

Sherin Khankan, 43, at the  
Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen.  
Portrait: Jude Edginton

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# Is this woman the future of Islam?

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Sherin Khankan is a controversial figure – not just as a female imam, but as a woman who has called for the reformation of Islam with a feminist agenda. Janice Turner meets her at Europe's first all-female mosque



**L**ast year Sherin Khankan's husband gave her an ultimatum: she could continue as Denmark's first female imam or remain his wife. "Blood will be spilt and marriages dissolved when women challenge male dominance," she concludes in her new book. "That's the price of change. I know, because it happened to me."

It was not that Imran Sarwar opposed her creation of the Mariam Mosque in Copenhagen where she leads women – both veiled and bare-headed – in Friday prayers. Rather, Khankan insists, he was concerned for their four young children and frightened for her. When a *Le Monde* journalist asked what trait enabled his wife to combat Islamists and Islamophobes alike, he replied, "Fearlessness." "And he's afraid of that fearlessness," she says. "I think that many people support the revolution, but they just don't want the leader to be their wife."

The Mariam Mosque is unlisted at its shabby entrance on a busy shopping street. Upstairs, past the offices of a refugee charity, is a single, airy, high-windowed white room with a Turkish carpet and floor cushions. It does not look like the centre of a global revolution. But in March Khankan, 43, met Emmanuel Macron to discuss "a dialogue of civilisations". He believes Khankan's "Islamic feminism" can forge a progressive middle way between French *laïcité* – secularism – and alienated conservative Muslims. "I took him my book as a gift," she says. "But he said, 'I've already read it.'"

In *Women Are the Future of Islam*, Khankan outlines her vision of a modern, gentle, flexible faith bridging the ever widening gulf between western society and orthodox teaching. Gone are rigid stipulations on *halal* and *haram* (allowed and forbidden), the notion of *kuffar* (the derogatory word for non-believers) and literalist Koranic readings used to deny women freedom, especially the freedom to divorce, while imposing restrictive modesty codes. "We must not base the customs of the 21st century," she writes, "on those of the 9th."

Sherin Khankan looks like no one's idea of an imam. She wears make-up and western clothes. Her face is wide-eyed and ethereal, her hair long and lush – she made a shampoo commercial when young – and she only covers her head when leading prayer. "To me, the hijab is a metaphor for sincerity," she says. "So I will speak about the inner hijab, which is your sincerity and kindness. I realise that women have different interpretations of what it means to be a modest woman. This is mine."

Her book is as much memoir as manifesto, describing her own experience growing up between east and west, Islam and Christianity. Her father was a Syrian political activist who opposed Hafez Assad (father of the current president) and fled to Denmark in 1970; her

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mother was Christian, a Finnish nurse seeking work in Copenhagen. Together they ran a Syrian restaurant. Born Ann Christine, Khankan was raised in both religious traditions, enjoying a relaxed Scandinavian childhood. But as a teenager visiting Damascus for the first time, she warmed to her Syrian heritage and family. There she encountered Sufism, learnt Arabic, stayed on to study and, at 19, shed Ann Christine for her Muslim name.

Yet Khankan was always uneasy about the patriarchal structure of the mosque. She asked Sufi women if they could imagine leading prayers; they could not. "They have internalised the idea that men should dominate women," she noted. "This idea disturbs me." On her return to Denmark in 2001 she helped found the Forum for Critical Muslims, an intellectual circle calling for an Islamic reformation. The majority of Muslims, she believed, were trapped between the far right, who portrayed them as primitive misogynists, and Islamists who rejected man-made democracy for God's word. A women's mosque, she began to think, would counter both: show a progressive face of Islam to the west while disseminating a feminist Koranic interpretation.

Two years ago, she was alerted to possible premises in the former Spanish consulate. Initially, Khankan envisaged a mixed-sex mosque to desegregate worship, but was outvoted by more conservative colleagues. In scriptural terms, there is no reason a woman cannot be an imam: one of Muhammad's wives led prayers and there were women imams in China from the 19th century. But initially, Khankan considered calling herself a *khatibah*, or speaker. At first she didn't even tell her own father; he was texted by a relative in Syria who'd heard her *khutbah* (sermon) online saying, "Did Sherin become an imam?" He was appalled, frightened for her safety and pleaded with her to stand down.

But the gratitude of Muslim women has made up for his disapproval. "They say, 'We have longed for a home and now we have found our place.' Some were brought up in very conservative families. But they can pray without the scarf; they can be themselves. It is an Islam that better connects to their identity."

More importantly, Khankan can counter the patriarchal Islam that ruins women's lives. Running a support group called Exit Circle for wives trying to escape controlling relationships, she heard too often that imams insisted women stay in violent marriages.

They should show patience, obedience, then maybe their husbands would desist. Even once divorced under civil law, imams would deny them the religious dissolution they craved.

"Muslim women have the right to divorce," she says. "It's basic. But male leaders, male imams and muftis all over the world, they took women's right to divorce out of the Islamic marriage contract ... I can't believe it's happening. And it has been normalised."

Her first divorce as imam concerned a woman whose husband beat her and her children so violently he was imprisoned for seven years. Yet dozens of Danish imams had denied the divorce. Believing her new mosque didn't yet have the authority, Khankan applied to a London sharia council who permitted the divorce. I say that many British Muslim feminists campaign to end sharia courts, which they believe undermine the principle of one law for all.

"Yes, I know. I am very ambivalent, because on the one hand I do believe only in Danish law and in a secular state that guarantees all people equal rights – I think that's the best way to serve humankind. But we cannot deny the fact that there are women who are trapped in religious Islamic marriages." Now she grants women divorces herself, never refusing. She aims to change the Islamic marriage contract so that a religious marriage is automatically dissolved the moment a civil divorce is granted.

She is also rare in conducting interfaith marriages. Her first couple were Swedish, a Christian man and a Muslim woman of Pakistani origin, who wished to honour each other's religion but not convert. They'd been turned down by 96 imams across Europe. This intransigence, Khankan believes, is a barrier to Muslims feeling they belong in the west. "You hear some parents say, 'It's not a problem to us because we have raised our children well, so they won't fall in love with a non-Muslim.'"

At this point, Khankan announces she needs to pick up her children from school and we take the metro to her car, then drive out into the Danish countryside to collect her youngest daughter, Halima, from after-school club. Her son Salaheddin is waiting on the steps with two friends as we arrive at her home, an apartment in a converted manor house. Doors are flung open on to a communal



Khankan's meeting with President Macron of France at the Elysée Palace in March



garden, where all the resident children play. It is an open, relaxed lifestyle in a country so trusting that Danish mothers leave their babies in prams alone outside shops or cafés. I think of Khankan's husband's fears for her safety as a prominent public figure.

Now he lives a few minutes away and the children flit between the two homes. His photo is pinned to the fridge: a doctor, Imran Sarwar is Bollywood-grade handsome. They met when she was speaking about Islam in Christiansborg Palace, the Danish parliament building – he leant over to a friend and whispered, “That woman, Sherin – I’m going to marry her.”

Both families opposed the match: his because they were Sunni Pakistanis who had never married an outsider, hers because they regarded Pakistanis as too conservative for their daughter. Over time the difference in their upbringing took its toll on their relationship. “My husband holds to a more literal and dogmatic reading of Islam,” she explains.

Having grown up between two cultures, Khankan loved Scandinavian Christmas traditions. But her husband asked, “Why do we need a Christmas tree if we’re Muslim?” Only when their first daughter reasoned the tree was not inherently Christian, but made

by the land, did he relent. They put an Islamic crescent on top instead of a star.

Khankan reflects that the “opposition I have met outside to becoming an imam is nothing compared with the opposition I met from within. Even though my ex-husband is wonderful and he’s very progressive – I mean, he chose me! – when people have children they fall back on the patterns they know from their own childhood ... I think people are complex, so you can be conservative and progressive at the same time. It’s like an inner fight.”

Is he right to worry for her safety? In Denmark, she is a prominent voice on Islamic subjects and, as a moderate, receives abuse from both sides. I ask how male imams regard her. “Mainly with silence,” she says. At meetings, young Islamist men from the radical Hizb ut-Tahrir chide her for not wearing a hijab, then argue for the creation of the caliphate.

“I read the profiles of terrorists. Sometimes people who were born and raised in Britain or France. Converts. When people convert to Islam they want to be a part of a community. They’re really lonely ... I sometimes look at the converts in our mosque, and I realise that, if they hadn’t ended up here, they could have been radicalised.”

She can’t imagine being the subject of a fatwa. The Mariam Mosque is too small and she proceeds slowly, building support. “I try to study dangerous topics in a less dangerous way – it’s my strategy. I try to nuance Islamism as a concept.” She is mindful of how a female imam will be judged – she swims every day in the sea but has abandoned her bikini for a homemade burkini. Nor will she conduct gay weddings, although she has made public statements supporting gay Muslims. “But I’m also aware that if I burn all the bridges behind me, I cannot be a bridge-builder. And we cannot take all the battles on our shoulders, because now we have the fight for women’s rights and gender equality, and it’s such a huge battle.”

The ugliest abuse comes from far-right groups, including the Danish People’s Party, which became the second biggest party after the 2015 general election. Now Denmark is likely to join Belgium and France in banning the burka. Khankan is against what she sees as criminalising a very small group – maybe 200 women – who are already isolated. Better, she says, to tackle underlying religious social control. However, she is opposed to young girls wearing the hijab at school. “It is a huge problem that children are brought up in a family where you normalise a certain way of

dressing, so they don’t have a choice. I think the hijab is a decision you take as an adult.” Her children, she insists, will follow their own path.

As a member of the left-wing Danish Social Liberal Party, Khankan achieved notoriety for opposing a conference motion, tabled after the stoning of a Nigerian woman, unequivocally condemning sharia. She argued that sharia is misunderstood: it does not permit such atrocities committed in its name. By her interpretation, sharia amounts to general principles on prayer and giving alms. She argued that this crude motion was like condemning the Ten Commandments, and voted against it.

This decision is still used against her: she is suing several Danish MPs for defamation for dubbing her an Islamic extremist. One, Naser Khader, a popular Conservative politician and Muslim who believes in cultural assimilation, is a former boyfriend. He has threatened to publish photographs taken during their relationship. While none is revenge porn, they are enough to embarrass and undermine a female imam. Why target her, a moderate, modern voice?

“I think people on the right see progressive Muslims as a greater threat than Islamists, because we are actually able to change the narrative on Islam in Europe by our own practices. And some people do not want Islam to be changed.” They’d prefer a woman in a burka, to feed their “war of civilisations” discourse? “Yes. It’s a theory I have.”

The 2005 Danish cartoon case, when the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper published images of the prophet Muhammad, posed a “murky equation”: that Danish Muslims were only truly assimilated Scandinavians if they accepted the mockery. “It seems to me,” she writes, “that freedom of expression must be used more delicately ... Where is the dialogue the mocker is claiming to establish?”

A secular state does not need to set such random and pointless tests of its citizens, she believes: they only cause more division, a hardening of both the racist right and the anti-west Islamists. And standing between them, buffeted from all sides, trying to reconcile faith and feminism, is this steely woman who dares call herself imam.

Is she making a difference? “Children come here with their parents when they are young,” she says, “and having female imams affects not only the structure in the mosque at a society level, but challenges the family structure. My four children are brought up watching me lead prayers. So it’s a part of their language, their narrative. Halima’s friend asked, ‘What is an imam?’ She replied very proudly that it is a woman who is doing great things.” ■

*Sherin Khankan’s Women Are the Future of Islam is out on June 14 (Riders Books, £12.99). To read an extract, go to [thetimes.co.uk](http://thetimes.co.uk)*

**She met President Macron – he had already read her book**