

Forum of Social Research

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On 29 and 30 June 2001 nine young female scholars met at the University of Constance (Germany) to discuss how female identity is constructed in various contemporary Muslim societies, and what constitutes this female Muslim identity. Sponsored by a special university programme aimed at the encouragement of academic research by women (Anreizsystem zur Frauenförderung) and in cooperation with the Forum of Social Research (www.socialresearch.de), Schirin Amir-Moazami (Department of Political and Social Sciences, Florence) and Wiebke Ernst (Department of History and Sociology, Constance) organized the workshop to give a panel of young scholars the opportunity to discuss their respective research projects with a view to this topic.

The papers that were presented and discussed during the two-day workshop addressed the theme of female Muslim identity from various angles. The main focus of the first day was religion and the challenge of modernity. Within this framework Margrit Pernau (Delhi) drew a fascinating comparison between the Muslim community in India and the Catholic milieu in 19th-century Germany. This comparison raised the question of how pious women, and their influence on the respective communities, could be viewed as an answer to the emergence of modernity in either (Indian or German) context. At the same time, by drawing this comparison between Germany and India, emphasis was also laid on the not so radical otherness of the Muslim

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community in India, as very similar developments appeared to have taken place in the German Catholic church at that time. Hodah Salah (Mainz) then brought into view the women activists of the Islamist movements in Egypt. She argued that the discourse and daily lives of the women she interviewed reflected their empowerment through Islam, as they negotiate and re-define the traditional role models. Wiebke Ernst (Constance) presented the final paper of the day, shedding light on the very particular situation of the Xinjiang Muslims in China as a Muslim community that many would define as peripheral in terms of their cultural and geographical context.

The morning sessions of the second day were dedicated to education and the challenge of public representation. Linda Herrera (Oxford) presented her findings with a view to Islamic and secular education of Muslim girls in Egypt (see also *ISIM Newsletter*, 6, p. 1), showing how crucial the veil, and even more so 'downveiling' are as indicators of the constant struggle of women to gain greater freedom within the public space in Egypt. Following the author's paper on the emergence of Muslim women's education in late 19th-century India, Daniella Kuzmanovic (Copenhagen) introduced the cultivation of bodily ideals

among female students in Turkey. The issue of body weight and the ways in which young Turkish women regulate their weight initiated a discussion about self and other, as the physical ideal these young women strive for is influenced by the (Western) media and by ideas of the self that are linked with upward social mobility.

The afternoon sessions dealt with the challenges and strategies of incorporation of Muslim immigrants in Germany. Kirsten Wiese (Berlin) tackled this issue from the legal perspective. She showed what the possible outcomes of the debate on the wearing of headscarves by teachers in German schools could lead to. Schirin Amir-Moazami (Florence) presented some of the data gathered during interviews with young Muslim women in Germany, and Berlin in particular. In these interviews she asked when and why young Muslim women begin donning the headscarf, and in how far their form of veiling differs those from that of the earlier generations of their mothers and grandmothers. Finally, Sigrid Nökel (Bielefeld) discussed the construction of female Muslim identity in Germany. The life stories she presented focused on how this particular identity is shaped by the affirmation of the self as well as through public policy in Germany.

One of the recurring topics of discussion was the tension between tradition and modernity, as it became evident that even if a certain group of actors within a particular context makes a claim to tradition, the meaning attached to such (re)interpretations might actually represent a break with tradition. A second recurring topic was the plurality of meanings, interpretations, and identities, some of which the programme and participants in the workshop themselves reflect, but also with regard to the geographical spread of the topics chosen by the participants. The aims of the workshop, namely to sketch a differentiated picture of the complex forms and constructions of female identity in modern Muslim societies, which is a picture that displays antithetical dichotomies, and the attempt to scrutinize common stereotypes, were therefore accomplished.

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