

# Change makers battling Muslim fundamentalism

By Elisa Van Ruiten for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (27.04.2015) The European Foundation for Democracy held a conference in Brussels, Belgium on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, entitled, "How to deconstruct the radical narrative? An alternative discourse of Academics and Activists of Muslim Heritage." The discussion touched on several issues related to radical jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State (IS); issues of Muslim fundamentalism, their portrayal in the media, and their appeal to young recruits. Undoubtedly, Islamophobia is increasing and leading more people to ask: why is this happening? Even further puzzling to many is why young women who were raised in the West - with its supposed democratic principles and human rights - would want to join such a barbaric group that rejects, and is literally at war, with Western ideals. As [Karima Bennoune](#), who, in addition to being one of the conference panellists is the author of *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here*, adamantly advocated: we need to change the way we see this issue [1].

## **The issue with fundamentalism**

Muslim fundamentalism is not a problem because of Islam, but because it is a form of fundamentalism. Even in Western society women are still fighting to overcome stereotypes and inequality - especially when confronted with any fundamentalist movement that is inherently at odds with women rights'. The conservative values that interpret these situations are harmful to women in all societies and religions.

While progress is being made to overcome these ingrained prejudices, one cannot deny they still exist. Yet, because women right's struggle in other areas does not mean that there is not a huge problem with the treatment of women within Muslim fundamentalist movements, like the IS. On the other hand, acknowledging problems in Western society does *not* legitimize or support these fundamentalists [2]. There is fine line between "advocat[ing] violations of human rights and discrimination against Muslims in response to the actions of Muslim fundamentalist...", and "tolerat[ing] the fundamentalists in response" [3]. In order to do this, a balanced, educated story needs to be told in order to advance women's rights and shut down Islamophobia.

## **Main-stream media's take**

If we look at the radical narrative from a women's rights perspective, and skim the surface of why young girls and women from Western society are voluntarily joining these movements, we see a few ways this phenomenon is being portrayed in main-stream media. The most common way that young women who join the IS are seen are as "naïve romantics" (aka: "Jihadi Brides") [4]. They are portrayed as seemingly disenfranchised Muslim girls in Western society who have been hooked via social media to the false promise of a more fulfilling life; a husband waiting for them in Syria, where they can practice their religion and are free to be their true selves. While this narrative may hold some elements of truth, in no way does it begin to explain the whole story. [An article](#) in Dissent magazine asks the poignant question: "Is it possible that ISIS appeals to some Muslim women, not because they are fooled by it, but because its political vision seems to offer solutions to some of their problems?" [5]. [A recent article](#) in the Guardian offers a response to this question, and rejects the oppression of the "Jihadi Bride" completely, suggesting that women join the fight for the same reasons that men do. They cite a report that expressed three reasons why women go to join the IS: (1) for their desire to defend the attack on Islam; (2) to contribute to the creation of the Caliphate and a new society; and (3) due to their feeling of duty to the Islamic State and the bonds of sisterhood with others who also heed the call of duty [6]. While approaching the topic from different perspectives, neither of these scenarios do justice to women. One is calling them naïve and the other is virtually saying, "Look, they're just like men!" However, both are ignoring women's own agency and individuality. What is almost

completely absent from the dialog are the stories of Muslim women who have taken a stand against fundamentalism – and have been doing so for quite a long time.

### **Change makers**

In order to make change, we need to support and turn the attention to those who are standing up against Muslim fundamentalism and its suppression of women's rights; those who are saying that you can be a Muslim and still be a feminist. The following examples demonstrate that Muslim fundamentalism does not mean that every person who practices Islam has the same belief, and to quote Mohamed Sifaoui, an Algerian journalist, from Bennoune's book, "the Muslim fundamentalists are *our* extreme right" [7].

Zainah Anwar started [Sisters in Islam](#) in Malaysia to help understand the rights of women under Sharia law, and furthermore, helped to pass the Domestic Violence Act in 1994. To date they continue to fight for women's rights issues in Malaysia through advocacy and research, and hold events, trainings, and study sessions to educate women on their rights in Islam.

Human rights activist Aïssatou Cissé is special adviser to Senegalese president, Macky Sall, since 2012, and is a champion for many causes involving women's rights; the rights of girls and women with disabilities, stopping female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriages, education of women in Islam, and she started the [Global Campaign to Stop Stoning and Killing Women](#).

The non-profit organization [Women Living Under Muslim Law](#) (WLUML), was founded by Marieme Hélie-Lucas in 1980. WLUML advocates for women who are living in oppressing, fundamentalist societies, raises public awareness of the issues women face, and battles the belief that violence against women is an innate part of their culture. For a more in-depth understanding of what they do, [click here](#).

Khalidia Brohi grew up in Pakistan and although her family was on the more liberal side, one of her friends was the victim of an honor killing. This drove her to start a movement to empower and educate women called [Sughar](#). She talks about her experience and fight against fundamentalism in [this Ted talk](#).

These are just a handful of women who are working to educate the public, combat fundamentalism, and promote women's rights for Muslim women. Professor Bennoune's book is filled with more examples of this, and you can view her Ted talk [here](#). These stories are just, if not more important, than the stories of young girls and women running off to Syria because they give hope where there is fear, and create connections across perceived gaps in culture and values.

### **References**

[1] Bennoune, Karima. *Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism*. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013

[2] Bennoune, Karima, pp. 24

[3] Ibid: pp. 25

[4] BBC News Online, 2014 via <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29507410> accessed 12 April 2015

[5] Dissent Online, 2015 via <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/why-women-choose-isis-islamic-militancy> accessed 12 April 2015

[6] The Guardian Online, 2013 via <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/04/jihadi-brides-arent-oppressed-they-join-isis-for-the-same-reasons-men-do> accessed 12 April 2015

[7] Bennoune, Karima, pp. 24