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# Women, Islam, and the Secular-Religious Divide

An Interview with Dr. Sheherazade Jafari

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*At the “Sprit of Struggle” gathering in April 2015, The Kairos Center interviewed Dr. Sheherazade Jafari, whose research focuses on how women’s rights activists in Muslim-majority societies are engaging religion and working across religious-secular divides in response to rising politicized religion and extremism. Two of the organizations she has been working with are Sisters in Islam, which promotes an understanding of Islam that recognizes the principles of justice, equality, freedom and dignity within a democratic nation state, and Musawah, the global movement for equality in the Muslim family.*

**Kairos:** Can you tell us about the research you’ve been doing with Musawah and Sisters in Islam?

Dr. Sheherazade Jafari (SJ): My research questions have been first, broadly: “how are women right’s activists in Muslim-majority societies responding to these global trends of increasingly politicized religion and extremism in many places?” And second, “how are they working across the supposed religious-secular divides that so often define the discourse on women’s rights, especially when it comes to Muslim women’s rights?” Sisters in Islam was my main case study, and not just Sisters in Islam but also the secular Malaysian organizations and activists with whom they have partnered over the years, looking at the relationships among both religious and secular activists within the broader women’s movement. And then I also looked at Musawah and included a small sample of interviews with activists from other Muslim-majority societies as well, mainly to draw on insights from other regions, i.e., Egypt, Bahrain, the Northern Caucuses, and the Balkans.

**Kairos:** While you were in the process of doing your research, the political context was constantly changing. How did you take all this into account?

SJ: It’s a continuously evolving situation. As one example, one women activist that I spoke with from Egypt, she is pretty young, in her mid 20’s, and she really strongly identifies as an activist; she is involved in a number of different types of human rights initiatives and has also founded some groups for young women. She grew up in a Muslim family but she always identified very strongly as secular. But when the revolution happened and in the years now since, she says that she now has to better understand religion, she has to better understand Islam. So, it was a necessity to go back to engaging with religion for herself. And then, through that process, she has learned a lot about some of the early women in Islamic history, for example, the leadership roles of some of the prophets’ wives, daughters and so on, and how inspiring and influential they have been. It’s been the revolution and the uprisings that brought her to a place of learning this for herself.

Kairos: Since she saw herself as secular, she wasn't involved in something like the Muslim brotherhood?

SJ: No, she wasn't. I spoke with another women who also wasn't involved with the Muslim Brotherhood but who very much identifies as a religious woman and has for years worked with women in the Muslim Brotherhood and also Salafi groups. And so she has built these relationships over years. But the younger woman who identifies very strongly as secular, she said that after the revolution she really wanted to attend some of the meetings of the Sisters of the Muslim Brotherhood because she was

curious, but couldn't because they didn't trust her as a secular activist. So she had to go through some people who knew people who knew people to be able to go.

Kairos: Do you have a sense to whether there is a middle ground that has emerged, if there are people who are Muslim and are trying to represent a different kind of Islam?

SJ: I don't want to make broad generalizations or anything, but with the activists I spoke with from Bahrain as well as in Egypt, especially those who were engaging religion in their women's rights work and drawing on these religious resources before the uprisings, they have said that

they've noticed a huge difference in how their work is now being perceived after the uprisings. Now, increasingly, other women's rights activists are turning to them for support on how do we deal with this new reality. There is an increasing demand for their religious-based approach. Whereas before, especially in a country like Egypt, the women's rights movement was defined as secular, as elite and really didn't want anything to do with religion. So some activists are seeing a shift.

And in Malaysia there are mainstream Islamists, members of the opposition party who have been advocating for more conservative interpretations of Islamic law, but then there are these newer groups that have emerged that are more violent in their ideology and in their way of going about things. When I was in Malaysia a couple years ago, one major issue was the relationship between Muslims and the Christian community, and who has the right to use the word "Allah." In Malay, the word "Allah" refers to God, so Malaysian Christians also use it. These more extremist groups were actually attacking churches and burning Bibles. Many Malaysians are also increasingly concerned about the influence of transnational extremist groups within the country.

Kairos: And are there problems associated with secular groups who are seen as anti- Islam? Do Musawah and Sisters in Islam have to watch those groups?

SJ: They do to a certain extent but I think for Musawah, it's very intentional that the movement is for secular and religious women. They are about equality in the Muslim family and in Muslim family law, which affects both Muslim and secular women, and requires the engagement of both. In Malaysia, they have great partnerships within the women's rights movement, between Sisters in Islam and the secular group, in fact, much better relationships across supposed religious-secular divides than with other religious groups. In other words, the intra-religious tensions are much stronger in practice, on the ground, than the religious-secular divides.



Some of the early founders of Sisters in Islam (SIS).

Kairos: Do you feel any effects of this kind of increasing fear of Islam in this country?

SJ: Personally, because I don't wear a hijab, I visually am not recognized as Muslim, compared to my friends that do wear hijab. And there is a difference--I see how they are perceived versus how I am perceived. My experience as a woman is different because of that. I also think Muslim men are targeted in different ways here. My brother for instance, he clearly looks Middle Eastern and he has been targeted, stopped in airports, things like that.

Kairos: We know that Islam has this long tradition of the "ulema" – with men and the hierarchy of scholarship that allows you to speak on Islam. How is this being understood today with the new leadership of Muslim women and activists taking up their religion in the way you are describing?

SJ: It is definitely a belief and core argument among the women I worked with that anyone has the right to read and understand and interpret the text for themselves. They make this argument based on the Quran's emphasis on human beings' intellectual capacity and the Islamic concept of "ijtihad," or independent reasoning. The traditional understanding is that the gates of ijtihad were closed centuries ago when the major Islamic schools of thought were established. Sisters in Islam and other progressive Muslim scholars and activists are saying, no, in fact the gates of ijtihad were never meant to be closed. It is our duty, our responsibility to be able to understand Islam for ourselves as we interpret it for our modern realities.

The emphasis is not on just reciting and memorizing the Quran, but to really understand it for oneself. And then they also emphasize the fact that core to Islam is that there is one God and ALL humans are then equal under God, and directly connected with God. For example, Islamic scholar Amina Wadud, who was also one of the co-founders of SIS, talks about the tawhidic paradigm, the concept of the oneness of God and the connection--the ultimate oneness--of all beings. If that's the case, then patriarchy or any sort of hierarchy that is saying that men are somehow above women or religious scholars are somehow closer to God or know or understand God better, goes completely against this core concept within Islam.

Kairos: How are these arguments gaining ground? Are there more women joining Musawah or Sisters in Islam?

SJ: One measurement of Sisters in Islam's success is the fact that they have been doing this for some 25 years and they really have gone from this very small group of professional women in an urban setting to now increasingly working with different women's groups across the country, in both rural and urban areas. They have a signature campaign for Islamic Family Law reform and they have thousands of signatures. Groups that don't necessarily identify as women's rights groups, such as single moms groups, are wanting to come and work with them and implement similar types of trainings on Muslim women's rights within their communities. This certainly speaks to Sisters in Islam's success and continued impact. Also, many of Sisters in Islam's publications and resources have been translated and are being used in other countries. Further, of course, there is now Musawah, as a growing transnational movement connecting women's rights activists groups and activists in Muslim communities around the world.

At the same time, there is a lot of backlash against Sisters in Islam, but it is often not about their religious arguments. This is because Sisters in Islam is actually pointing to verses in the Quran to make

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their religious arguments, so it's hard to argue against them on that basis. Instead, their detractors say things like, "you're not an ulama (scholar), you're not an ustad" or "what do you know, you're a woman," or "you are an elitist, out of touch with real Islam." These attacks are not about the actual content of their arguments.

**Kairos: Are they experiencing any state repression or other difficulties based on the perception that somehow this is subversive or dangerous activity?**

SJ: Absolutely. Some of the messaging is that Sisters in Islam is "anti-Islamic, they're dangerous, they're going to confuse the Muslim community. It's about delegitimizing the women's religious voices, ultimately that's what the attacks are trying to do, to say that somehow Sisters in Islam is not really Muslim, that it's dangerous to Islam.

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**Kairos: But they haven't faced actual imprisonment or violence?**

SJ: Not actual imprisonment or violence, but they have faced threats of violence. For instance, one time an opposing organization organized a big rally and event that was focused on how Sisters in Islam is anti-Islamic. There was this huge banner on a main street very close to Sisters in Islam's office. It had an image of Zainah, one of the founders, and then an image of a Muslim woman with hijab and a whip. Really terrible images.

**Kairos: Is Zainah and other women that are leaders within Sisters in Islam, have they pursued advanced levels of scholarship?**

SJ: Some of these women have pursued degrees in Sharia law. Some form of religious education is also mandatory for all Muslims within Malaysia, although each state does it differently. But in terms of pursuing higher levels of religious education, the Executive Director and a few others in [Sisters in Islam] have. But they really do emphasize the fact that you don't need a religious degree or to have studied with religious scholars to have a religious voice, that everyone has a right to understand their religion for themselves.

**Kairos: And what is the basis of their legitimacy among the wider public?**

SJ: I think that legitimacy comes in part from the fact that they've been around for so long. They started by writing letters to the editor. That was their way of getting their voice out initially. And then they started doing other types of activities, such as providing legal aid, trainings and so on. These letters to the editor are incredible. They draw on people's lived realities but they go right into this verse and that verse and here is how the current law contradicts these verses, and so on. It's right there, even for a religious scholar, the argument is clearly laid out.

**Kairos: We've talked about the Poor People's Campaign and this idea of uniting the dispossessed, the poor, and the ways in which this idea has manifested across the world. What might that look like in the communities you're connected to and how people might respond to something like that?**

Jafari: These type of connections, partnerships and networks are so important. Especially in some of the interviews I've had with women from Kosovo and the Northern Caucasus, they all emphasized how isolated they felt from other Muslim women's rights activists and movements. On the other hand, the activists with whom I spoke in the Middle East and North Africa region and Southeast Asia felt they at

least have access to some resources and networks regarding Muslim women's rights. Even if they don't identify as Muslim women's rights activists or Muslim feminists themselves, they know of individual or groups who make these types of arguments. But in the other regions, in the Northern Caucasus and the Balkans, the activists felt alone and disconnected. They said that while they really don't want any sort of Western intervention, if there was to be involvement from the West, the best support would be to give them funding so that they can connect on their own terms with other women's rights activists within the region but also across regions as well.

For instance, one woman in the Northern Caucasus spoke about how her organization has had a few opportunities to attend international conferences. For some of the women in the group, this was the first time that they were leaving Russia. They said that the most incredible part of that experience was actually meeting women from the Arab region who were these powerful, strong women. Now they could go back and say – especially given the growing influence of the Gulf in the Northern Caucasus – that in fact we met these strong Arab women, one who was a judge and who who was this and that, and then they can counter the local narrative that says if you're a good Muslim you are subordinate, you must submit to the will of men. Instead, they have these examples of women who are coming from the Arab region, and that's not how they are living or what they believe. These examples were very important for them in their own local advocacy.

**Kairos:** Is there a conscious effort to reach beyond the more elite audience to a more popular community based audience?

SJ: Since 2000, there has been an important shift in Sisters in Islam's approach and their advocacy in order to better reach the grassroots, but there is still much work to be done to truly reach across class lines. For Musawah, this is something I would love to talk with them more about, as a relatively new movement. What I see as a challenge for any kind of global movement that is engaging religion in this way, is on the one hand to be able to immerse oneself in the text and theology, which is an intellectual experience in which you need the time and space to do it, and not everyone has the time and space to do that. A lot of the major Muslim feminist voices are scholars who are in the comforts of their universities, oftentimes based in Western countries. On the other hand, there are also these incredible examples everywhere of this intersection of scholarship and practice and how Muslim women's rights scholarship and religious arguments are being used locally and how local realities are influencing the scholarship. I think that's something that needs to be talked about more, to think about how to do this effectively and how to ensure that the voices of the poor are informing and shaping the movement, and how to be inclusive of both local and global, rural and urban voices and experiences.

**Kairos:** Does Musawah have a presence in Iran?

SJ: No, Musawah has a rotating secretariat. They started in Kuala Lumpur and were supposed to go to Egypt but then decided it wouldn't be good to go given the instability and difficulties facing women's rights groups there. Just recently they've announced that they are moving next to Morocco. I think the plan has been that wherever they move they'll have a host organization for a few years, and then they'll move again in order to stay global. There are some important progressive religious scholars in Iran, but within the last several years and especially after the 2009 Green movement a lot of human rights and women's rights activists were arrested or have fled the country. So for now, it would be very difficult for Musawah to have activities there.

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*Harriet Tubman was an African-American abolitionist and key historical figure in the fight to end slavery in the United States. Known as "Moses" by slaves and abolitionists, she escaped from slavery herself and then returned some thirteen times to rescue dozens of other slaves. Her life, courage and commitment to freedom are an inspiration to contemporary struggles against poverty and oppression.  
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