Excerpt: His Highness the Aga Khan on women (1)

by NANOWISDOMS ARCHIVE OF IMAMAT SPEECHES, INTERVIEWS AND WRITINGS

Globe and Mail: We haven’t talked about gender which is too important an issue to address in a few minutes. But there’s been a great debate about gender in Muslim countries, post-September 11th. Where do you see the debate going in these countries?

Aga Khan: I find it very difficult to validate the concept, for example, that Islam says a woman cannot be educated. Or that Islam says that a woman cannot work. I think what Islam says is that men and women have to live in a dignified manner in civil society. I think Islam says [sic] there is a tendency for the male half of society to dominate and at times become overbearing. You in the Western world have laws, you recognise that risk in society and you recognise it by laws in work, by laws in equity of employment and things of that sort, so I don’t think there’s a big difference there — it is a structural issue in society.

What I’m saying is that I think in the Islamic world, there will be an acceptance that women must function and try to function in civil society in a proper, overt manner. But that does not mean that that line I told you about between freedom and licence can be crossed. I think that’s where the difference lies ... So I certainly see a change occurring, I think it’ll take time. There are risks, you know. There are risks in forcing the issue. Educated women in societies which are not accustomed to educated women within their midst can reject educated women. If they reject educated women, those educated women find their destiny outside of those societies. So I think it’s a little bit foolhardy to say let’s simply say women automatically have to be educated and everything is going to fall into place -- that’s not true. That’s not true. There are social limits ... In our own community I think women have demonstrated, including here in Canada, that they can be very, very well respected people who have very high roles and that’s what I would hope. But I think that the problem for you in the West and for us in the Islamic world is this structural issue of the female society versus the male society.
His Highness the Aga Khan's 2002 Globe and Mail Interview (3rd) (Toronto, Canada)

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