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Conference Report

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The ISIM workshop on 'Islam, Women's Rights, and Islamic Feminism: Making Connections between Different Perspectives' (9–11 November 2001) took place under the shadow of the looming confrontation between the West and the Muslim world, at a time when public interest was focused on the American offensive in Afghanistan and anti-American responses in countries as diverse as Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia. Most of the participants felt that precisely at this time one should not allow the agenda of intellectual debate to be completely determined by political issues and that the workshop should take place as planned.

A few of those invited to the conference were not able to attend because of the international situation: some faced travel restrictions or feared for their security; irrational consular regulations made it impossible for our participant from Pakistan, Professor Arfa Sayeda Zehra, to acquire a visa, and another prospective participant, Dr Lo'lo' Ghazali from Malaysia, went to lead a medical team working among the new wave of Afghan refugees.

Fifteen scholars and activists, representing a broad range of women's engagement with Islamic issues, and coming from eight different Muslim countries, from Indonesia to Nigeria, actually did take part in the workshop. Participants had been invited because of their contributions to public discourse or concrete experience in defending women's rights and women's points of view. It was hoped that a heterogeneous composition in terms of background, experience and concerns might lead to a stimulating exchange of views, and this proved to be the case. The participants presented papers on what they considered as a major issue in their respective situations and in which they had been intensively engaged. The discussions that followed offered up comparative perspectives, contrasting views, and food for reflection.

The contributions

The experience of Iran since the Islamic revolution has been one of the most fascinating developments in the Muslim world, producing some of the most important contributions to contemporary Muslim discourse. Many secular feminists left the country after the revolution, but in due course a strong women's movement emerged precisely in the circles that had supported the revolution. Four of the participants were from Iran; two of them are based in the West but are deeply involved in developments inside Iran. Mahboobeh Abbasgholizadeh, the editor of the women's studies journal *Farzaneh*, exemplifies perhaps most clearly the development of Muslim women's discourse in Iran. She had been actively involved in the revolution, gradually adopted a feminist perspective and was among the first women in Iran to plead for an Islamic feminism. She spoke about the impact of the political reform movement and the 'new religious thought' (of such authors as Soroush and Shabestari) on the women's movement. In her view the movement is entering a new phase in which there is the possibility of a convergence between secular and Islamic feminism and, more importantly, a post-modern acceptance of plurality.

Nahid Motie, a feminist and sociologist affiliated with the Azad University, surveyed the debates around the very term 'Islamic feminism' and gave overviews of the various, often conflicting ideological positions adopted by women thinkers and activists in Iran. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, known for her book on *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* and her film *Divorce Iranian Style*, gave a similar overview, focusing

Islam, Women's Rights, and Islamic Feminism



PHOTO: WIM VREEBURG, 2001

on the individual trajectories of leading women's intellectual development. Ziba also showed the participants her new film, *Runaway*, shot in a shelter for runaway girls in Tehran (the film was to win a nomination at the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, see page 23). Sussan Tahmasebi, a US-trained political scientist and NGO activist, spoke of the various types of women's NGOs existing in Iran. Some of these are modern organizations, established in response to global trends and President Khatami's call for strengthening civil society as a step in democratization. Sussan emphasized the potential of the less publicized, traditional community-based organizations, which are much closer to the grassroots.

The participants from Turkey, Cihan Aktas and Hidayet Tuksal, described conditions that were almost the mirror image of those in Iran. The *hijab* is a major political issue; fighting for women's rights to wear the *hijab* in Turkey is a struggle against men's control of women's bodies and very similar to women's resistance against its imposition by the state in Iran. Cihan Aktas, a popular Islamist essayist and author of short stories, told how for Islamist women it was the veil that has made their participation in public life possible but that its official ban in schools and government offices prevented these women from getting an education and a job.

Hidayet Tuksal, a doctor in Islamic theology and the author of a critical study of the gender bias in *hadith*, sketched the history of the Islamist women's movement in Turkey and the dual struggle of women in the movement for their rights as committed Muslims and as women. In efforts to develop an Islamic discourse that is liberating, they are up against the state as well as Muslim men, conservative or Islamist. There is no convergence between secular and Islamic feminism in Turkey as Abbasgholizadeh claimed was the case in Iran. Secular feminists are rarely interested in their Islamist sisters' struggles for rights, and when they do support a case it is usually presented as proving the essentially oppressive nature of Islam.

Actually working within an Islamist movement, the women's wing of Malaysia's JIM (Jemaah Islah Malaysia), Suriya Osman gave

an account of work at the grassroots level – she is a medical practitioner as well as a women's organizer. Faced with the difficult tasks of raising women's gender awareness and confronting conservative *ulama*, she found support in the search for more enlightened and woman-friendly interpretations of Islam in a nationwide network of women's activists.

Two of the participants are presently affiliated with Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), an international organization defending women's rights. Cassandra Balchin, the programme co-ordinator for Asia, who has extensive experience as a journalist and women's rights activist in Pakistan, explained the work of her organization, which addresses secular feminists as well as those working within an Islamic perspective. She called for a renewed debate on secularism and religious pluralism, referring to women's protest movements against the Islamization campaign in Pakistan (under Ziaul Haq) and in Bangladesh. Asma'u Joda, who founded a centre for women's empowerment in northeastern Nigeria and is presently at the WLUML office in London, discussed the impact of *shari'a* movements in West Africa on women's lives, focusing especially on the impact of the *shari'a* legislation in Nigeria in 1999.

The other activists included Raufah Hasan, who was the director of the Women's Studies Centre in Sanaa until this was closed under pressure from Islamist circles. She spoke on the dynamics of Islam, democracy and women's rights in Yemen, where the North and the South, only recently reunited, are very different with respect to the acceptance of women's public roles. Official endorsement of women's participation, a remnant from the South's socialist past, has regularly been overruled due to pressure from conservatives and Islamists alike.

Debates on women's political participation were also central to the two Indonesian contributions. Lies Mustafisrah Marcoes analysed the positions adopted by major Indonesian Muslim associations on the matter of female political leadership (which became relevant when Suharto appeared to be grooming his eldest daughter Tutut for

succession, and again when Megawati became a presidential candidate). Not surprisingly, the 'religious' arguments used for or against female leadership at different points in time appear to vary in accordance with the political situation and with mundane interests.

Chusnul Mar'iyah discussed the situation in Aceh, which had recently been granted a considerable degree of autonomy (in the hope of appeasing the separatist Free Aceh Movement) and where the *shari'a* has been proclaimed. Women's groups here are making efforts to take part in drafting the concrete regulations in which the *shari'a* will be operationalized. Several of the other participants commented on the importance for women to be actively involved in legal drafting (and therefore the necessity of developing the relevant expertise).

Zainah Anwar of the Malaysian NGO, Sisters in Islam, brought up a number of other themes. One of the objectives of her organization is to give women a more active role in developing Muslim discourse, so that this will not remain a monopoly of men unsympathetic to women's concerns. This raises important questions of authority and legitimation. The standard response of conservatives when women join the debate is to delegitimize them for not having the 'right' expertise – something that is not demanded from men who support conservative interpretations. The Sisters have, on the one hand, made efforts to strengthen the traditional legitimacy of their arguments in favour of liberal and pluralist understandings through study and consultation with sympathetic theologians and jurists. On the other hand, they have developed an effective lobby pressuring the government with memoranda and keeping a steady presence in the media through letters to the editor.

Special guests

Two special guests added further dimensions to the discussions. Nasr Abu Zaid spoke on Qur'anic hermeneutics and women's rights, giving a sophisticated analysis of key verses in their context and in the light of the non-chronological organization of the entire text of the Qur'an. His work on hermeneutics was felt to be of great importance to the participants' concerns.

Mona Abaza made some critical comments on the search for an Islamic feminism by Western scholars and its emergence as a particular form of middle class discourse in Egypt. She also made a comparison with the emergence of a feminist theology in German Protestantism in the 1960s, which, unlike later liberation theology, never drew much attention in the Muslim world.

Revised versions of the papers and an analytical summary of the discussions of this workshop will be posted on the ISIM website. One can also find there papers and the report of the previous workshop in this series, 'Muslim Intellectuals and Modern Challenges'

(<http://www.isim.nl/isim/activities/conferences/intellectuals/index.html>).