

Islamists' Fear of Females

The Roots of Gynophobic Misogyny among the Taliban and Islamic State

DR. HAYAT ALVI

The Afghan Taliban, along with a lengthy list of global Islamist extremists, seemingly possess an overt, irrational fear of females. However, this fear is not just based on the secular phenomenon known in psychology as *gynophobia*, which is the general fear or dislike of women. Rather, it is more than that; it is a religiously interpreted fear of females as a source of temptations that might lead to sinful sexual behavior. This article offers an analysis of the misogyny of Islamist extremist groups, specifically in the case of the Afghan Taliban and the Islamic State (IS), in the context of psycho-religious fear of females as the source of temptations leading potentially to sinful acts. The actual fear of females plays a principal role in the Taliban's and Islamic State's misogyny, and coincidentally, these organizations' determination to control the lives of women and denial of agency revolve around the same fears.

In the extremists' logic, if the patriarchal social system can control practically every aspect of females' lives, especially in the public space, then the risk of temptations for committing sins in the eyes of God is mitigated. Therefore, if women must venture into the public space, then they are required to dress with the full veil, rendering them "invisible." As the Islamists' logic goes, failure to do so would result in chaos in the streets, as men would have to face sexual temptations and distractions at every turn. Also, many ultra-orthodox interpretations of Islamic theology and principles place the burden of temptations on the shoulders of women. In other words, even if it is not a woman's intention to cause sexual temptation, she is still responsible and at fault. It is a similar concept to the burden of Eve/woman in her role causing the "original sin," as believed in some Christian denominations—but with a twist.

Renowned writer Francine Prose has illuminated the issue of fear and control of women in many religious traditions. According to Prose, referring to the Southern Baptist Convention,

. . . the convention's leaders, quoting a few carefully selected Bible verses and claiming that Eve was created second to Adam and responsible for original sin, ordained that women must be 'subservient' to their husbands and prohibited from serving as deacons, pastors, or chaplains in the military service.

. . . To automatically hate and fear anything or anyone different from ourselves and to want to feel smarter and worthier than an entire race or gender are two of the least admirable and most regrettable aspects of human nature. So it does seem peculiar that religion, with its emphasis on self-perfection through prayer and the help of God, should so rarely include intolerance among the roster of sins for which we wish to be forgiven, or to avoid altogether. Strange, but not so very strange, when we consider that religions are not merely belief systems but social institutions whose leaders have always understood how effectively fear, hate, and the assurance of racial, national, or sexual superiority—and sex—can be used to define and control a society.¹

In Islam, there is no concept of original sin. However, it can be argued that throughout Islamic history the Muslim clergy—whose institutions are male-dominated—have interpreted the *Quran* (Islamic scripture) and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) according to their respective cultural lenses. As the birth of Islam took place in Arab culture during the seventh century, wherein society consisted of predominantly patriarchal social structures and systems (with very few exceptions), the preeminent culture of Islam has been observed primarily through the male lens. While Islam brought revolutionary freedoms and rights to women *at that time of history*, the subsequent interpretations and applications of Islamic principles and laws have favored men, and, in fact, in many cases have denied women fundamental freedoms and rights. The early Islamic freedoms and rights afforded to women do not pass the test of modern standards and circumstances. Nonetheless, the ultra-orthodox clergy and followers feel compelled to impose the seventh century norms on modern societies. Global Islamist extremists are practically unmatched in their zealotry in this matter.

For instance, Saudi Arabia holds the record as an ultra-orthodox Sunni/Wahhabi theocracy that implements an extreme version of gynophobic Islamic misogyny. Furthermore, the facts that Saudi Arabia, along with Pakistan, helped create the misogynistic Afghan Taliban and that the IS ideology is based on its own version of Wahhabism are not mere coincidences. Francine Prose supports these contentions, saying, “The Taliban’s demonic and demonizing attitude toward women represents merely the most current extreme manifestation of the grotesque misogyny fostered throughout history by religion and patriarchal tribal culture. Both the Taliban and the Southern Baptists employ the ‘lessons’ of biology and scripture to ‘prove’ women’s inferiority, a view of our gender unlikely to be eliminated by another air strike or drone-missile deployment, or by the polite demurrals of a former president.”²

All these misogynistic ideologies and attitudes stem from a principal psychological factor in religiously orthodox male-dominated societies: the actual *fear* of

females. This is even more potent for the Afghan Taliban, who have been indoctrinated with this irrational fear of females in their schooling in *madrassas* (seminaries) and who have been physically isolated from female populations in their youth.

In addition, Afghan Pashtun tribal culture and codes have been known to be highly conservative and repressive toward women. Ahmed Rashid reminds us that the role that Amir Abdul Rehman (1880–1901) played—with British help—in setting the stage for Pashtun domination and empowering the mullahs (clergy) in Afghanistan is a pivotal moment in the country's history. According to Rashid, one of the most reliable authorities of the Taliban,

The Amir used British subsidies and arms supplies to create an effective administration and a standing army. He subdued rebellious Pashtun tribes and then moved north to ruthlessly end the autonomy of the Hazaras and Uzbeks. Using methods that were to be closely followed a century later by the Taliban, he carried out a nineteenth-century version of ethnic cleansing, massacring non-Pashtun opponents and transporting Pashtuns to settle farms in the north thereby creating a loyal Pashtun population amongst the other ethnic minorities.

... His other legacies, which were to indirectly influence the Taliban, included the isolation of Afghanistan from Western or modernizing influences including education, his emphasis on Islam by enhancing the powers of the Pashtun mullahs and introducing the concept of a divine right to rule rather than the traditional concept of election by the Loya Jirga.³

Rashid has long studied the madrassa culture and curricula since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and thereafter, and he describes them in his book, *Taliban*, in which he mentions that “Afghan mullahs or Pakistan’s Islamic fundamentalist parties” have run the madrassas.⁴ The students, or *Taliban*, were mostly orphaned refugee boys between 14 and 24 years old.⁵ The madrassas have proliferated along the Afghan-Pakistan border region, in which the boys “studied the Koran, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and the basics of Islamic law as interpreted by their barely literate teachers. Neither teachers nor students had any formal grounding in maths [*sic*], science, history or geography.”⁶ Moreover, Rashid reports that these boys

... were literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge. They admired war because it was the only occupation they could possibly adapt to. Their simple belief in a messianic, puritan Islam which had been drummed into them by simple village mullahs was the only prop they could hold on to and which gave their lives some meaning. Untrained for anything, even the traditional occupations of their forefathers such as farming, herding or the making of handicrafts. . . .

Moreover, they had willingly gathered under the all-male brotherhood that the Taliban leaders were set on creating, because they knew of nothing else. Many in fact were orphans who had grown up without women – mothers, sisters or cousins. Others were madrasa students or had lived in the strict confines of segregated refugee camp life, where the normal comings and goings of female relatives were curtailed [...] They had simply *never known the company of women*.⁷ (emphasis added)

Undoubtedly, the roots of the Taliban's gynophobic misogyny stem from this severely gender segregated background of the madrasa students and young male refugees. Rashid adds the following observations that clarify the depths of the Islamist extremists' gynophobic misogyny:

The mullahs who had taught them stressed that women were a temptation, an unnecessary distraction from being of service to Allah. So when the Taliban entered Kandahar and confined women to their homes by barring them from working, going to school and even from shopping, the majority of these madrasa boys saw nothing unusual in such measures. They felt threatened by that half of the human race which they had never known and it was much easier to lock that half away, especially if it was ordained by the mullahs who invoked primitive Islamic injunctions, which had no basis in Islamic law. The subjugation of women became the mission of the true believer and a fundamental marker that differentiated the Taliban from the former Mujaheddin.⁸

These historical factors have contributed to and exacerbated the Taliban's fear of females. Based on this fear, the Taliban feel compelled to control and restrict the female population as much as possible to prevent the public sphere from descending into chaos due to female temptations. Author Prose substantiates these points, saying, "Measures are taken, as in Islam, to protect men from temptation."⁹

The Taliban and the IS harbor gynophobic misogyny in the context of the Islamic rule of "enjoining the good and forbidding evil." The specific verse in the Quran mentioning this is chapter (Surah) 9, *At-Tawbah* (The Repentance), verse 112, which countless violent Islamist extremists invoke: "Those that turn (to Allah) in repentance; that serve Him, and praise Him; that wander in devotion to the cause of Allah; that bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer; that *enjoin good and forbid evil*."¹⁰ Therefore, the likes of the Taliban and IS deploy religious police to enforce dress codes and other socio-religious policies, especially to control and manage women and girls. In fact, for religious extremists, women are the first targets of social control. In doing so, these Islamists believe that they are "enjoining the good and forbidding evil," and hence, the public sphere will be safe and secure, including from sources of female temptations and distractions.

When the Taliban first came to power in Afghanistan during the mid-1990s, “women were prohibited from working, girls’ schools shut down and beatings liberally handed out for ‘abuses’ of the strict dress code.”¹¹ The IS took this a step further once they turned Raqqa, Syria, into their headquarters in 2015, as they violently enforced a *double-veil* policy: “In Raqqa, the ISIS ‘capital’ in Syria, women were initially ordered to wear a black abaya covering the entire body. Soon after, a command to wear a veil was issued, then a third ordered a shield on top of the abaya. Women are also instructed to wear only black, including gloves and shoes. ISIS subsequently ordered women to hide their eyes, requiring a double-layered veil.”¹² The resolve to “purify” the streets from any perceived sources of female temptations cannot be overemphasized. Clearly, the burden of these policies always falls on the female populations. In addition, in these highly conservative cultures, the concept of honor is also borne by females for the entire family or even tribe. Seemingly, men are absolved of any behavior that may lead to “sin” or “evil,” especially in terms of sexual attraction and acts.

Consider the words of a Taliban cleric, Maulvi Kalamadin, who served as the head of the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (i.e., another interpretation of “enjoining the good and forbidding evil”), in an interview with Rashid: “Stylish dresses and decoration of women in the hospitals are forbidden. Women are duty-bound to behave with dignity, to walk calmly and refrain from hitting their shoes on the ground which makes noises.”¹³ Also, Kalamadin’s organization has issued and enforced a number of decrees “including that men should not shave their beards and women should not appear on the streets without a blood-shared relative.”¹⁴

Rashid describes the Taliban’s fear of women early on in his book, describing his American journalist colleague, “a tall, lanky blonde”: “[She] posed a threat to every concept the Taliban held—that women should be neither seen nor heard because they drove men away from the proscribed Islamic path and into wild temptation . . . Whether it was a fear of women or their abhorrence of femininity, Taliban leaders had frequently refused to give interviews to female journalists.”¹⁵

Another aspect of the Taliban and IS misogynistic control of women has to do with power. Girls and women who are denied an education and employment cannot pose a threat to the men in society. Thus, while the Taliban and IS impose harsh social policies against girls and women while claiming that it is for the purpose of “enjoining the good and forbidding evil,” the bonus is to remove their potential socioeconomic and political competition of the opposite gender.

Conclusion

What can be done about this deeply rooted gynophobic misogyny in Afghanistan, especially now that the Taliban have reemerged into power and continue to violently repress women and girls? The international community must continue pressuring the Taliban regime to embrace international norms and laws of human rights. The international community must also expose Taliban crimes and violent abuses of the female population and minorities. We cannot let them off the hook, nor can we stop shining the “light of shame” on the Taliban on the global stage.

What counterterrorism strategies can be deployed to fight against Taliban and IS ideologies? The latter are ideologies steeped in distorted religious interpretations and beliefs, and such gynophobic beliefs facilitate and exacerbate violent repression of female populations. To quote Prose,

To automatically hate and fear anything or anyone different from ourselves and to want to feel smarter and worthier than an entire race or gender are two of the least admirable and most regrettable aspects of human nature. So it does seem peculiar that religion, with its emphasis on self-perfection through prayer and the help of God, should so rarely include intolerance among the roster of sins for which we wish to be forgiven, or to avoid altogether. Strange, but not so very strange, when we consider that religions are not merely belief systems but social institutions whose leaders have always understood how effectively fear, hate, and the assurance of racial, national, or sexual superiority—and sex—can be used to define and control a society.¹⁶

Fighting against such entrenched gynophobic ideologies is immensely challenging, since they are cloaked in religion, and one thing is for sure: no amount of air strikes, bombs, targeted assassinations, denial of safe havens, or whole-of-government counterterrorism tactics can remove what is embedded in one’s heart—especially if it grants the perpetrator great advantages over the other sex. ❀

Dr. Hayat Alvi

Dr. Alvi joined the US Naval War College in 2007. Previously, she served as an assistant professor in the Political Science Department at American University in Cairo from 2001–05 and as the director of the International Studies Program at Arcadia University from 2005–07. She specializes in international relations, political economy, and comparative politics, with regional expertise in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. She also specializes in Islamic studies and genocide studies. She is proficient in Arabic and Urdu and is a Fulbright Fellow (Syria, 1993–94). Alvi has published numerous articles, books, and book chapters.

Notes

1. Francine Prose, "The Original Sin: Where Misogyny Comes From – And Why It Endures," *Lapham's Quarterly*, Winter 2010, <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/>.
2. Prose, "The Original Sin."
3. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 12.
4. Rashid, *Taliban*, 32.
5. Rashid, *Taliban*, 32.
6. Rashid, *Taliban*, 32.
7. Rashid, *Taliban*, 32.
8. Rashid, *Taliban*, 33.
9. Prose, "The Original Sin."
10. *The Holy Quran*, Surah 9 At-Tawbah, verse 112, interpreted by Yusuf Ali, <https://quran.com/>.
11. Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: Afghanistan, Al Qa'ida and the Holy War*, revised edition (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 41.
12. Mona Mahmood, "Double-Layered Veils and Despair ... Women Describe Life under ISIS," *The Guardian*, 17 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.
13. Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 180–81.
14. Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, 181.
15. Rashid, *Taliban*, 2.
16. Prose, "The Original Sin."

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.