

## Women Living Under Muslim Laws: An interview with Casandra Balchin on the work of the WLUML network

Yoginder Sikand

*Q: How would you define the Women Living Under Muslim Laws Network? What is its agenda?*

A: The network aims basically to provide linkages and support to women whose lives may be affected by Muslim laws. Mind you, here I use the word 'Muslim' laws, instead of 'Islamic laws', to stress that ... what is considered as 'Islamic' in a particular context is often heavily influenced by local culture and customs, and the distinction between customary laws and practices an

The network's goal is to strengthen women's struggles in Muslim countries and communities. We seek to highlight the rich diversity within the larger corpus of what are considered as Muslim laws, because this can help contest legal notions that have seriously deleterious consequences for women. We also seek to help promote broad alliances between women's groups in Muslim countries and communities, and with the wider global women's and progressive human rights movement.

*Q: What sort of activities is the network engaged in?*

A: We carry out research, publications, provide individual women support and advice, conduct urgent international alerts, link women in different contexts and facilitate capacity building. We have published numerous books on various aspects of Muslim laws and what they mean for women, some of which are also available on our website, [www.wluml.org](http://www.wluml.org). Some of our books have been translated into Arabic, French, Farsi, Tamil, Dari, Urdu and some other languages as well so they can be accessed by women who are not normally able to access international debates. Our main themes are fundamentalism, militarism, peace-building and sexuality. Some networking groups also work with figures such as qazis, which enables our ideas to have a broader reach.

*Q: How would you describe the network's approach to Islam as a belief system?*

A: The network as such does not privilege faith-based discourse. We are not a faith-based organisation. We regard religion as a private matter. We, however, bring together both practicing Muslims as well as people who define themselves in other ways. The dichotomy between faith-based and secular discourse is very distinct in the West, where the two are generally seen as opposed to each other. The distinction is much less sharp in other contexts. For instance, Sisters-in-Islam, a leading Malaysian feminist group that works from a faith-based perspective, works closely with secular human rights groups. I

think this owes in some way to the fact that in non-Western contexts, religion is so much part of people's daily experiences that people are more aware of what harm can sometimes be done in the name of religion. In turn, this means that they can also be more confident in challenging conservative or reactionary interpretations of religion... At the same time, secular human rights groups or white feminist groups, who could be allies of women in non-white communities, are so terrified of being accused of being racist that they often fall into the trap of cultural relativism, allowing for patriarchy to remain largely uncontested.

*Q: How do you see the fact that controlling women is so central to the agenda of conservative religious groups, Muslim as well as others?*

A: In conservative religious discourses, women come to be seen as custodians of community identity and authenticity, as bearers of tradition. Possibly this is because of their role in bearing and rearing children. Hence, defining and controlling women comes to be seen as central to a revivalist religious agenda. Along with this comes a host of burdens that are sought to be placed on women as bearers of the normative communitarian ideal. Let me cite an instance to substantiate this argument. One sight in Lahore that never ceased to amaze me was men wearing baseball caps and T-shirts displaying the US flag, riding motorcycles with their wives or sisters, heavily draped in black burqas, sitting behind them. No one ever seemed to question the men's identity as Muslims, but I presume if the women sitting behind them refused to veil up they would be damned as bad Muslims or even worse.

*Q: What possibilities do you see for developing what could be called an Islamic feminist theology? In this regard, do you see any significant difference in the attitudes and approaches of the traditionalist ulama and various Islamist groups?*

A: Traditionally, in almost every community, the interpretation of religion has always been a male monopoly. But things are changing now, with women in all traditions demanding the right to interpret their religion for themselves. That's also happening among Muslim women, and our network is trying to facilitate this process. I would also add that not every interpretation of religion by a woman is necessarily more gender-sensitive or women's friendly. Likewise, it is equally important to recognise that not all male religious scholars are necessarily upholders of patriarchy. I can cite the names of several modern male Islamic scholars who have produced remarkably feminist exegesis of Muslim scriptures.

I certainly would not lump the traditionalist *ulama* with the Islamists into one category. I have found in the course of my work that although many traditionalist *ulama* might initially work with standard stereotypes of feminism, once one begins to engage and interact with them they can begin to appreciate that we are not anti-Islam but that our work can, in fact, actually help the Muslim community. In contrast, the Islamists have a political agenda, which we do not share, so I presume they would not agree with us, although this does not preclude our discussing with certain individuals who might be associated with certain Islamist groups. We in the network do not agree with the standard Islamist perception of privileging religion as the only structure through which

society should be organised. This is a politically far-right position which we are opposed to. Our position is that there are multiple ways of being and that they should all be allowed to exist.

*Q: Feminists are often accused by the Muslim religious right of 'conspiring' to divide the community, setting women against men and thus playing into the hands of what are routinely branded as the 'enemies of Islam'. How do you respond to this sort of accusation?*

A: I could cite the names of several progressive male Muslim theologians who share the same social vision as us to counter this silly argument. We also have a number of like-minded men on our decision-making bodies. We aren't an exclusively women's group and nor do we champion women's exclusivity. We talk of gender justice, not simply justice for women. We are not seeking to replace one form of gender injustice—rule by men—by another form. And as for the accusation of dividing the Muslim ummah, I can only say that there has always been a tradition of internal debate among Muslims. Such debate and dissent is, in fact, invaluable, because its absence would lead to stagnation. Every community needs debate in order to evolve or even simply to survive.

Now, as far as the charge of Islam being in danger because of feminist demands is concerned, the least said the better. This slogan is routinely deployed to silence debate and dissent within the community by those who seek to preserve and promote their own powers and privileges. Precisely what aspect of Islam is supposedly under threat? Is it Islam as a religion of social justice or is it simply the patriarchal order that seeks legitimacy under an 'Islamic' label? Now, it is true that today several Muslim countries have been targeted by imperialist forces, but this owes not to any inherent anti-Islamic 'conspiracy' as such but mainly to the combination of deep-seated racism and the workings of the imperialist-capitalist system. It is important not to confuse the issues of racism and imperialism with religion. So, for instance, in Iraq today the problem is essentially one of Western neo-colonialism and global capitalism, and has little or nothing to do with any supposed anti-Islamic 'conspiracy'. However, both radical Islamists as well as right-wing Christian evangelists tend to frame this in religious terms, and so religion comes to be used essentially as a mobilisational tool. I, for one, do not buy the clash of civilisations argument. In fact, it is remarkable how fundamentalists in all religious traditions speak the same language and often work together against progressive movements, or at least feed on each other.

**This interview has been edited for length. The full version appears on the WLUML website. Permission to re-print this interview was granted by WLUML.**

**Women Living Under Muslim Laws is an international solidarity network that provides information, support and a collective space for women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam. [www.wluml.org/english/index.shtml](http://www.wluml.org/english/index.shtml).**

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