Islam, Children’s Rights, and the Hijab-gate of Rah-e-Kargar

In Defence of the Prohibition of the Islamic Veil for Children
Mansoor Hekmat (1997)


Two leaflets have recently been published in Stockholm against the International Campaign for the Defence of Women’s Rights in Iran (ICDWRI) and the Swedish Committee of the Worker-communist Party of Iran. The tone of both leaflets is extremely hostile. They have the same content and the same orientation, and are maybe even from the same pen. The first one is signed by the editorial board of the ‘Swedish (?) journal of Women and Fundamentalism’, while the second one is signed directly by Rah-e-Kargar (Organisation of Revolutionary Worker of Iran). The leaflets require a prompt and serious answer.

What has provoked the writers of the two leaflets is apparently our support for the prohibition of the Islamic veil for children. They protest that this ‘goes against the freedom of choice of clothing’ for Muslims. It is a negation of the ‘democratic rights of minorities’. They say this demand is ‘racist’ and ‘fascist’ and harks back to the methods of ‘Pol Pot’ and ‘Reza Shah’. They expose us for bringing in the ‘state, the law, and the police.’ They say we want to take the veil off women’s heads by force; they say we have divided the people into ‘the nation of Islam and its enemies’, and that we are starting a new ‘crusade’. But these are only some of their milder accusations. There are also accusations that would, in any society in which the reputation and dignity of the citizens are respected and the ‘minorities’ are not left at the mercy of ‘their own’ Islamic and oriental culture and traditions, result in a libel case and bring in ‘the state, the law and the police’.

Our differences over the inviolable rights of the child and the question of oppression and contempt for women in Islam-stricken families are certainly substantial and serious and must be explained and emphasised in a clear and well-reasoned manner. We shall come to this further down. The hysteria in the leaflets, however, is not caused by theoretical differences over these issues. It is, rather, because they realise that once more they have put their foot in it in public. Just like a few years ago when they supported the expulsion of the Afghans from Iran (before the fall of the Soviet Union and the democratic baptism of our noble friends, when their beloved camp was at war with the Afghan Muslims, and democracy was considered as yet forbidden fruit for the Afghans). This time the hullabaloo is caused by a meeting they called with the intention of putting the communists in their place and countering the massive public attention to the statements of Asrin Muhammadi and ICDWRI on the issue of Islam and the rights of children. But, as their own leaflets show, they did not expect the meeting to be embraced so unanimously by the Muslims, and, of course, the ‘fundamentalists’, and the passionate cries of Allah o Akbar and Islamic acclaim in the ranks of their supporters. In time they have realised that, on balance they have come out badly. They did not mean to appear so Islamic. It was not meant that their ‘demarcation line’ with the Islamicists should be smudged so easily. Islamophilia might (though even this is doubtful) prove useful for a ‘brother
party’ dealing with an immigrant population among which Islam has an influence. But it is a disgrace and a political scandal for an organisation dealing primarily with more urban, deeply anti-religious, and, as the leaflets put it, ‘dandy’ Iranian immigrants. An organisation that should, once again, try to divide Islam and the Islamic movement into good and bad, moderate and fundamentalist, poisonous and edible, folksy and non-folksy, has publicly declared its own political bankruptcy, in particular since everybody knows that the organisation itself is just a chip off the same old block of the social movement and political tradition that presented Iranian society with the pro-Khomeini Tudeh party and the Majority. This has turned out to be a huge scandal for these friends. It is their ‘Islam-gate’ and ‘Hijab-gate’. Now they have realised this and are trying to whitewash it in a medley of noise. They are trying to excuse the embarrassing support of the Muslims for their positions and ideas by blaming it on our ‘leftism’ and anti-Islamic ‘fundamentalism’. If it were not for the Worker-communist Party’s Pol-Potism and Reza-khanism, then the fundamentalist Muslims would not be able to assume a righteous position and shield themselves behind democracy, and, thus, fade their demarcation line with Rah-e- Kargar and the Swedish Women opposed to Fundamentalism! A cunning, but useless excuse.

Let us deal with the key points in this argument one by one.

**Children’s Rights and the Islamic Hijab (Veil)**

We have never said anything about ‘pulling the veil off women’s heads,’ and by ‘the police’ at that. The Programme of the Worker-communist Party clearly defends the freedom of clothing. But our programme also asks for the protection of children against the transgressions of religion and religious sects on their rights. Moreover, our programme considers it an offence to prevent children from enjoying their social and civil rights such as education, amusement, and participation in social activities specific to children. The question of freedom of clothing concerns adults, i.e. those who, at least formally and legally, have the right to choose and can face the consequences of their choice -- even though the-right-to-choose of an adult woman who is familiar with the threat of the Islamic knife or the Islamic jar of acid on her face is as formal as formal can be. The argument for the freedom of clothing says nothing about the rights of children or the little or adolescent girl who lives in an Islamic family under the custody of her parents. Our dear geniuses declare that the distinction between the child and the adult ‘makes no difference in this matter’! Well, it does.

We say that putting a veil on the heads of children and adolescents who have not come of legal age should be prohibited in law, because it is the imposition of a certain clothing on the child by the followers of a certain religious sect. It so happens that the defence of the civil rights of the child and the child’s right to choose (not an absolute in itself) require that this imposition be legally prevented. The child has no religion, tradition and prejudices. She has not joined any religious sect. She is a new human being who, by accident and irrespective of her will has been born into a family with specific religion, tradition, and prejudices. It is indeed the task of society to neutralise the negative effects of this blind lottery. Society is duty-bound to provide fair and equal living conditions for children, their growth and development, and their active participation in social life. Anybody who should try to block the normal social life of a child, exactly like those who would want to physically violate a child according to their own culture, religion, or personal or collective complexes, should be confronted with the firm barrier of the law and the serious reaction of society. No nine year old girl chooses to be married, sexually mutilated, serve as house maid and cook for
the male members of the family, and be deprived of exercise, education, and play. The child grows up in the family and in society according to established customs, traditions, and regulations, and automatically learns to accept these ideas and customs as the norms of life. To speak of the choice of the Islamic veil by the child herself is a ridiculous joke. Anyone who presents the mechanism of the veiling of a kindergarten-age girl as her own ‘democratic choice’ either comes from outer space, or is a hypocrite who does not deserve to participate in the discussion about children’s rights and the fight against discrimination. The condition for defending any form of the freedom of the child to experience life, the condition for defending the child’s right to choose, is first and foremost, to prevent these automatic and common impositions. Anyone who thinks that in the matter of the veil there is ‘no difference’ between the child and the adult, should, before becoming a member of any editorial board or any Scandinavian Committee of any organisation, urgently do something about her own backwardness and ignorance about the basics of the issue under discussion.

When these people speak of the ‘infringement of democratic rights,’ however, they do not mean those of the child, but of the parents. Does the forbidding of the Islamic veil for the child and adolescent girl infringe on the ‘democratic rights’ of the parents? That is what they claim. Luckily human society is emerging from the time when the wife and the children were considered the property of the patriarch who was eligible to put them to death if he so wished. What these people speak of as the democratic right of the parents in this context is the left- over of the tribal rights of the patriarch, which has fortunately been curbed considerably in the course of social progress and with society turning more ‘dandy’. Certainly, the rights of parents in regard to the child is limited to, and conditioned by, the universal and legal human rights of the child. It is the task of the law (the very ‘state and the police’) to safeguard this. No one, neither the father, nor the mother, nor anybody else, has the right to beat or intimidate the child. No one has the right to take the child’s freedom away from her, to prevent her from getting an education or engaging in sports, or having a social life. No one has the right to abuse the child sexually. No one has the right to make the child work or employ her. No one has the right to physically abuse the child, even by sanction of the ‘holy Sharia’. No one has the right to deprive the child from any of the possibilities that the established norms of society grant her as her right. These varieties of child abuse are nobody’s ‘democratic rights.’ Imposing bans and limitations on the traditional and tribal almightiness of fathers and husbands is a sine qua non for the child’s enjoyment of her basic human rights. Our part-time democrats should simply take our word for it that society has taken a step forward in arriving at this point. Is this simple fact really so difficult to comprehend?

But maybe the Islamic veil does not qualify as a form of child abuse. This is what they imply. After all, the Islamic veil is ‘folksy’; it is ‘our own’; it belongs to the ‘deprived immigrants’; it is part of the culture of ‘us Orientals’; it is garb of the ‘anti-imperialists’. The racists don’t like it either, and the Swedish immigration minister herself, a symbol of hostility to immigrants, walks around without a veil. Pure garbage. Coming from a ‘non-fundamentalist’ Muslim, or from someone belonging to the Mujahedeen sect, such a nonsense would not be surprising. But do people who make claims on being progressive women, and keep reminding us of their cordial relations with ‘veterans in the Swedish women’s movement and anti-racist movement’ really fail to understand the significance of the Islamic veil and its devastating impact on the minds and lives of little and adolescent girls? Should one begin to preach to them about the misery of a child who is isolated and singled out, does not know why she is not allowed to swim, mix freely with her class mates,
active and playful, and, meanwhile is completely powerless to get herself out of this nightmare? The long-term effects of the Tudeh party political upbringing on this bunch are so profound that they don’t even accidentally stumble on a liberated position vis-à-vis Islam.

Prohibition of ‘Compulsory’ Veil for the Children

This is the positive slogan of these people on the question of the Islamic veil and children. They imagine that they have discovered a good, effective, and democratic formula. But the slogan says nothing and does not have the slightest effect on the fact of the oppression of children and specially girls in Islamic environments. Why? Think how this is going to work in practice. If this formula becomes the social norm, the only children excused from wearing the veil would be those who can prove in a court of law or a tribunal that the parents have put the veil on them by force. As long as the use of force is not proved no illegal act has been committed. What a miraculous formula! Every bold nine year old girl with a post-graduate degree in law, who is fully aware of her civil rights, and, moreover, is prepared to be banished from her family, and testify in court against her Muslim parents, and back it up with sufficient evidence indicating the use of force in putting the veil on her head, who can readily come up with the necessary arguments against the parents’ defence lawyers and eloquently criticise and reject the issue of cultural relativism, might (provided, of course, that the Swedish industry is not, at that point, engaged in exporting something to the ‘Islamic world’) be given permission not to put the veil on. Where this child is going to live after the trial and what would happen to her on the bus line or on the way to school, is of course not a problem with which our friends are bothered.

The entire usefulness of this formula appears to be that it puts on display the naivety and ignorance of its supporters in regard to the actual mechanisms of real life and the problem of child abuse in the family and in society. One can only point out to these great minds that the mechanism of coercion and imposition in the family is quite deep rooted and covert. No one draws a gun on the child to force the veil on her, because the child does not question the will and the wish of her parents. In her mind she considers them justified and herself guilty even when she is beaten and physically abused. She regards submission to their wishes as an obvious duty. It is a nightmare to the child to annoy her parents and to lose their love or approval. It is difficult to understand how these people expect the courage that they collectively are not prepared to show in confronting the Muslims, to be shown by a child in confronting her parents and the authorities in a religious family. We thought they mean to formulate a proposal or a policy in the defence of the rights of the children. Now we realise, with their slogan, that it is the children who should gallantly rescue Rah-e Kargar and the ‘Swedish Journal of Women and Fundamentalism’ from a political dead end. Just think, with this slogan how many children a year will actually be rid of the Islamic veil? Three, four, seven, eleven? Is this the slogan that is supposed to solve the problem of one generation of oppressed children and adolescents in Sweden? Let us ask them, why is the burden of the proof, or the duty to file a complaint, not on the child in other similar cases? Are you prepared to forbid only ‘compulsory’ child labour, or the ‘forcible’ sexual abuse of children? Or forbid the beating of a child only when it is carried out against her wishes or the marriage of an under-age girl only if it is ‘against her will’? Are you going to forbid only the ‘forcible’ sexual mutilation of the girl? Are we not correct to assume that in any of these cases if the child herself is indifferent or gives consent, or refrains from filing a complaint, or withdraws her complaint, no crime has been committed, your responsibility is
over, your conscience is clear, and you can go back to your Swedish editorial meeting and that of the Scandinavian Committee of your organisation?

This slogan is empty and hypocritical. It is a formula designed to avoid the issue and not to upset the Muslims. Putting the veil on little girls is by definition a religious and cultural imposition by a certain religious sect. Just as the followers of the ‘Heaven’s Gate’ sect are not allowed to put their children to death along with themselves when they commit suicide to reach the ‘Mother Ship’, the members of the sect of Islam should not be permitted to simply impart to the little girls who come to the world in their midst, the isolation and enslavement and disenfranchisement of women in their cult. Society is entitled, indeed is duty-bound, to defend the rights of these children even if they themselves are unaware of what is happening to them or have willingly accepted it. Society has the right to demand that standards that have turned into norms as a result of the enlightenment and just struggles of numerous human beings to be observed in the case of these children as well. They are not simply the property of their parents. They are respectable members of society, entitled to certain rights, and society is responsible for the safeguard of these rights. Whoever truly wants to prevent the imposition of the Islamic veil on children, whoever really wants the thousands of girls who are victims of the Islamic veil today to be released from it, will also understand that the Islamic veil must be forbidden for children. Only this demand provides real support for girls in Islamic families. Only this demand allows families who are reluctant to have the Islamic veil, but are forced under pressure from Islamic groups and the atmosphere dominating their environment to join in, to push back these pressures and to act more humanely. Only this demand strengthens the hands of mothers who have themselves once felt the injustice and have sympathy with their daughters to protect their children in the family and to have a voice. Only this demand will really isolate the hardened, closed-minded fanatics and racketeers in religion in immigrant environments. Only this demand provides the least painful and the most principled way for children to be set free from the injustice they are made to suffer.

The Bogey: ‘the Law and the Police’

One of our serious crimes appears to be that we have asked for the law to prevent this infringement of the rights of little and adolescent girls in Islamic environments. We have asked for a certain variety of child abuse and child confinement to be legally forbidden. Their reaction is unbelievable. This is ‘resorting to the law and force’! It brings in ‘lock and key’! They cry ‘Pol Pot’!, ‘Reza Shah’!, ‘Le Pen!’ As if it is the first time they hear someone ask for a change in the law and for legal guarantees in support of a right and against infringements of it. It is not clear whether we should account for their opposition to the interference of the state in defence of children as a newly adopted anarchism and super-revolutionism, or as their having joined the movement for de-governmentalisation and market-worship which seems to be the prerequisite for being considered a democrat in the post-Soviet world! Someone among these ‘Swedish feminist and anti-racist movements’ should certainly take the trouble to explain to our nouveau-democrats that the entire struggle for reforms and eradication of discrimination is a struggle over the law, changing and improving, and implementing the law. Someone should explain to them that egalitarian workers and women have gone through many struggles so that the principle of the equality of men and women, maternity leave, and unemployment benefits have been included in the labour legislation, for the benefit of, among others, our own noble friends. Someone should tell them that the women’s movement, the civil rights movement in the US, the anti-apartheid movement, and the
environmental movement have all been movements for changing the law and putting the support of the law behind their demands. The law is the main focus of the struggle for reforms in society. Those who speak of women’s rights and the defence of children but declare beforehand that they would leave the laws of the land alone and have no need for changing them cannot be taken seriously. Granted, there is a New World Order and the Swedish sponsors of our friends do not understand Persian. But this is a poor excuse for talking gibberish. If they repeat these ‘brilliant’ ideas in Swedish, if they shout ‘Le Pen’ and ‘Pol pot’ at the feminist movement that is asking for the ratification of laws in favour of women, if they abuse the trade unions who are demanding a legal ban on child labour, if they insult retired people who insist on the control of the state and the law and ‘the police’ over their savings in pension funds to stop them being squandered away, then the first people to show them the door would be these very ‘Swedish feminist, and anti-racist movements.’

It is not clear, moreover, why the passing of any law should be interpreted as putting people ‘under lock and key’. Scaring people in the manner of the mullahs and repeating, parrot-like, the thread bare Cold War abuses and lies of Western governments against communists, even though despicable, does not surprise us coming from these people. The truth of the matter is that ratification of the law to forbid the Islamic veil for children, would, like all other civil regulations, result in the majority of the people following them without much ado. The outcome of such a situation is that many girls in Islamic families would be free from this entanglement without daily conflicts. As to what steps should be taken in those cases where the law is not followed; there can be further discussion separately. Parking a car in front of the Fire Departments taps on the street is also forbidden and so far no one has been arrested for this offence even in Iran or Indonesia. Riding a motor cycle without a safety helmet is also forbidden and this law is in conflict with the turban of the Sikhs. But this fact has not prevented the passing of the law and no Sikh has called it the legacy of Pol Pot and Reza Shah, or a plot designed to put the Sikhs under lock and key. The point is that with the passing of the law, the principle of the rights of the child and the fact that religion is the private affair of the parents and should not be imposed on the child and infringe on the child’s civil rights is confirmed and established as a social norm. And, finally, maybe it should be pointed out that it is the parents who are answerable for the violations of this law, and not the child. The child who is wearing a veil has herself committed no offence.

But what is the alternative for these people? If the law is not to interfere, then how can an end be put to the nightmare of the daily lives of girls in Islamic families? Their answer is ‘critical dialogue’, guidance, ‘increasing the support for girls in Islamic families’ and ‘increasing the power of independent popular organisations and institutions’. In other words, the issue should be left to the private sector and the market mechanism of ideas. More assets and ‘power’ should be allocated to organisations such as ‘the Swedish Journal of Women and Fundamentalism’ and ‘well known television personalities’ who know how to ‘chair a meeting’ to work against the growth of fundamentalism among the immigrants, in the manner we have witnessed, by mobilising moderate Muslims and promoting tolerant Islam. Meanwhile, girls in Islamic families should be patient, respect the democratic rights of their believing parents. They shall be informed in due course of the liberating outcome of these exertions through the wonderful TV programme Mosaic.
We shall see below the ‘material’ basis for this position. But for those whose real concern is the deprivation of a group of the present generation of children in this society of their human rights these views are empty and worthless. The rights of the child should be guaranteed through the same mechanisms as all other rights in society. The law should change in favour of eliminating discrimination against girls in Islamic families. The law should secure the girls from the infringement of their rights by religious sects. The law should grant the right to these forgotten members of Swedish society to freely decide about religion when they come of legal age, and that meanwhile no religious belief or ritual, particularly those with such devastating effects, should be imposed on them. Whoever is not prepared to bring the support of the law and the state behind these obvious victims of child abuse and hatred for women, if not a demagogue, is certainly unable to grasp the basics of the problem.

Minoritism and Cultural Relativism

The core of the rightist, Islamic position of these people is the concept of cultural relativism and the issue of ‘minorities’. This should be dealt with in detail elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the thesis of cultural relativism and the combination of policies and governmental and non-governmental measures and provisions based on it in the West is a profoundly racist phenomenon. Cultural relativism is a cover to create a comprehensive social, legal, intellectual, emotional, geographical and civil apartheid among the inhabitants of a country based on distinctions of race, ethnicity and religion. Its outcome is creating small, enclosed, and regressive communities of non-European ‘minorities’ in the heart of a white, European ‘majority’.

This tendency should be prevented. All Swedish people are citizens with equal rights, and should live according to same social laws and norms. Unlike these others, we do not divide society into cultural, religious, national and racial majorities and minorities. We stand for equal and universal laws and freedoms for all humanity which should embrace all, irrespective of sex, race, ethnicity, etc. We do not consider ourselves as part of any minority. The children who are at the centre of the present controversy do not belong to any minority. These are Swedish inhabitants who should be able to enjoy all the rights, freedoms and possibilities provided for children as a result of the efforts of successive generations of progressive, enlightened, egalitarian people in this society.

The controversy over the Islamic veil in itself also reflects what type of people the supporters of cultural relativism and minoritism are: the Swedish bourgeoisie which considers immigrants and foreigners as forever alien to Swedish society, and sets itself the task of controlling them and keeping them away from the social metabolism in Sweden as cheaply as possible. Intellectually and socially, cultural relativism follows the same goals as gettoisation does in regard to housing and settlement. On this side of the equation, the false minority thus created requires headmen, sheikhs, monitors and supervisors – people of ‘their own’ kind and race who should assist the majorit society in running the minority community, who should prevent tension and upheaval in the minority camp, and prevent, from within the minority community, the endeavour toward an integrated, unified society, keep expectations down, and justify the apartheid ideology through the language and culture of the minority community.

And this is the esteemed post for which these people are bracing themselves. They asking the state for ‘power and authority’. They are mindful that the religion and the rituals of the minority community and the ‘democratic rights of the Islamic parents’ should go unscathed. They create
noise and bad blood against the ratification of unanimous laws that aim at limiting the powers of the traditional authorities in the minority environment. They promise the minority little girls ‘more support.’ To the minority, they boast of connections with and support from the authorities, well-known personalities, and sympathetic figures among the majority, while they show the majority authorities the fervent hosanna and approval of the religious section in the minority camp. They hope to become the internal managers of the world of the minority. They are people who have one foot in each of the two worlds; in the centre they wear jeans, become feminists, and claim to defend civil liberty in Swedish, while in the locality they put on loincloth, head scarf, and Aba, and, using the lingo of the village clergy and the youngsters of the bazaar, they call people who speak of modernity ‘dandy’. They have fully understood the order of the day, and are doing their utmost to carry it out. The goal is to keep the minority community from the majority society and to keep it in a cultural, political and intellectual quarantine. The goal is to avoid a polarised, restless atmosphere. The goal is to prevent ‘the growth of fundamentalism among the second generation immigrants’. The goal is safeguard Sweden against Islamic terrorism.

This recipe, unfortunately, is not only detrimental to the girls in Islamic families; it also paves the way for Islamic reaction and terrorism. It has been proved time and time again that pushing back religiosity and religious reaction is not possible except through unequivocal defence of human values against religion. It has been proved time and time again that preventing religious barbarism does not come about through bribing it and trying to give it a human face, but through the fight against reactionary religious beliefs and practices. What price should be paid for these people to realise that Islam and religion do not have a progressive, supportable faction? How many times should it be proven that only the existence of a truly radical liberating alternative can pull the rug from under the feet of political Islam? Is it so difficult to grasp that hindering Islamic reaction and terrorism is not possible through justifying this ossified terror within the framework of the family, or to understand that minoritism and the policy of cultural relativism is thankless service to the Islamic reaction by providing the social and cultural milieu for its recruitment.

Nonetheless, these people do not have much of a chance to play the part of a broker, since they are dealing with a range of immigrants who not only are not religious, but are profoundly anti-religious. The Islamic veil is not an issue affecting immigrants from Iran. This is an immigrant community which has great sympathy for the European way of life, and has come here precisely with an abhorrence for Islam. Islamophilia might prove gainful political business among immigrants from some other countries, but it is not in demand among this particular group. Meanwhile, this fact highlights the important role that Iranian immigrants can play in the future of Swedish society by forging the destiny of Islamic reaction in this country. This group can, on the one hand serve as a model for modernity among immigrants from the other so called Islamic countries, while, on the other hand they have a free hand in fighting against Islamic reaction, since they comprehend, more than the others, the nature of religion and the religious state. They can thus be the voice of truth against the propaganda of the Islamicists and the chorus of the likes of Rah-e Kargar and the supporters of cultural relativism. The Worker-communist Party in Sweden does its best to engage these immigrants in the support for children’s rights, and in preventing the expansion of Islamic reaction, as well as the racist policy of cultural gettoisation.
The issue at stake is of the greatest importance. The polarisation which has come about is deep and real. To what extent can the noise and the demagogy of these groups patch up their recent political scandal is beside the point. What is important is that the advocates of freedom and egalitarianism and secularism should come forward in full force against state racism in these societies and its theses and policies in forming a cultural and social apartheid, and against reactionary, regressive, and opportunistic trends among the immigrants themselves. The Worker-communist Party is committed to this struggle. Defending the rights of girls in Islam-stricken milieus and Islamic families is an inseparable part of this struggle.

1. ‘Critical dialogue’: A term that gained notoriety as the official policy of appeasement adopted by European states towards the Islamic Republic of Iran.