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Worried white men

PVV uses the headscarves issue to conceal a completely empty political programme.

Emancipation for all women is today's central theme at the Women Inc. festival in Amsterdam. On hearing the word 'emancipation', a large group of worried men immediately thinks of pathetic, downtrodden Muslim women who need to be freed. But do these women really want to be freed?

It's heart-warming how a group of white men appear to be working body and soul to achieve the emancipation of Muslim women in the Netherlands. Wilders and other committed PVV (far right-wing political party) politicians, such as Fritsma and De Roon advocate freeing Muslim women from the yoke of their headscarves. In their view, true emancipation can only occur if these women can break free of the oppression imposed on them by their violent husbands and aggressive brothers. Freed from their background and religion, they will finally feel free in our open, friendly society.

This committed paternalism towards Muslim women unfortunately ignores the fact that the emancipation agenda is far from a success in the Netherlands. Yet you don't hear these men saying anything about that. It's as if they view the discarding of headscarves as separate from the constant struggle by many Dutch women and men to combine work and care. They simply do not see the absurdly low percentages of female professors, the male-dominated executive boards at banks and multinationals or the way the SGP (orthodox Christian political party) excludes women from politics.

Of course there is still a great deal to be done about participation by migrant women in Dutch society. Many women with a Moroccan/Turkish/Afghan/Somali background struggle every day to achieve a fine balance between the demands of their immediate families and the challenges presented by Dutch society. Their cultural traditions, often justified by a specific interpretation of the holy Koran, do not always contribute to their integration. Especially when this is combined with typically macho behaviour from brothers and fathers, who assume they know better than the women in their family.

Nowadays there are many Muslim women and men who speak out about all kinds of wrongs. They work behind the scenes, display the required strategic patience and achieve ever greater results in eradicating disadvantages.

Norms and values

Emancipation for all women is today's central theme at the Women Inc. festival in Amsterdam. I assume, however, that Wilders & co will not be in attendance. This is because they are not interested in the true emancipation of women, never mind that of Muslim women. On the contrary, it is now clear that they don't even hear the voices of emancipated Muslim women. It is of course much easier, to keep inveighing against *the terrible religion of Islam* which cannot be reconciled with Western norms and values.

This time the fight is not about how you as a woman can continue to be 'in control of your own womb', as was the case in the 60s and 70s of the previous century, when male politicians thought they could dictate to women how they should deal with unwanted pregnancies. It is now about whether male politicians and policymakers can accept that Muslim women are 'in control of their own heads'.

I dare to doubt that they can. Last week in London I participated in a BBC/British Council Our Shared Europe debate about whether Europe is failing Muslims. Douglas Murray, a great friend of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, was the staunchest opponent of this motion. Not because he agreed with his fellow panellist Flemming Rose, that Muslims are given sufficient space in Europe to participate and to subscribe to our liberal values. No, the director of the UK's Centre for Social Cohesion, believes that Muslims are seriously failing Europe because they believe in a radical, violent ideology.

The core of his argument focuses on the victimisation of Islamic women, which results in us Europeans having *terrible difficulties with Muslims*. He was strongly supported by a group of middle-aged white men in the audience. They view the headscarf as the ultimate symbol of female oppression. However, a large section of the British audience was of a totally different opinion. In London, Murray found himself faced with a group of emancipated Muslim women. These assertive young women – some wearing headscarves, some with luxuriant hairstyles – spoke with pride about being British, their role as European citizens and the fact that they want to be taken seriously both as women and as Muslims. They tend to feel let down if they are not seen as who they want to be: emancipated European citizens who want to practise their own religion within the borders of the constitutional state.

Murray didn't want to know any of this. He is just as fundamentalist in his conviction that nothing good can come out of Islam as those Muslim fundamentalists who believe that only true Islam can create utopia. In his weblog, Murray focuses mainly on the behaviour of those Muslim women who had dared to contradict him. He also believes that they are in a state of denial by not recognising how oppressive Islam really is. He apparently didn't, or couldn't, understand what these emancipated Muslim woman had to say: we can stand up for ourselves!

The question is why men such as Douglas Murray, Geert Wilders and many others do not wish to listen to these voices. The response from the London audience is familiar to me – I have heard this in the Dutch debate. Our national debate forums are occupied by concerned Dutch people, often white men, who speak with a great deal of passion on the subject of oppressed Muslim women. Unfortunately, the conversation often takes place over the heads of these same women. Even if a lone headscarf-wearing female audience member does speak out about her own image of herself, hardly anyone listens to what she has to say.

Loyalty

So far, Wilders has not clarified which problems he aims to solve with his ban on headscarves in Almere and The Hague. Will the ban really contribute to a greater sense of security among people or be a successful way to tackle youth at risk or youth unemployment? Whatever the case, it would certainly demonstrate true commitment to the emancipation of Muslim women if the PVV were to advocate good education, improved access to the labour market, combating domestic violence and attention to sexual rights and the health of migrant women.

Perhaps this attitude arises from a lack of faith in the loyalty of these Muslim women to the Netherlands? In his book *'Moorddadige Identiteiten (Murderous Identities, 1996)'*, the Franco-Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf describes what happens when minority groups are asked to make choices about that part of their identity of which they are most proud. Maalouf contends that people are highly likely to choose their race, ethnic background or religion. And that we should then not be surprised if they constantly shove this in our faces.

I think that is exactly what we have done with the migrant population in the Netherlands and Europe; we have constantly asked the question: who are you and where do your loyalties lie? This has forced many migrants to opt for the religious aspect of their identity. While the Dutch constitutional state offers individuals every opportunity to show who they want to be within our oft-praised norms and values. It is sometimes as if our belief in universal human rights was a luxury during the good times, while they are of course a bitter necessity in difficult times.

Ultimate touchstone

Why is it that men often make women's bodies the ultimate touchstone of civilisation? It is still a surprise to see that many people believe that the height of emancipation is that women's bodies are used to inspire lust. In our Western consumer society, we encourage consumer spending by revealing bodies as much as possible: women in bikinis apparently still sell cars and beer.

In closed Islamic societies, women have to be completely covered. A male Dutch friend once told me that he thought this was an insult to his self-control: "As if I would drop my trousers at the sight of a lock of hair". It seems to me that in the twenty-first century women should be allowed to be so much more than just their bodies, whether they are Islamic, Christian or atheist.

Through their call for a ban on headscarves, Wilders and his followers are reducing Muslim women to nothing more than their bodies and are therefore doing exactly what they are accusing radical Muslims of doing. It is logical that the more paternalistic the PVV becomes, the more emancipated Muslim women will become. And it is precisely now that there is a role for 'reasonable citizens'. Anyone can opt out of being part of the silent majority and doing nothing as an 'innocent bystander'. The question is no longer about the tone of the debate, but what we are really saying about each other and how we can get past the notion of 'them and us'.

This is really a question for everyone: active Muslim women, their brothers, fathers and husbands, the worried white men, those people who think it has nothing to do with them and the Dutch media, which need to look beyond one-dimensional stories. The major challenge is to keep looking beyond the 'colour of religion' and continue to value people for their individuality. Even if there is a group of emancipated Muslim women who evoke the 'colour of their religion' by wearing headscarves, as the ultimate symbol of their own emancipation struggle.

As a diplomat, Petra Stienen spent over ten years working in the Arab world, wrote the book '*Dromen van een Arabische Lente* (Dreaming of an Arabic Spring)' and currently works as a consultant.

The BBC broadcast of the debate can be found on: <http://www.ourshareurope.org/london-debate-febr-10>

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