of God had
to die). Not only did the church affirm the inferior status
of woman, it deprived her of legal rights she had
previously enjoyed.

III. WOMAN IN ISLAM

In the midst of the darkness that engulfed the world, the divine revelation
echoed in the wide desert of Arabia with a fresh, noble, and universal
message to humanity: "O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who
created you from a single soul and from it created its mate (of same kind)
and from them twain has spread a multitude of men and women" (Qur'an
4: 1).

A scholar who pondered about this verse states: "It is believed that there
is no text, old or new, that deals with the humanity of the woman from all
aspects with such amazing brevity, eloquence, depth, and originality as
this divine decree."

Stressing this noble and natural conception, the Qur'an states:

He (God) it is who did create you from a single soul and
therefrom did create his mate, that he might dwell with
her (in love) ...(Qur'an 7:189) The Creator of heavens
and earth: He has made for you mates of your own
nature, and has given you from your mates, children and
grandchildren, and has made provision of good things
for you. Is it then in vanity that they believe and in the
grace of God that they disbelieve? Qur'an 16:72

The rest of this paper outlines the position of Islam regarding the status of
woman in society from its various aspects – spiritually, socially,
economically and politically.

1. The Spiritual Aspect

The Qur'an provides clear-cut evidence that woman is completely
on a par with man in the sight of God in terms of her rights and responsibili-

"Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds"
(Qur'an 74:38). It also states: ...So their Lord accepted
their prayers, (saying): I will not suffer to be lost the work
of any of you whether male or female. You proceed one
Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, verily to him will We give a new life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to their actions. (Qur’an 16:97, see also 4:124).

Woman according to the Qur’an is not blamed for Adam’s first mistake. Both were jointly wrong in their disobedience to God, both repented, both were forgiven. (Qur’an 2:36, 7:20 – 24). In one verse in fact (20:121), Adam specifically, was blamed. In terms of religious obligations such as the Daily Prayers, Fasting, Poor-due, and Pilgrimage, women are no different from man. In some cases indeed, women have certain advantages over man. For example, the woman is exempted from daily prayers and from fasting during her menstrual periods and forty days after childbirth. She is also exempted from fasting during her pregnancy and when she is nursing her baby if there is any threat to her health or her baby’s. If the missed fasting is obligatory (during the month of Ramadan), she can make up for the missed days whenever she so desires. She does not have to make up for the prayers missed for any of the above reasons. Although women can and did go into the mosques during the days of the prophet and thereafter attendance at the Friday congregational prayers is optional for them while it is obligatory (on Friday).

This is clearly a tender touch of the Islamic teachings for they are considerate of the fact that a woman may be nursing her baby or caring for him, and thus may be unable to go out to the mosque at the time of the prayers. They also take into account the physiological and psychological changes associated with her natural female functions.

2. The Social Aspect

a) As a child and an adolescent

Despite the social acceptance of female infanticide among some tribes, the Qur’an forbade this custom, and considered it a crime like any other murder.

“And when the female (infant) buried alive – is questioned, for what crime she was killed.” (Qur’an 81:8-9).

Criticizing the attitudes of such parents who reject their female child, the Qur’an states:

When news is brought to one of them, of (the Birth of) a female (child), his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain her on (sufferance) and contempt, or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on? (Qur’an 16: 58-59).

Far from saving the girl’s life so that she may later suffer injustice and inequality, Islam requires kind and just treatment for her. Among the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (P.) in this regard are the following:

Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise. (Ibn Hanbal, No. 1957). Whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the day of judgment as this (and he pointed with his two fingers held together).

A similar Hadeeth deals in like manner with one who supports two sisters. (Ibn-Hanbal, No. 2104). The right of females to seek knowledge is not different from that of males. Prophet Muhammad (P.) said:

“Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim”. (AlBayhaqi). Muslim as used here including both males and females.

b) As a wife

The Qur’an clearly indicates that marriage is sharing between the halves of the society, and that its objectives, beside perpetuating...
life, are emotional well-being and spiritual harmony. Its bases are love and mercy.

Among the most impressive verses in the Qur'an about marriage is the following.

"And among His signs is this: That He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest, peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Lo, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect." (Qur'an 30:21).

According to Islamic Law, women cannot be forced to marry anyone without their consent. Ibn Abbas reported that a girl came to the Messenger of God, Muhammad (P.), and she reported that her father forced her to marry without her consent. The Messenger of God made the choice . . . (between accepting the marriage or invalidating it) (Ibn Hanbal No. 2469). In another version, the girl said: “Actually I accept the marriage but I wanted to let women know that parents have no right to force a husband on them” (Ibn Maja, No. 1873).

Besides all other provisions for her protection at the time of marriage, it was specifically decreed that woman has the full right to her Mahār, a marriage gift, which is presented to her by her husband and is included in the nuptial contract, and that such ownership does not transfer to her father or husband. The concept of Mahār in Islam is neither an actual or symbolic price for the woman, as was the case in certain cultures, nor is it a gift symbolizing love and affection. The rules for married life in Islam are clear and in harmony with upright human nature. In consideration of the physiological and psychological make-up of man and woman, both have equal rights and claims on one another, except for one responsibility, that of leadership. This is a matter which is natural in any collective life and which is consistent with the nature of man.

The Qur'an thus states:

“And they (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them, and men are a degree above them.” (Qur’an 2:228).

Such degree is Quiwama (maintenance and protection). This refers to that natural difference between the sexes which entitles the weaker to protection. It implies no superiority or advantage before the law, man’s role of leadership in relation to his family does not mean the husband’s dictatorship over his wife. Islam emphasizes the importance of taking counsel and mutual agreement in family decisions. The Qur’an gives us an example:

“…If they (husband wife) desire to wean the child by mutual consent and (after) consultation, there is no blame on them…” (Qur’an 2: 233).

Over and above her basic rights as a wife comes the right which is emphasized by the Qur’an and is strongly recommended by the Prophet Muhammad. (P); kind treatment and companionship. The Qur’an states:

“…But consort with them in kindness, for if you hate them it may happen that you hate a thing wherein God has placed much good.” (Qur’an 4: 19).

Prophet Muhammad. (P) said:

The best of you is the best to his family and I am the best among you to my family.

The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and best of you are those who are best to their wives. (Ibn-Hanbal, No. 7396)

Behold, many women came to Muhammad’s wives complaining against their husbands (because they beat them) – – those (husbands) are not the best of you.
As the woman's right to decide about her marriage is recognized, so also her right to seek an end for an unsuccessful marriage is recognized. To provide for the stability of the family, however, and in order to prevent hasty decisions under temporary emotional stress, certain waiting periods should be observed by men and women seeking divorce. Considering the relatively more emotional nature of women, a good reason for asking for divorce should be brought before the judge. Men, however, the woman can divorce her husband without resorting to the court, if the nuptial contract allows that. More specifically, some aspects of Islamic Law concerning marriage and divorce are interesting and are worthy of separate treatment. When the continuation of the marriage relationship is impossible, men are still taught to seek a gracious end for it.

The Qur'an states about such cases:

When you divorce women, and they reach their prescribed term, then retain them in kindness and retain them not for injury so that you transgress (the limits). (Qur'an 2:231). (See also Qur'an 2:229 and 33:49).

c) As a mother:

Islam considered kindness to parents next to the worship of God:

"And we have enjoined upon man (to be good) to his parents: His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness..." (Qur'an 31:14) (See also Qur'an 46:15, 29:8).

Moreover, the Qur'an has a special recommendation for the good treatment of mothers:

"Your Lord has decreed that you worship none save Him, and that you be kind to your parents..." (Qur'an 17:23).

A man came to Prophet Muhammad (P) asking:

O Messenger of God, who among the people is the most worthy of my good company? The Prophet (P) said, Your mother. The man said then who else: The Prophet (P) said, Your mother. The man asked, Then who else? Only then did the Prophet (P) say, Your father. (Al-Bukhari and Muslim).

A famous saying of The Prophet is "Paradise is at the feet of mothers." (In Al'Nisa'I, Ibn Majah, Ahmad). "It is the generous (in character) who is good to women, and it is the wicked who insults them.

3. The Economic Aspect

Islam decreed a right of which woman was deprived both before Islam and after it (even as late as this century), the right of independent ownership. According to Islamic Law, woman's right to her money, real estate, or other properties is fully acknowledged. This right undergoes no change whether she is single or married. She retains her full rights to buy, sell, mortgage or lease any or all her properties. It is nowhere suggested in the Law that a woman is a minor simply because she is female. It is also noteworthy that such right applies to her properties before marriage as well as to whatever she acquires thereafter. With regard to the woman's right to seek employment, it should be stated first that Islam regards her role in society as a mother and a wife as the most sacred and essential one. Neither maids nor baby-sitters can possibly take the mother's place as the educator of an upright, free, and carefully-reared children. Such a noble and vital role, which largely shapes the future of nations, cannot be regarded as "idleness".

However, there is no decree in Islam which forbids woman from seeking employment whenever there is a necessity for it, especially in positions which fit her nature and in which society needs her more. Examples of these professions are nursing, teaching (especially for children), medicine. Moreover, there is no restriction on benefiting from woman's exceptional talent in any field. Even for the position of a judge, where there may be a tendency to doubt the woman's fitness for the post on her more emotional nature, we find early Muslim scholars such as...
Hanifa and Al-Tabary holding there is nothing wrong with it. In addition, Islam restored to woman the right of inheritance, after she herself was an object of inheritance in some cultures. Her share is completely hers and no one can make any claim on it, including her father and her husband.

"Unto men (of the family) belongs a share of that which Parents and near kindred leave, and unto women a share of that which parents and near kindred leave, whether it be a little or much – a determinate share." (Qur'an 4:7).

Her share in most cases is one-half the man’s share, with no implication that she is worth half a man! It would seem grossly inconsistent to make such an inference. The overwhelming evidence of woman’s equitable treatment in Islam was discussed in the preceding pages, to make such an inference a variation in inheritance rights is only consistent with the variations in financial responsibilities of man and woman according to the Islamic Law. Man in Islam is fully responsible for the maintenance of his wife, his children, and in some cases of his needy relatives, especially the females. This responsibility is neither waived nor reduced because of his wife’s wealth or because of her access to any personal income (whether from work, rent, profit, or any other legal means. Woman, on the other hand, is far more secure financially and is far less burdened with claims on her possessions. Her possessions before marriage do not transfer to her husband and she even keeps her maiden name. She has no obligation to spend on her family out of such properties or of her income after marriage. She is entitled to the “Mahr” which she takes from her husband at the time of marriage. If she is divorced, she may get alimony from her ex-husband.

An examination of the inheritance law within the overall framework of Islamic Law reveals not only justice but also an abundance of compassion for woman.

4. The Political Aspect

Any fair investigation of the teachings of Islam o~ into the history of the Islamic civilization will surely find a clear evidence of woman’s equality with man in what we call today “political rights”.

This includes the right of election as well as the nomination to public offices. It also includes woman’s right to participate in the public affairs, in the Qur’an and in Islamic history we find examples of women who participated in serious discussions and argued even with the Prophet himself, (see Qur’an 58: 14 and 60: 10-12).

During the Caliphate of Omar Ibn al-Khattab, a woman argued with him in the mosque, proved her point, and caused him to declare in the presence of people: “A woman is right and Omar is wrong.” Although not mentioned in the Qur’an, one Hadeeth of the Prophet is interpreted to make woman ineligible for the position of head of a state. The Hadeeth referred to is roughly translated: “A people will not prosper if they let a woman be their leader.” This limitation, however, has nothing to do with the dignity of woman or with her rights. It is rather related to the natural differences in the biological and psychological make-up of men and women.

According to Islam, the head of the state is no mere figurehead. He leads people in the prayers, especially on Fridays and festivities; he is continuously engaged in the process of decision-making pertaining to the security and well-being of his people. This demanding position, or any similar one, such as the Commander of the Army, is generally inconsistent with the physiological and psychological make-up of women in general. It is a medical fact that during their monthly periods and during their pregnancies, women undergo various physiological and psychological changes. Such changes may occur during an emergency situation, thus affecting her decision, without considering the excessive strain which is produced. Moreover, some decisions require a maximum of rationality and a minimum of emotionality – a requirement which does not coincide with the instinctive nature of women.

Even in modern times, and in the most developed countries, it is rare to find a woman in the position of a head of state acting as more than a figurehead, a woman commander of the armed services, or even a proportionate number of women representatives in parliaments, or similar bodies. One can not possibly ascribe this to backwardness of various nations or to any constitutional limitation on woman’s right to be in a position as a head of state or as a member of the parliament. It is more logical to explain the present situation in terms of the natural and indisputable differences between man and woman, a difference that does not imply any “supremacy” of one over the other; the difference implies rather the “complementary” roles of both the sexes in life.
IV. CONCLUSION

The first part of this paper deals briefly with the position of various religions and cultures on the issue under investigation. Part of this exposition extends to cover the general trend as late as the nineteenth century, nearly 1300 years after the Qur'an set forth the Islamic teachings. In the second part of the paper, the status of women is briefly discussed. Emphasis in this part is placed on the original, authentic sources of Islam. This represents the standard according to which degree of adherence of Muslims can be judged. It is also the case that during the downward cycle of Islamic Civilization, such teachings were not strictly adhered to by many people who profess to be Muslims. Such deviations were unfairly exaggerated by some writers, and worst of this, were superficially taken to represent the teachings to the Western reader without taking the trouble to make any original, unbiased study of the authentic sources of these teachings.

Even with such deviations three facts are worth mentioning:

1. The history of Muslims is rich with women of great achievements in all walks of life from as early as the seventh century (B.C.)
2. It is impossible for anyone to justify any mistreatment of women in the legal, divine decree of rule embodied in the Islamic Law, nor could anyone dare to cancel, reduce, or distort the clear-cut legal rights of women given in Islamic Law.
3. Throughout history, the reputation, chastity and maternal role of Muslim women were objects of admiration by impartial observers. It is also worthwhile to state that the status which women reached in the present era was not achieved due to the kindness of men or natural progress. It was rather achieved through a long struggle, sacrifice on woman's part and only when society needed her contributions and work, more especial; during the two world wars, and due to an escalation of technological change.

In the case of Islam such compassionate and dignified status was decreed, not because it reflects the environment of the seventh century, nor under the threat or pressure of women and their organizations, but rather because of its intrinsic truthfulness.

If this indicates anything, it would demonstrate the divine origin of the Qur'an and the truthfulness of the message of Islam, which, unlike philosophies and ideologies, was far from proceeding from its human environment, a message which established such humane principles as neither grew obsolete during the course of time and after these many centuries, nor can become obsolete in the future. After all, this is the message of the All-Wise and all-knowing God whose wisdom and knowledge are far beyond the ultimate in human thought and progress.

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opportunists will stop at nothing to get praise from anti-Islamic organisations and media and give their propaganda an added flavour.

Ayan Hirsi Ali: A One-Note Islam Critic

One of Islam’s worst critics is now an academic “fellow” in the U.S. But Ayan Hirsi Ali’s anti-Islam criticism is getting old.

She is as famous as she is notorious. Ayan Hirsi Ali, the former Dutch parliamentarian and outspoken critic of Islam (detailed in her new book, “Infidel,” which chronicles her difficult childhood and journey out of Islam), is now a fellow at The American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a conservative think tank. Ali is a stinging and unrepentant in her criticism of what ails the Islamic world. Yet, she does not blame individual Muslims for her opinions about Islam itself.

She is a celebrity of sorts among Islamophobes, and I am not sure why. But consider her personal history, the way she tells it: She had a very difficult childhood, being born into the strife of a war-torn Somalia. She moved from place to place, eventually escaping an arranged marriage to the Netherlands.

Ali then became famous with her controversial film “Submission,” which depicted near-naked women with verses of the Qur’an draped across them (resulted in the brutal death of the filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, who had a death threat against Ali stuck to his chest with a knife).

In the Netherlands Ali rose up the ranks to become a member of the Dutch parliament. But here is where the story unravels: She left parliament and the country when she was found to have lied on her asylum application about the story of her “escape” from the arranged marriage in Somalia. By that time Ali was known to the world, and after 9/11, she permanently and publicly renounced Islam.

And now her move to AEI has her back in the media spotlight. Why does she garner such interest wherever she goes? Perhaps because these days the world seems to love outspoken critics of Islam, whether or not they have the facts to back up what they’re saying.

In a recent interview with the British newspaper Metro, Ali was asked whether she sees any positive sides to Islam. She replied, “That’s like asking if I see positive sides to Nazism, communism, Catholicism. Of course Islam preaches generosity and kindness and taking care of the poor and elderly and so on-- but these values aren’t limited to Islam.

Ali is an expert on putting a big negative stamp on Islam and finding ways to blame the religion for all sorts of problems that ail the Muslim (and non-Muslim world). Consider some of her incendiary statements:

On NPR’s “Talk of the Nation,” Ali tried to link the ills of the Muslim world—which have a multitude of causes—with just Islam itself. Of female genital mutilation, Ali admitted that it started “1,800 years before Christ, so it was way before Islam came about.” Then comes the “but,” “If you look at the countries that practice it today,” Ali said, “most of them [are] Islamic. And one of the things that makes [female genital mutilation] very useful to Muslims is their attitude towards virginity and premarital sex. The Qur’an is very clear and says those who engage in premarital sex should be flogged 100 times, both men and women. But it is, of course, much easier to prove that a woman has had premarital sex. Islam, like the other monotheistic faiths, tries to control the sexuality of the woman first.”

When talking about slavery, she highlighted how the idea to abolish slavery practiced by the West came from within the West itself. In contrast, however, “Today, in the world we live in, slavery is practiced only in Arab/Islamic world … Muslims are not responding to that,” she said to Neal Conan of NPR.

I guess she’s unaware that according to a report by MSNBC, officials estimate that “more than 200,000 women and girls—quarter of all women trafficked globally—are smuggled out of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics each year, the bulk of whom end up working as enslaved prostitutes. Almost half are transported to Western Europe. Roughly a quarter ends up in the United States.”

Ali’s mind, since “slavery is practiced only in Arab/Islamic world,” must be because of Islam itself.

Ali is notorious for making sweeping generalizations about Islam and Muslims, and she frequently cites information that is incorrect. For instance, on the NPR shw she said: “For empirical evidence on women and/or the Islamic world is in a crisis,” she would (in) refer to the Arab Human Development report … in
the writers of that report say the Arab/Islamic world is retarded when it comes to … three factors: The freedom of the individual, knowledge, and the subjugation of women.”

According to reading, the Arab Human Development report speaks only of the Arab–and not Islamic–world. And her characterization that the Arab/Islamic world is “retarded” was a gross oversimplification. A quick glance at the United Nations Development Program’s website for states clearly shows this.

But what left me truly flabbergasted by that NPR interview was Ali’s statement about the West: “I know that Western societies have had a terrible past from the burning of women as witches all the way to what happened in the Second World War … that’s one part of the West. There’s the other part which is really developing institutions that protect the life and freedoms of the individual, and it would be a huge pity to confuse the two and, you know, lump them together and describe the West only as a source of evil.” Yet, she does that exact same thing when it comes to Islam and the Muslim world. Doesn’t this smack of sheer hypocrisy?

As frustrating as all this is, it is nothing new from Ali. She is just one in a series of critics of Islam who generalize, stereotype, and mischaracterize the religion. Remember Dr. Wafa Sultan? She is a Syrian-born California psychiatrist who made headlines last year when she criticized Islam in the very same manner as Ayan Hirsi Ali does.

In the now-famous interview on Al Jazeera just over one year ago on February 21, 2006, Dr. Sultan said: “The clash we are witnessing is not a clash of religions, or a clash of civilizations. It is a clash between two eras. It is a clash between two eras. It is a clash between the mentality that belongs to the Middle Ages and another mentality that belongs to the 21st century. It is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between barbarity and rationality.

“It is a clash between freedom and oppression, between democracy and dictatorship. It is a clash between human rights, on the one hand, and violation of these rights, on the other hand. It is a clash between those who treat women like beasts, and those who treat them like human beings.” Sultan said. The harsh implication of her words was that Islam—and individual Muslims—was “backward,” “primitive,” “barbaric,” and “oppressive.”

Ayan Hirsi Ali and Wafa Sultan are very similar in many respects. Both are ex-Muslims. Both had terrible experiences with Islam that galvanized their decision to leave the faith. For Hirsi Ali the tipping factor was the brutal attacks of September 11, 2001: “I didn’t question [Islam] seriously until after 9/11. Bin Laden defined the world into Muslims and non-Muslims, and these had to either be converted or killed. As a Muslim, I had to ask if I agreed with that. I was saddened to see Bin Laden’s citations were from the Koran and were consistent with the Islam I grew up with,” Ali said. “It is just that we were passive until then. Now we had to take sides. I had completed a political science degree and could no longer use ignorance as an excuse. I had to make my own path.”

For Dr. Sultan, the impetus to reject Islam was her witnessing the murder of her medical school professor in Syria in 1979 by Muslim gunmen shouting “God is great.” Of this, Dr. Sultan said: “At that point, I lost trust in their God and began to question all our teaching. It was the turning point of my life, and it has led me to this present point. I had to leave. I had to look for another God.”

Their experiences are real, and their choice to leave Islam is theirs to make. But the problem is that both women make very similar accusations and generalizations about the evils of Islam and how religion is the sole reason for the depressing state of the Arab and Muslim worlds. They seem to be reading from the exact same playbook, and it’s getting annoying.

I’m not saying that there is nothing wrong with the Arab and Muslim worlds. There are awful extremists in the Muslim world who have committed the vilest acts that I have ever seen. The Arab and Muslim worlds are ripe for real, true reform. But that does not make it right, proper, truthful, or honorable to malign the faith of 1.2 billion people who derive strength and comfort from that faith.
It is wrong for Ali to say on NPR: “The whole idea is for 1.2-1.5 billion people living in the world to start thinking, at least, I mean exercising some sort of intellectual activity, which we haven’t been doing because in our own countries, in our own societies. If you do that you’ll run the risk of being killed…”

Really? All 1.2 billion Muslims are unthinking idiots? All 1.2 billion Muslims are liable to get killed if they exercise some sort of intellectual activity? True, there are some Muslim societies that are repressive, where freedom of speech can be a danger to one’s health. (Take the recent conviction of an Egyptian blogger who was sentenced to four years in prison for “insulting Islam” and insulting “the President.”) But it is a tall order to say that “the whole idea is for 1.2-1.5 billion living in the world to start thinking.”

I am not alone in the criticism of this critic. Muslim feminist Asra Nomani recently told Newsweek magazine: “I wish people had been nicer to her. But I don’t blame Islam. I blame really messed-up people who’ve used religion to justify their misogyny.” This is my point exactly. It is possible to speak out against the injustices committed in the name of Islam—and unfortunately they are far too many—and still remain faithful to the spiritual tenets of Islam.

In fact, we need much more of this. Muslims really need to take a close look inward and try to improve their own situation. The Qur’an says this directly: “Verily God will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves. (13:11)” Of the many, many things Ali says with which I disagree, this is one thing she says that I concur with: Muslims need to reform themselves first.

Even author Irshad Manji—whose past criticisms of Islam were very similar to those of Ali’s—has amended her viewpoint. Talking about her upcoming documentary “Faith without Fear,” Manji said: “This film is not as a critique of Islam but as a quest for the beauty of Islam. I realized that to find the beauty of my faith, I needed to ask basic questions addressed: Is the problem religion itself or the manipulation of religion?”

I believe the answer is the latter. Unfortunately, however, there is a shortage of “ex-Muslim” critics who will stop at nothing to claim the former, and there are too many people who are willing to believe what they say. And our unity and mutual understanding as a people are liable to suffer because of it.