

WOMEN IN THE MUSLIM WORLD - TOWARDS MODERNITY?

Summary of a panel discussion held during the symposium *Women in Islam*
6 November 2003

Jointly organised with VIDC/Cultures in Movement and the Stadthalle/Szene Wien, Salam Islam Festival.

Panellists:

Valentine Moghadam, Iran/US, Professor of Sociology, Director of the Women's Studies Programme and Associate Professor of Sociology, Illinois State University

Necla Arat, Professor and Director of the Faculty for Systematic Philosophy at Istanbul University, founder of the first centre for women's research and education in Turkey

Nahda Younis Shehada, Palestine, Associate Professor at the Women's Studies Department of Birzeit University

Amatalrauf Alsharki, Yemen, Director of the Women's Studies Centre of the University San'a until 1999, consultant for international organisations like UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP, World Bank, guest professor at the Centre for inter disciplinary Women and Gender Research at the Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg.

Moderator:

Viola Raheb, Palestine, author, educationalist and theologian.

Viola Raheb introduced the panellists as four women from four different countries, four different contexts and various disciplines who were engaged in issues related to women, Islam and modernity, each one of them a voice that was seldom heard in Europe. The issue of Islam and modernity was very often portrayed in the Western media as an unbridgeable gap, with the insistence that Islam was unable to participate in modernity.

The first panellist, Valentine Moghadam, had published numerous articles and books on the issue, and in one of those books - "Modernising Women. Gender and Social Change in the Middle East" - she had tried to show the variety of traditions and of women's conditions. She focused her lecture on the question of Islam and modernity, on women's rights in Islam and in modernity, explaining that the question of Islam and modernity was a very complex one. Some would argue, she said, that Islam was absolutely incompatible with modernity, with human rights, with women's rights and with democracy, a vision shared by both Orientalists in Edward Said's sense and by Islamists. Often modernisation was regarded as the same as Westernisation and secularisation as an essential component of modernisation and therefore impossible in Islam. Others would insist that there was no contradiction whatsoever between Islam and modernity. If the Islamic world had had some difficulties in its encounter with modernity, it was because of certain identifiable factors and forces, both internal and external.

The transition to and through modernity, Moghadam continued, was not and had never been an easy one. It was an inevitable process of social change. For her, at the heart of this difficult relationship between Islam and modernity lay the question of women's rights. Divergent views were held by people within the Islamic world and within Muslim societies. In one view, Islam was incompatible with women's rights, another position saw Islam as incompatible with Western feminism because Western feminism was secular and a third view held Islam to be fully compatible with women's rights through a return to true Koranic Islam. Islamic feminists were engaged in a kind of Koran-centred, women-centred re-interpretation of the Koran and of early Islamic history to show that today's interpretations were misguided. A final perspective was that the main factors that influence and shape the legal status and social positions of women in the Muslim world, like in any other part of the world, were a

combination of political and economic conditions, the state and its policies, internal political forces and movements and of course the global context that was as determinant in the Muslim world as in Latin America, Asia, Europe, North America, etc.

Many states in the Middle East could be characterised as patriarchal, authoritarian states. During the transition to and through modernity some of them had been sympathetic to the idea of women's emancipation and empowerment, like Turkey and the Kemalist reforms in the 30s, Tunisia and the Bourguiba reforms in the 1950s, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, Nasser's Egypt and in the 1970s and in the early 1980s the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

Professor Moghadam explained that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism had complicated the situation, especially in the last 20 to 25 years. In some cases these Islamist movements had exerted pressure on governments and forced them to tighten controls on women. In a country like Iran this had resulted in the establishment of a clerical Islamist state and in severe setbacks for women.

She was convinced that fundamentalism and feminism were to be understood as opposites but also as a reflection and consequence of the Islamic world's encounter with modernity. Throughout the Muslim world dynamic women's movements and organisations existed and these women's movements and organisations were deploying a variety of legal and discursive strategies. They were fighting uniformly for the same thing, such as the reform of family law, nationality rights especially for Arab women, criminalisation of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women, and for political and economic participation of women.

Necla Arat entitled her contribution to the panel "Ways into modernity, the Turkish case". She gave a short overview of the history of modernisation in Turkey, which had started with an initiative for gender equality in the 19th century. The real change came with the abolition of the Khalifate in 1924 and with the adoption of secularism reinforced by constitutional law, replacing the Muslim legal code Sharia by a new civil code based on the Swiss civil code and eliminating the codes of sexual segregation and discrimination. The liberation of Turkish women was closely associated with their participation in the national liberation movement against the allied forces that had occupied Turkey after World War I. She explained that modern Turkey had inherited a rich history of multinational and multicultural traditions and it was unique among the Islamic countries in being a secular state. Turkish women were the first Islamic women to be granted legal and social rights and were encouraged to give up wearing the veil as a symbol of religious and patriarchal oppression.

Mustafa Kemal had declared openly that there would be no difference between men and women, moreover he had promised that Turkish women would be free, enjoy education and occupy a position equal to that of men, since they were entitled to equality. He therefore tried to break down the traditional norms and overcome the prejudices of male dominated institutions, including religion. The implementation of an egalitarian gender policy began with the new Latin alphabet, legal reforms and the separation of religion and state. From the 1930s to the 1940s the revolutionary dynamism of the Turkish republic, the principle of secularism, the principle of total independence in economic policy based on natural resources and totally independent foreign policy were cited as examples of modernity. She concluded that in the last 60 years limited economic opportunities, rapidly increasing population, unusual domestic migration, continuous patriarchy and other factors had increased the power of religious groups.

Nahda Younis Shehada, the Palestinian participant said that after the signing of the Oslo Agreement between the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and the State of Israel everybody thought themselves to be in a state of transition. Feminists from different backgrounds, from different ideologies, thought that it was the time to modernise national laws. On the agenda of priorities was unified Islamic family law, since it was different in the Westbank and in Gaza. Based on their commitment to the national struggle, women wanted to use the fruits of their engagement, they wanted to work for having better rights. They raised the flag of equality and engaged in public discussions with Islamists, and with the Hamas, and Jihad parties. Shehada explained that following this phase she herself wanted to understand better how Islamic family law discriminated against women as she found a reality

which was very diverse and more complex than the question of equality and modernity. She concluded her statement by saying that for her there was not one model for the path to modernity.

Amatalrauf Alsharki outlined the historical background of Yemen and the complicated path of two separated countries towards unification. For her, Yemen's recent history was an example that illustrated the question of modernity and its complexity. Regarding the relation of women to the question of modernity, she explained that after the unification, for the first time, Yemeni women discovered that they had to fight for their rights all together, as the conditions in the former north were very different from those in the former south. One of the issues was, for instance, the struggle for equal voting rights for men and women. She said that they were learning how to be democrats and would hopefully succeed by the elections of 2006.

During the ensuing discussion the question was raised of whether women in the Islamic countries were not fighting against Islamic laws but against tradition.

Moghadam stated that women in the Middle East, in Iran, in Egypt, in Jordan, etc, were struggling against both tradition and Islamic law. Tradition would, for instance, include female circumcision in Egypt, or in Sudan, or in Somalia. Even if some people said this was Islamic, she was convinced that it was not. It was just tradition, like honour killing was an ancient tribal practice, or the right to beat one's wife. For her, Islamic laws based on Sharia distinguished between men and women on the one hand and between Muslim and non-Muslim on the other hand. In other words, men would have more rights than women and Muslims would have more rights than non-Muslims.

Nahda Younis Shehada held that on the issue of the head scarf or hijab, human rights activists should promote the right to wear or not to wear the hijab in the proper place, an opinion shared by Valentine Moghadam who concluded the discussion by saying that an Islamic reformation was going on in the world today. A number of intellectuals were making extremely important contributions to the re-thinking of what it meant to be Muslim, what Islam was or should be like in this modern era.