

Time to Thrash Out Gender Roles

By

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Like many Singaporeans, I was initially amused when news broke about a group of Malaysians setting up an Obedient Wives' Club (OWC).

But this quickly turned into dismay when *The New Paper* reported that some men and women plan to set up a branch of the OWC in Singapore, to promote the idea that social ills can be solved through wives pleasing their husbands in bed - and in the words of the OWC's founder, wives performing in bed 'like a world-class prostitute'.

Never mind that its proponents are from a fringe group, Global Ikhwan, an offshoot of the Al-Arqam, a movement outlawed in Malaysia but still active in the region. The fact that they have decided to promote their views warrants a response.

My concern is less over what people do in the confines of their bedroom; rather, my worry stems from the ludicrous claims made by OWC proponents, and their assumptions about what Islam says about the role of wives and the position of women in general.

It is easy to dismiss such views as patriarchal and downright sexist, and dissociate them from Islam and the Malay community. But it may take more to unpack the assumptions underpinning the OWC.

The OWC's extreme views can be traced to a more subtle but dominant patriarchal orientation existing in segments of the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore. Bookstores in Geylang Serai are replete with popular writings on Islam written in Malay, particularly on

the subject of marital relations. Subjects range from love-making etiquette to instruction manuals on how wives can please their husbands.

Casual observers may conclude, with some justification, that sex is not taboo in the community. An unmistakable trend is the idea that the husband has the right to be gratified sexually by his wife at all times.

While classical juristic writings by early Muslim scholars highlighted the mutual rights of husbands and wives to have their biological (sexual) needs met in a marriage, patriarchal tendencies often dominate. According to Kecia Ali in her recent book, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, these tendencies developed as a consequence of the marriage contract being treated like a business transaction, where a man's right to a woman's body is balanced with the woman's right to the *mahr*, or dowry.

Thus, marriage is primarily seen not as a relationship of mutual love and respect, but as a set of duties and obligations. The man, as the absolute leader in the family, is entitled to absolute obedience from the woman. Any form of denial or subversion of his authority may constitute *nushuz* (rebellion). Inadvertently, this has led to men believing that they have the right to demand sex from their wives, even if she refuses.

These ideas are part of the worldview of traditionalist Islam. The popularity of books such as *Tobfa-e-Doulhan* (Gift For The Bride), sold in local bookstores here, latches on to a dominant orientation as much as it seeks to entrench patriarchy through religious discourse.

Essentially, this constitutes a crisis of traditionalist thought in Muslim jurisprudence. The gravity of the OWC can be understood if one examines the centrality of the notion of 'obedience'.

In Malay, obedience is called *taat*. This term permeates nearly all the discussions on the role and responsibilities of the Muslim wife to her husband. Given the centrality of the notion of *taat isteri kepada suami* (a wife's obedience to her husband), it is not surprising that

all social ills relating to family life, such as divorce and delinquency, are tied to the 'straying' from the concept of obedience and authority.

In the simplistic minds of traditionalists, all domestic problems can be solved when men exercise their authority responsibly and women obey men as an act of submission to 'God's will'.

In such a patriarchal structure, men are to a degree above women. Thus, internal Muslim critiques of gender biases are often dismissed as an imposition of alien world views such as 'Western feminism'.

Some reformers, however, take a different view. A notable Muslim jurist Khaled Abou El Fadl has brilliantly dissected problems in contemporary Muslim discourse on gender in his book *Speaking In God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority And Women*.

He identified the prevalence of the language of 'obedience' as an example of how Islam's discourse on gender is in serious need of reform. This argument has been made by other reformists such as Dr Ziba Mir Hosseini (Iran), Professor Asma Barlas (United States), Dr Riffat Hassan (Pakistan), Dr Farid Esack (South Africa), Dr Asghar Ali Engineer (India) and Mr K. H. Hussein Muhammad (Indonesia).

In their progressive interpretation of Islam, a woman's 'obedience' is owed directly to God as a principle of *tawheed* (monotheism), and not via 'obedience' to her husband. Marriage is based on the equality of men and women and, as specified in the Quran, 'so that (they) may dwell in tranquillity' and develop 'deep feelings of love and mercy' (Q.30:21). Furthermore, roles and responsibilities are to be negotiated with mutual trust and respect, and are not predetermined by God.

More importantly, their views are grounded in the same sacred sources of the Quran and Hadith (prophetic traditions). Unfortunately, such alternative views have been neglected and sometimes rejected outright by an ossified form of 'Islam'.

If anything good emerges from the recent news about the OWC, it would be to open up a discussion about one of the most taboo topics in public discourse - sex in marital life. For reform-minded gender activists, this is the time to correct archaic assumptions about gender roles - from issues of reproductive right to inheritance law and marital rape. It is also an opportunity to highlight the limits of traditionalist thought in properly diagnosing issues and problems in society.

For Muslims in particular, it is time for critical self-reflection, to reclaim the egalitarian message of Islam, and reposition women as equally dignified partners in all spheres of life, marital relations included. It is time for a new gender discourse to take shape in the community. []

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