

Q&A Interview |  
Tabassam Javed, Former President,  
Islamic Center of Rochester

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*This interview has been edited for clarity.*

**Biandudi Hofer:** When the news broke in June that the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, how did you address this with members of the Islamic Center of Rochester?

**Javed:** It wasn't like a mass reaction from the congregation. It was more like certain people who felt a level of comfort with me did discuss it. Because the position in Islam is pretty much in the pro-life direction, I just thought that this would be something in which they would say, "Okay, well, this is something maybe we waited for, and it happened in the right direction." But that was not the case. It was very nuanced, and it was very diverse. There were people who said that this was something that was snatched away from women. It was a right that should have continued, and therefore something almost to the point of saying that this was an injustice. Even some of the people who came up to me used that word too, where they felt that this was unjust. So these were the, I would say, the array of responses.

**Biandudi Hofer:** So your expectation, initially, was that people would be in support of this ruling, yet you discovered there was not one type of response from members; there was a variety. Is that right?

**Javed:** Yes, because the reason is the default position in Islam is pro-life in the sense that life is bestowed by God and, therefore, it is something to be cherished. So that becomes that position. But at the same time, when you go further into asking me questions, I'll tell you how Islam also gives provisions and accommodations to be able to deviate from that position based on certain circumstances. So it's a much more nuanced position, and that's why the responses came in a nuanced manner rather than in an extreme manner except for that part which I mentioned to you where there were some people who strongly felt that justice was not being served and it was an unjust ruling by the Supreme Court.

**Biandudi Hofer:** How do you, as a leader, prepare yourself for that level of nuance? I imagine you have your own personal beliefs, and then there may be those coming to you for counsel and advice with differing beliefs.

**Javed:** Well, what happened is I accepted everybody's position. In other words, I never felt that this was a forum for debate because this person is coming to me to really affirm that this is how they are feeling, and then my job, at that time, was really not to go into litigate the reasons for that as to why their position is but was more affirming what they said.

So for you to have a certain view does not mean that it negates all other views. It basically means that you have one view sitting in a queue of so many other views, and that's how I

handled it. I did not bring in my own views as part of the conversation unless I was asked. In some situations, I was asked, and that's what I told them, this is how I felt, and I also told them that I came from a position also from a feminist position, from a strength of a woman's position and from a position of all the accommodations that are given in Islam. So this is how I helped.

**Biandudi Hofer:** Let's dig deeper into Islam's stance on abortion and the accommodations you mentioned. Tell me more about that.

**Javed:** The first thing is that this is very clearly written in the opinion of the theological scholars. Obviously, 15 centuries ago, we were not talking about the fetal movement and ultrasound images, but at that time, too, the opinion was that if the mother's life is in danger, it becomes what you call a present life versus the would-be life. Those are the kind of terms that were used. So the present life takes precedence over that. So anytime a mother's life is in danger, Islam totally accommodates that pregnancy can be terminated.

Second, if the doctor at that time is of the opinion that the fetal growth is not going to develop into a viable fetus and a viable pregnancy, and there may be some medical obstacles to that, and those obstacles may again put the mother's life in jeopardy, then it can be mitigated at that time.

The other thing on which there's a consensus of opinion among Muslim scholars is that God blows the soul at 120 days....and until that time, there is accommodation of all the things that I mentioned as well as other things.

Obviously, this was never theologically discussed that this is a matter of convenience for somebody, or this is a matter of population control for somebody, or this is a matter of affordability for somebody. None of those things.

For example, if somebody does an amniotic fluid test and it comes up that the child is going to have cerebral palsy, there's accommodation for that. Even then, there's accommodation. We are before 120 days, we can detect these abnormalities, and then the decision becomes in terms of the parents, the mother. So that is one of the reasons why these accommodations have been discussed over the years.

**Biandudi Hofer:** As I hear you describe the nuances of Islamic law around pregnancy and abortion, I'm curious about what you think is oversimplified about the issue of abortion.

**Javed:** Our country has come to a point of my way or the highway kind of mentality, and that's why any person who condones abortion in any of the circumstances becomes murderers. When you have rhetoric like that, it does not leave much room for accommodation or for a middle position, and that's why it gets oversimplified. That means, all of a sudden, people who are for the women's right to choose become murderers and baby killers, and the ones on the other side claim or get to a point where they feel that it's a self-righteous path for them and it's for them to

save all the unborn babies. It always boggles [my] mind that they don't worry about all the people who have already come into this life and are not taken care [of].

I had here at the Islamic Center a bunch of pro-life groups who came and wanted us to sign a petition so that the Planned Parenthood would not come across from us on the building across from the paychecks. I said, "Islamic Center could not be representing one opinion on this because within our congregation of a thousand people, you could have so many people who have a nuanced view of this." And then, "Why would Islamic Center become involved in signing a petition against the town of Brighton when it is a town planning issue? If Planned Parenthood qualifies as an entity and the town has no problem with them, then it is between them and the parent. Planned Parenthood and Islamic Center does not get involved."

But their position was so extreme when they came in to meet me, and I met with four or five church groups, and they said, "Well then, you are condoning that this can go on." I said, "I never said that. I only said that I would want this decision to be at the level between the mother and the doctor and also to be considered with all the other conditions."

This is also expressed where it says that if a sexual encounter is forced, now if you take the paddle, I mean, this word was used at that time, but if you right now used it in the current context, it'll become rape. It will become a pregnancy related to the rape, and so that would be something which will again not be acceptable according to the faith and according to the scholars. So there's accommodation there as well.

**Biandudi Hofer:** In what ways is the abortion issue personal to you, if it is?

**Javed:** Personally, [I'm] very much pro-feminism in the sense that women have their full rights and autonomy towards the decisions which are related to their body.

I also had a very strong mother. As I told you, she was a dean of a college we always felt, and she was born in 1926. So a woman born in 1926 in a country like Pakistan could go at that level at that time. You can well imagine that, how much of a strong woman she was, and I had always seen that. So that filters into my decision-making as well, that I do not want to ever thwart the independence and the independent decision-making capacity of a woman in terms of this issue.

I told this group that came in, I said, "Your part should be to convince the other party, stand right next to them, be next to them. And if you can comfort [them], give them a way out that you think is a better way, give them a better option. You cannot be the ones who block the clinics, block the clinic doors, shoot the abortion doctor, any of that." So I brought it up in my discussion, and I said that this is where you're doing harm to your movement because it's no longer peaceful persuasion. It is persecution of the ones who don't believe in you.

**Biandudi Hofer:** I must go back to your mom because she sounds fascinating. Is there something she shared with you or an experience you had with her that influenced your views on feminism?

**Javed:** I came here when I was 22 years old and then very much got acclimatized to everything that's happening here. But here, the tone we use is that anybody can be a president of the United States. Similarly, my mom used to say that it's time that a woman is the president of Pakistan. And that happened before a woman president could ever happen in the United States; Benazir Bhutto became the president and the prime minister of Pakistan.

So that is one thing I do remember in which she had that very strong feeling that there's nothing women can[not] do, even though they may be part of a third world country or they may be part of a country where the literacy rate was only 20%. That's [something] I do remember, and it was way back, it's like 50 years ago, but I also think that my views evolved also because I felt that no society should be able to hold back 50% of its population and women in the United States are 50% of the population. What would a country do if 50% of its population is not made to realize its complete and fullest potential?

**Biandudi Hofer:** You mentioned your views evolved. In what ways?

**Javed:** Well, I think they evolved in terms of gaining more strength. So my position was pro-choice. My position was strengthening the position of the woman to make the decision, and by evolving, I mean that it became strengthened. They gained more steam because I kept on believing further and further. I also saw the tactics of the other groups, and I felt that they had left the path of persuasion, that they had become more violent in their views. They had become more violent in their actions. You remember how that law came that the clinics would need 20 feet of space where you couldn't protest. Before that, there was a time that they could block the door from where the women would come in, then they had the back doors and they were blocking the back doors. So all this seemed to me that they did not use their intellect to the best of their ability to persuade the people whose thoughts were different than them.

**Biandudi Hofer:** It sounds like the extremes you were seeing impacted you.

**Javed:** Yeah, they were catalysts in further strengthening my original position.

**Biandudi Hofer:** Are there any other life experiences that have shaped your views on abortion?

**Javed:** I was not touched by it personally. Let me tell you another point, something that people may find it interesting to hear because they may think that this is different, and that is that in the Muslim faith, premarital sex is absolutely prohibited. So this thing doesn't touch the Muslim community that much because even the Muslims living in America are holding onto that 95% of the time.

There are going to be some exceptions, but the majority is in that category. That's why this particular debate doesn't touch a lot of the people in the congregation personally.

**Biandudi Hofer:** So even though there's not a personal connection to this issue, there's still a deep belief that women have the right to choose.

**Javed:** Yes, absolutely. That comes from my inner core. It doesn't even come from a political party thing. It just comes basically because, as I said, I feel very strongly for half of our population. All of a sudden, something [was] being yanked away from them; I feel the rug was pulled under them. Let them make the choices. We have half a million kids in foster care, half a million kids are in foster care homes wanting to be adopted. Let's get that going. They're already here. So that's another thing I always think about that there's such a contradiction about that, and here we are, all these fights about the status of the fetus and when it's viable and when we heard the heartbeat and when we didn't, and all that.

In the four years, I was president, all these organizations would come and seek time and sit with me, and I would sit with everybody. And then, at the end of the one-hour meeting or something, they would say, "Well, have you changed your views?" And they would ask me their question, and I said, "No." I said, "You can always say that you have planted a seed in me for me to intellectually look at another position, and that is what an intellectual person would do, that when they're presented with another idea, they consider it, they debate it, they see what the merits are, and then they make the decision."

**Biandudi Hofer:** What do you want to understand about those who have different views than you?

**Javed:** Well, what I would want to understand with them is that they are being driven by faith. They're being driven by passion. They're driven by making life the worthiest thing, which all I agree with, but I'm also driven with the practicality of it. For example, once they have the child, let's say they've convinced the mother to have the child, the adoption process is a very expensive process. So there's a select group of people who can afford that.

The average adoption process, along with the attorney's fees and everything, is \$30,000 plus. So there are many families who cannot even do that. So when they say that, bring the baby, and we'll take care of it, it's not really practically what happens. There are many times when people are promised that they will find the right adoption for you, [but] it does not go the way they're promised. The other thing is that there is a lot of variation in the process. It is easy to adopt a white baby than a multiracial, than a Black, than a Muslim, than a Jewish, than a Baha'i, a Buddhist, a Hindu. So those things are not talked about, and I brought this up with these groups I did.

**Biandudi Hofer:** So you want to understand their responses to some of the points you made?

**Javed:** Their response was that some of them felt that it was sinful to abort. Fine. It is sinful to abort in Islam as well unless it's a medical condition for the mother, unless it is the baby that is going to be deformed, [and] unless the baby's life is going to affect the entire family in an adverse way. So all these are conditions that are allowed. So I told them that. I said, "When you go to a mother who is ill-equipped to be a mother, and you tell her to have the child, and you are unable to adopt the child or to put them, place them in a family, that girl who is 16, is unable to

cope with the after-effects of what you told her to have.” So I've had these debates many times, and then they would also give me a theological angle, and that would be that the baby comes with their destiny.

God has made provisions for them. God is the one who gives life. We don't thwart that and everything like that. And by the way, all those things are in the Quran. Muslims believe all that Christians believe. But I am going to the position where I'm saying that there are certain circumstances under which this pregnancy can be terminated for the good of the mother, for the good of the family, for the good of the child. Also, think about a mentally retarded child with a schizophrenic personality is brought into this world.

**Biandudi Hofer:** Do you feel torn about anything when it comes to the issue of abortion?

**Javed:** No, I really don't. Because I feel that this decision goes to the mother, and in our case, in the community, it would be the mother and father and a Muslim couple knows that abortion is forbidden unless it is for medical reasons, or it is other reasons, or the life of the mother is in jeopardy. Or there are some other reasons that are genetically going to make the child suffer in other ways. So apart from that, no.