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On the participation and empowerment of women.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am here because I completely believe in what we are doing at Tolerance International-UK.

Our collective experience at planning today's event has been a team effort and I hope that I do my colleagues proud today.

So I thank you for taking the time to be here today and for allowing me the privilege to listen to me speak, especially to those of you who have travelled from very far because you believe in our work.

Isn't it the faith that we have in human nature that allows us to see the good in one another?

>   Aren't we here today because we collectively reject the horrors of 7/7?

>   We are here today because we care about our communities.

>   We also share one thing by being here today.

>   We are here in remembrance.

>   We are here for tolerance.

>   Empowering women is central to the whole question of extremism and intolerance.

The distortion of the perception of women in contemporary Islam comes out of its problematic relationship with the West, and that is what I address today. I address this by looking at the issue of real women as Islam understands it.

Our 'Mission of Tolerance' at Tolerance International UK's (TI-UK) aims to moderate extremes by providing a common ground for people of all faiths to interact positively in order to re-assert the needs of our societies. At Tolerance International we like to believe that this moral grounding is based on people's experiences and their beliefs in the common good. This generally depends on the peaceful edicts of one's creed.

The common factor in societies and cultural groups is people. People tend to be complex beings with differing cultures, creeds and belief systems. One common ground they all have is tolerance as the moral grounding for actions.

Only in providing a common ground for all faiths to interact positively can people in society take ownership of the 7th of July. The 7th of July was a day on which Islamic Fundamentalism 'won' by creating chaos and disorder. The most dangerous religious consequence of the fundamentalism of that day was the way in which a distorted image of Islam was reflected to the world.

In Islamic fundamentalism religious values were no longer what they seemed, they were turned upside down and the religious principles could no longer be defined independently of the government and political leaders who implemented them. According to Gangeii, on that day Islamic fundamentalism relied on two things:

Firstly 1- Total belief and adherence to Sharia Law and what is called the "religious principles" of Jihad.

Secondly 2- An execution that put those principles into practice, (where the necessity of establishing an Islamic state was even more important than the actual practice of Islam itself) (Gangeii, 2007)

In his 1999 paper on "Muslims and Democracy" Professor Filali-Ansary observed that "the past is often held to weigh especially heavily on Muslim countries, particularly as regards their present-day receptivity to democracy". He did not dispute that history had an "overwhelming and decisive" influence in shaping the contemporary features and attitudes of Muslim societies, but he saw the overwhelming influence being the nineteenth century encounter of Muslims with the modernising West.

The diverse conflicts that local Muslim populations had waged in defence of their independence and identity against colonial powers in the nineteenth century meant that their independence, identity and religion became as Filali-Ansary describes "intimately fused". The differences between Muslims and Europeans were conflated. Thereby, the polarisation of Muslims from Europeans came to dominate all the approaches that were taken to questions that related to what he termed "religion, politics and the social order".

On the level of principles, Islam should favour "individual freedoms" and the "capacity for religious choice" writes Mohamed Charfi in 1998. But the evolution of historical developments has caused Muslim societies to evolve in the opposite direction towards the loss of individual autonomy and submission to the community and the State. This evolution gave rise to such dichotomies as "Islam and the West".

In fact, according to Altawajri, Muslims, particularly those living in Western countries have a "thirst for knowledge and equality in order to achieve liberation of their emotional and intellectual life" (Altwaijri, 2007).

TI-UK's Mission of Tolerance views this liberation of emotional and intellectual life as the act of remembering the 53 *[note: one went under a train on the circle line due to the shock of the blasts but has never been mentioned by the press (see wiki below)]* who died on this day. It is in memory of human suffering; that we need to feel a sense of peace and forgiveness inside. Forgiveness for the consequences of these fanatical acts; and the phobia of Muslims that ensued.

The 7th of July is a day in which vengeance should be forgotten; and hatred be put aside. Where the ultimate aim: is to enable people of faith/ no faith to use their commonalities in order to reflect on issues of intolerance, discrimination and extremism in a healthy positive way. In order to engage young vulnerable people in a healthy dialogue, whereby the reflexes that may take them towards such discrimination and intolerance may be engaged

by embracing the essence of their root belief: as a common voice for peace and democracy.

The mission of Tolerance is five-fold that spells out the word 'PEACE':
We Promote peace, coexistence & equality in religion
We aim to Engage with & alert those vulnerable to extremism
We aim to Affect policy through research & public participation
in order to Call for the participation & empowerment of women
thereby Eliminating discrimination, and promoting tolerance

We believe that the "C" part of this 'PEACE' mission – that is Calling for the participation and empowerment of women; is the key to combating extremism. We choose to focus on women, because the mother is the base of the home. And we choose to address extremism in the name of Islam because at present Islam is facing a crisis of identity with Islamophobia at one end of the spectrum and so-called religious- based extremism at the other. We work to moderate extremes by addressing this ideological crisis. Islam's war is not territorial, it is ideological. It is quite distinct from other conflicts like Ireland and Israel.

I return to the question of women, Islamic communities have developed with time to promote gender-based distinctions, discrimination and inequality, not only in the home but also in social and political arenas. For some reason, most people within these communities refuse to address these cultural norms. Some people within Muslim societies (as lead by clerics like Morteza Motahhari) believe that a "woman's self esteem derives from the man, and so she does anything to gain his esteem. Her soul and flesh, feelings, even her basic identity, belong to and are identified with him. Man replaces God for a woman", a view plainly contradictory to monotheism, which Islam represents.

According to Islam and Islamic precepts, a woman owns her body and all her property. Under the pretext of the sanctity of the family, however, the reactionaries, or extremists, consider the husband as the owner of his wife's body and life, thus making her his slave.

Khomeini's theory of velayat-e-faqih begins with gender discrimination and ultimately tramples upon the most rudimentary human rights of women. For the fundamentalist mullah's perspective, gender distinction is the key to controlling people. People are controlled in worship, in trade and in signing contracts. On the marriage of virgin girls, Qomi has said: "In Islam, the marriage of a virgin girl is not allowed without the permission of the father and the consent of the girl. Both must agree, but at the same time the rule of the divine leadership superseded that of the father and the girl on the issue of marriage and vali-e faqih (that is the supreme leader) can enforce his view contrary to the opinion of the father and the girl." That means that a cleric could sanction the forced marriage of the girl over her own objection and that of her father.

According to Rajavi, from the fundamentalists' perspective, "sexual vice and virtue are the principal criteria for evaluation". The most unforgivable of all sins is sexual wrong doing, so piety, chastity and decency are basically measured by sex-related yardsticks. They seldom apply to the political and social realms. Fundamentalists perceive women to be sinister and satanic.

"She is the embodiment of sin and seduction. She must not step beyond her house, lest her presence in society breed sin". (in Rajavi, 2003)

The fundamentalists look at the world and the hereafter through distorted sex-tinted glasses. Throughout history they have fabricated their own fantasies as moral lessons and attributed them even to the Prophet Mohammed's ascension to Heaven. (Rajavi, 2003)

Such fantasies are nowhere to be found in the Quran. The Quran consists of more than 6200 verses, the great majority of which deal with the question of existence, history and human being, and emphasize the responsibilities of the human race. "The total number of verses focusing on religious precepts does not exceed 500, of which only a handful deal with sexual vice and virtue" (Rajavi, 2003).

According to the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet), the Prophet enumerated seven mortal sins, namely loss of faith in God's mercy, homicide, robbing orphans of their belongings, sorcery and demagoguery, usury, and slandering virtuous women.

A common theme runs through these seven sins, however diverse they may be: rather than being introspective, they all relate in one way or another to social relations and man's relations with others in society.

Looking at the list of the seven mortal sins, the question comes to mind that while one of the mortal sins is slandering women, why do fundamentalists exaggerate gender distinctions? "Is it not a dogma persisting from ancient times? That may be so, but the fundamentalists may see this as the only way to maintain a monopoly on Islam." (Rajavi, 2003)

At Tolerance International we call for the participation and empowerment of women in all aspects of political, cultural, social, educational and working life.
Women's input and involvement is fundamental for a democratic process. Religious dogma, in particular a false interpretation of Islam, undermines the position of women. We seek to empower women as we believe that women's participation in social and political leadership is a cornerstone of the solution to contesting religious extremism.

Because we believe in hope, we believe that these people who are sympathetic to the ideas of people in extremist groups are the people we can have a dialogue with.

Our approach opens the way to dialogue which in itself is the most important obstacle to overcome.

Connecting with those who are at risk of being affected by distorted religious teachings, using core religious values such as mercy and coexistence helps open the way to dialogue, this is the most important obstacle to overcome.

Empowering those vulnerable to re-examine their understanding of the core values of their faith ultimately helps them to disassociate themselves from damaging distortions. This requires public involvement to generate a comprehensive approach and a change in policy. We will conduct research into the roots of unrest and the sources of extremist interpretations of religious texts, which are leading to acts of violence and polarisation

within our communities. We aim to offer independent unbiased information to bring clarity to a confused and worrying situation, thereby hoping to improve on the public's perception and to gain active participation for our campaign in promotion of tolerance.

Empowering women to choose a life different to their own and to work towards an active coexistence that breaks down the barriers of inequality and discrimination that they face in everyday life is the key. Only by shaping the contemporary features and attitudes of women in British societies and in Muslim societies can we alleviate the nineteenth century encounter of Muslims with the modernising West and thereby go some way in tackling extremism.

Maryam Al-Alami ©
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"One initial report, in the minutes after the explosions, involved a person under a train, while another concerned a derailment (both of which did actually occur, but only as a result of the explosions)."