They hate women, don't they?

Muslim and secular feminists pity one another. It is time they realised they have much common ground.

"It must be terrible having to wear all that," a friend of mine was told last December as she attended a meeting to discuss the future of Afghanistan, particularly its women - "all that" being some baggy clothing and a headscarf.

"Not particularly," she retorted, putting an abrupt end both to the conversation and to the prospect of building bridges between Muslim and secular feminists.

My friend is the founder of an NGO dedicated to penal reform. A convert to Islam, she is as British and as white as the participant who so earnestly assumed she was a victim of the Taliban and in need of liberation. No doubt the woman meant well, but no amount of good intentions justifies the way that she, like many others, berates Islam for embodying all things anti-women. This misconception pre-dates the Rushdie era - indeed, so oppressed were we deemed to be in the 80s that even an illicit affair with Ricky Butcher in EastEnders provided an avenue of liberation.

The Islamic Human Rights Commission receives case after case of employers and educators using this image of the downtrodden Muslim woman to excuse discrimination. Muslim women are denied many opportunities on the assumption that they will - if not on a whim then by force - get married, or have many children. Or they face the horrendous dilemma of having to choose between employment and their Islamic garb.

Muslim women have become an absolute symbol of oppression, and distorted images of them permeate news coverage. While Daisy Cutters began to thunder down on Afghans
last year, journalists from across the political spectrum - from Boris Johnson in the Telegraph to Polly Toynbee on these pages - maintained that it was Islam that oppressed Afghan women. Beware Muslims, they screamed in their unlikely unanimity. They hate women, don't they?

As soon as they turn their attentions to Islam, commentators become missionaries. Muslim women must be saved from a religion that reviles, objectifies and veils them. Everything is proof of this. Afghan women had to wear the head-to-toe burka (although it turns out they did not); were not allowed to work (although they did); and could not vote (nor could men under Mullah Omar's regime).

Even an Iranian (yes, Iranian) movie has become part of the iconography of the campaign to rescue the Afghan and, by extension, Islamic woman. Mohsen Makhmalbaf's Kandahar has been held up as a critique of Islam and its treatment of women. The fact that it may actually be an appraisal of the Taliban's prejudices is a subtlety grasped only by a few. It is almost impossible to find a mainstream critique of the horror of the Taliban that is not itself an Islamophobic diatribe. Muslims, who could provide such a critique, are left out of the debate. Their reactions might as well not exist.

The cartoonish realisation of long-held prejudices in the Taliban's Afghanistan has given succour to an anti-Islamic clamour that the experiences of "western" and "Muslim" women are utterly distinct. While western women are assumed to have, or at least be approaching, equality with men, Muslim women are simply the victims of terror and oppression. So unfettered are western women in this scenario that they are what, according to Johnson, "Islamic terrorists" are really afraid of.

But this language of liberation disguises an exclusionary discourse. Conversions in the west are increasing and more women than men opt for the faith. Perhaps, the argument goes, they are not able to see how oppressive their choice is. Donning the headscarf as a means of negotiating modernity invites contempt for Muslim women's non-conformity to a single vision of female emancipation. "No letters please from British women who have taken the veil and claim it's liberating," Polly Toynbee wrote not so long ago. "It is their right in a tolerant society to wear anything, including rubber fetishes." Either insane or masochistic, the motives and beliefs of Muslim women are voiced by everybody except themselves.

The polarisation and misrepresentation works both ways, however. Marginalised Muslims have accused liberal society of objectifying, reviling and unveiling women. Western society, they charge, is pornographic, voyeuristic and exploitative. The gender
pay gap is shocking. None of this would happen in a truly Islamic society. Women’s financial independence and property rights are absolute in Islam. No woman is considered a commodity and pornographers would face punishments.

While the gap between Muslims and the west is widening the most striking feature of each other’s critiques of their treatment of women is the lack of dissimilarity. Violence, workplace discrimination, educational opportunity and a desire for basic respect from men are universal issues.

Whether we are western, Muslim, both or neither, we must wake up to the possibility that what we see as problematic for women is much the same whoever and wherever we are. Plastered over billboards, or banished from view, women are subjugated by patriarchy. Demeaning Islam excludes the voices of Islamic women and that liberates no one.

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