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Moors, A.

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ANNELIES MOORS

ISIM organized a workshop on “Transnational Circuits: ‘Muslim Women’ in Asia” as part of the conference on Inter-Asian Connections convened by the Social Science Research Council together with the Dubai School of Government in Dubai from 21-23 February. The conference aimed to launch new, transregional, and comparative research initiatives that go beyond more narrowly defined area-studies approaches and focus on the connections between different parts of Asia. The workshop addressed how women’s subjectivities were transformed in new transnational circuits of labour and consumption. It focused on the involvement of Muslim women in Asia in these circuits, be it as mobile people or as producers, propagators, and consumers of things, ideas, and images on the move. We used the notion “Muslim women” as a heuristic device to move beyond an area studies approach. This focus on Islam and gender turned out to be fruitful in analyzing three major Inter-Asian circuits: migrant domestic labour, transnational marriages, and fashionable styles of Muslim dress.

Studies about migrant domestic labour have often focused on the nationality of domestic workers. However, when focusing on how migrant domestic workers connect to their employers or their natal families, and on the sense of belonging they develop, religion is a highly relevant category, both for Muslim-born migrant domestic workers and for those who became Muslim during their migration trajectory. Bindulakshmi Pattadath did research with poor Muslim women from Kerala who work as domestics in the United Arab Emirates. This connection needs to be seen within the context of long-standing trade links between the Gulf and coastal Kerala, resulting in a sense of familiarity between Emiratis and Muslims from Kerala (including some knowledge of Arabic). Living for years in the Gulf did not mean that these domestics brought “Gulf Islam” back home. Many of them went to work in the Emirates to be able to better adhere to Keralese notions of propriety. For instance, they used their savings to provide their daughters with a substantial dowry, a practice common in South Asia, but not in the Gulf.

Academic writing dealing with migrant domestics from the Philippines has rarely acknowledged the presence of Muslims amongst them. Alicia Pingol focused on Muslim Filipinas migrants to Saudi Arabia working in the field of care, and on how their work experiences alongside other Muslims sustain or transform their religious beliefs, practices, and identities. Attiya Ahmad discussed the process of conversion of migrant domestic workers to Islam in Kuwait not as a sudden transformation but as a process of “becoming Muslim.” The domestic workers did not discuss their conversions in terms of inner motivations and identities, but of how it impacted on their relation with the families for whom they worked, other migrants in Kuwait, and their natal families.

The papers on migrant domestic workers illustrated the link between labour migration and transnational marriages as they included examples of the numerous Inter-Asian marriages between men from the Middle East and women from South and Southeast Asia. Such transnational marriages are closely intertwined with long-distance movements for the sake of trade, pilgrimage, education, and employment, but have gained a new meaning with the emergence of nation-states, laws on nationality and residency, and discourses about national identity. Frances Hasso connected this to “transnational invasions,” a term expressing the cultural anxiety among citizens of the United Arab Emirates and Egypt about increased flows of people, ideas, and products. As she argued, social and political tensions regarding gender relations, sexuality, and marriage were often inaccurately attributed solely to “external” influences, such as migration and the new media. Whereas different opinions about marriage and sexuality have always co-existed in lay practices and among Islamic jurists and scholars, this has been affected by the more stringent laws of modern states.

Long-distance migration has also led to transformations in family relations in Kerala. Caroline Osella pointed out how in Kozhikode families

are shifting from matrilineal large extended households into small individual household units with patrilineal emphasis, often in new neighbourhoods. Other families choose to remain in the old Muslim area, building large properties and trying to re-constitute matrilineages, enabled by remittances from the Gulf. In these settings transnational migration, family relations and notions of the self constitute each other interchangeably. Rehana Sultana and K.C. Bindu zoned in on the phenomenon of senior Arab citizens visiting Hyderabad to marry young local women. As they pointed out, marriages between an Indian woman and an Arab man in itself need not pose a problem and are part of a long history of connections with the Arab world. Yet, reported cases of husbands abandoning wives immediately after a few days of married life point to the sexual exploitation these girls. However, analyzing the 1991 Ameena case—an under-aged girl from Hyderabad rescued from a marriage with an elderly Saudi man—they argued that newspapers used this case to blame the Muslim community, a minority already under threat, while the story of the young woman herself, who subsequently married a much older local man, was lost.

With the turn of the Islamic revival movement towards a more cultural orientation and, especially since the 1990s, fashionable styles of Islamic dress have become a growth sector with materials, designs, and items of dress part of transnational circuits of consumption. Vivienne Angeles zoned in on fashionable styles of dress among Filipina and Malaysian Muslim women. Affected by the Islamic resurgence of the mid-1970s, Muslims in both countries have been increasingly manifesting their Muslim identity through the use of Islamic forms of dress. In the Philippines the ethnic clothing worn by tribal communities in the south has been affected by the growing labour migration to Saudi Arabia, with migrants taking on the *abaya* and in some cases the face-veil. For the Malays, the Islamic revival has contributed to the growing popularity of a style of Islamic dress that is not imported from the Middle East but reflects the evolution of Malay dress to conform to new local interpretations of modesty. Also in Indonesia Islamic fashion emerged along with the Islamic revival movement. Eva Amrullah pointed out how the desire to wear fashionable styles of veiling was first linked to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Yemen, while more recently Indonesian designers have developed their own styles of fashionable Muslim dress that have become an export item and gained a presence in cyberspace.

The discussions highlighted the importance of various forms of mediaization through magazines, television, or the Internet. Shalina Mehta discussed the impact of the media on bodily appearances of Muslim women in a Delhi slum. She pointed to the development of cable television networks targeting a “home bound women audience.” Muslim girls who were not allowed to go to college were influenced by a media-created cosmopolitan popular culture with respect to dress styles, jewelry, and accessories.

The papers show not only the mobility of Muslim women, but also how different circuits of people, products and ideas are interconnected. Whereas previously men from the Gulf involved in trade married South and South-East Asian women, after the oil-boom women from these regions started to work in the Gulf States as domestics, sometimes marrying local men. The same domestic workers brought new fashions back home which contributed to the development of fashionable styles of Muslim dress building on local traditions. Various media provided information about jobs available and propagated new fashions, but also produced a discourse of foreign invasions, moral panics, and families in crisis. Clearly, the discussions on mobile domestic labour, transnational marriages, and Muslim fashions point to the need to link global trends in the political economy with the micropolitics of family life and gendered subjectivities, for these fields are at once transnational and personal. Moreover, they exemplify how money and love, economics and emotions, and national politics and sexuality constitute each other in people’s everyday lives.

Annelies Moors holds the ISIM Chair at Amsterdam University.